**First Global Webinar for the Voluntary National Reviews
to be presented at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
in 2021**

Virtual format

26 and 29 October 2020

3, 4, 9 and 10 November 2020

The First Global Webinars for countries presenting a Voluntary National Review at the 2021 HLPF was held on 26, 29 October and 3, 4, 9 and 10 November. The meetings were attended by an average of 100 participants from most of the 44 VNR countries that have volunteered to present at the 2021 HLPF. The webinar included dedicated sessions on stakeholder engagement, institutional arrangements for SDG implementation, financing, data and statistics as well as country presentations to facilitate peer learning. The webinar series also included a knowledge exchange where over 50 UN entities and SDG-related organizations presented tools and approaches that could support VNR countries in their preparatory process and SDG implementation.

Contents

Opening and main purpose of the workshop

The webinar was opened with remarks by **H.E. Mr. Collen Kelapile,** Vice-President of ECOSOC, Permanent Representative of Botswana to the UN, **H. E. Mr. Juan Sandoval Mendiolea,** Deputy Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations and Chair of the Group of Friends of VNRs, and **Mr. Liu Zhenmin,** Under-Secretary-General of UN DESA.

Ambassador Kelapile shared his perspective on the VNRs process based on the experience of Botswana as a VNR country. He emphasized that the most important and rewarding step in the VNR process is the national process of preparations. The VNR process is not only about the presentations at the HLPF, but also be meaningful as an inclusive internal consultations process, rather than a one-time event. The VNR process is a critical opportunity to engage all branches of Government and stakeholders and thus foster "a whole of Government approach" as well to reach to local authorities and all stakeholders. Presenting countries need to have an honest assessment of where they are nationally in implementation of the SDGs. He encouraged countries to use the VNR preparatory process as a catalyst to accelerate the recovery of the economies from the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and to build back better.

Ambassador Mendiolea stressed that the VNRs should be not only for the voluntary presentations, but also an opportunity to show political will, strength cooperation and coordination internally for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and for peer learning on best practices. He said that a hybrid format of in-person and virtual presentations could be used for the HLPF 2021 VNRs. He assured that the Group of Friends of VNRs will work with Member States for preparing their VNRs in 2021.

Under-Secretary-General Mr. Liu emphasized that the work of the HLPF in reviewing progress towards realizing the vision of the 2030 Agenda is essential for peer learning and renewing action and progress in achieving the ambitious SDGs. At the heart of this process are the voluntary national reviews, which have become a hallmark of the HLPF. 168 countries presented a VNR at least once since 2016. Their reviews have provided an essential source of lessons learned and experience on implementing the SDGs and, in 2020, on how to deal with impact of COVID-19. He shared lessons that DESA learned from supporting the VNR process over the past six years, including on following the Secretary-General's voluntary guidelines; integrating the SDGs into national development plans, sectoral strategies and budgets; dedicating a specific section of national VNR report to the principle of leaving no one behind; reviewing the implementation of all the SDGs; and involving stakeholders in preparing the report and presentation on the VNR.

Ms. Marion Barthelemy, Director, Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development (OISC), UN DESA, presented the overview of the global VNR webinar series for HLPF 2021.

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

Ms. Irena Zubcevic, Chief of the Policy and Review Branch, OISC, DESA made a presentation in which she provided recommendations from lessons learned on VNR preparations from previous years, including to

start process early; to make a work plan that will include consultations with stakeholders; to include country's Mission to the UN at every stage of preparation; to make institutional arrangements that include a policy guidance "tier" and a technical advisory "tier"; to determine drafting arrangements early; to establish early arrangements for the means of inclusion of stakeholders; to know the presenting team well ahead of time; and to make presentation interesting and not "cookie-cutter". She emphasized the need to strengthen the role of HLPF as a platform for peer learning and exchanging of experiences. She also noted the need to strengthen HLPF to serve as a broker and matchmaker for partnerships in the follow-up to the VNRs by looking at areas where countries need support.

Representatives from three countries then shared their national experiences with VNR preparations and discussed examples of challenges and successful measures and approaches to the VNRs. Some of the best practices that they shared include:

- Using the UN Guidelines as the framework, and sharing the guidelines, calendar, means for reporting and sources with everyone involved from the beginning.
- Sustainability assessment was integrated into national policy planning, budgeting and reporting, and VNR gathered all relevant information which formed in monitoring and reviewing processes.
- Establishing a national VNR taskforce comprising government, National Assembly, private sector, academia, civil society organizations, NGOs, development partners, youth and women. The taskforce coordinated the entire VNR process including the drafting of a roadmap and overseeing its implementation.
- VNR included chapters written by stakeholders and institutions. VNR included independent assessments of the SDGs both from governmental offices and civil society actors.
- The real importance is the process. Drafting of the national report will enhance the national process if the report is rigorous and is being drafted by several stakeholders.
- Special coordination with the persons with disabilities and the youth which gave them an active involvement on the VNR process.
- Peer dialogues with other country governments.

Challenges in the preparation of the VNR include:
- Due to COVID-19 pandemic, events had to be done via web.
- Data gaps still remain.
- Short time of presentation in HLPF.
- Some overlapping issues in the content of the VNR guide.
- Some stakeholders may use the VNR for their political profit rather than common targets. In order to avoid this, there is a need for clear and common ruled agreed by consensus among all stakeholders since the beginning.

Lessons learned and things to do differently for the next VNR include:
- In preparing national report, every main chapter starts with "Key challenges and lessons learned", and chapters include case boxes.
- In some countries there is the need for increased use of electric media and in particular community radio station that will increase wider outreach.

- To work on the data gaps. There is a need for institutionalization of data and information needs for SDG monitoring that defines roles and responsibilities for collection, analysis, storage and retrieval, creating a repository of data and information.
- Language and scope of the national report should be comprehensible for non-expert readers.
- Keep in communication with stakeholders and promote their contribution in their expertise area.
- Incorporate something new, such as a tool, a monitoring or reporting system, a survey, in order to make VNR more attractive and promoting the VNR to contribute to national implementation.
- VNR should orient process, targets, indicators for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. Implementation does not end in July at HLPF.

Session 2: The VNR preparatory process: approaches, milestones, deliverables and preparation of a roadmap

Mr. Joop Theunissen, Deputy-Chief, Policy and Review Branch, OISC, UN DESA provided an overview of the roadmap, milestone and deadlines in the VNR preparatory process. In his presentation he reminded the participants of the deadline for the main messages of the VNR report which was 3 May 2021. He noted that the main messages are the main findings of the VNRs process and should be no longer than 700 words. He noted that this can be submitted in any of the six UN languages and will be compiled into an official UN document. He informed of the deadline for submission of the final VNR report is 11 June 2021. He stated that there is no maximum number of words for the VNR report but noted that it should be submitted in an official UN language and that countries may consider a second language for wider reach. He stated that the reports will be posted on the HLPF website. He informed the meeting of 18 June 2021 as the deadline for submission of audiovisual materials for the VNR presentation.

Mr. Theunissen also provided a simplified checklist for VNR countries. The checklist included steps for the initial planning stage, where countries could: estimate and identify resources required; consider the scope of review; develop work plans with deliverables aligned to HLPF deadlines; map key national actors; prepare draft outline and key messages and assign information- and data-gathering tasks. Another key step in the process would be stakeholder engagement, for this the VNR countries could consider: contacting ministries and agencies with tasks and establish focal points; developing stakeholder engagement plan; creating awareness-raising and public outreach plan for the VNR process; and make targeted efforts to reach groups that are marginalised and at risk of being left behind.

Another key step in the process in the preparation of the report itself. This step would include: review and incorporate material received, including data; follow-up to secure missing material or additional analysis; prepare the zero draft, including identifying remaining gaps, together with stakeholders; carry out quality control, allowing time to discuss contentious issues; circulate draft internally and establish a period for public comments; provide opportunities for stakeholders to comment and integrate comments at all phases of the drafting; arrange translation into English, if needed/desirable, and design and layout; submit

the report for approval if required (Parliament, Minister, Prime Minister, Cabinet); transmit electronic copy of the VNR to DESA by the deadline of 11 June 2021.

Following the presentation, the participants were divided into breakout group sessions in order to discuss the preparations of the roadmaps for the VNR process. In the plenary the participants reported by the discussion of the breakout sessions and highlighted the status of preparations. The participants also shared some do's and don't of the VNRs, this included that countries should regard the VNRs as a process and not a report and to start early. It was also noted that countries should build on past experiences and focus on inclusiveness. Participants also noted the importance of strengthening institutional coordination and stakeholder engagement. Focusing on the impacts of COVID-19 was also highlighted.

Session 3: Making the VNRs most useful to the countries

Session 3 was facilitated by **Mr. Sai Navoti,** Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG), UN DESA and featured a presentation by **Ms. Marion Barthelemy**, Director, OISC, UN DESA. Ms. Barthelemy began her presentation by noting that VNRs were created with the purpose of accelerating implementation of the SDGs; sharing national experiences and fostering partnerships. She also noted that the key benefits of the VNRs result from the preparation at the national level. She highlighted ways in which the VNRs can be made useful. She noted that the VNRs are an occasion to better understand where countries in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. She also noted the VNRs are way to stimulate cooperation within the government and improve the institutions for the implementation. The VNRs can provide a mechanism for the SDGs and targets to be incorporated into national plans and sustainable development strategies. VNRs can be used to identify gaps in data and assess statistical capacity.

VNRs can be used to help countries to articulate priorities and policy adjustments, particularly in light of the impact of COVID-19. VNRs can be used to help mobilize support and financing for implementation of the 2030 Agenda. She noted that a few countries had used to the VNRs to conduct cost analysis of the SDGs as well as create integrated financing frameworks (INFF) for the mobilization of resources for implementation of SDGs. The VNRs can be used to the identify groups that are at risk of being left behind and develop new ways to consult with civil society. Countries may consider ways follow-up with the stakeholders and develop next steps after the HLPF. She encouraged countries to share their challenges and experiences honestly, so that country can learn from each other. She also noted that country could consider working together with other VNR countries, to share and compare the review processes. Furthermore, she noted that countries could work together with the Group of Friends to prepare interactions at the HLPF.

The session featured a panel of two countries who presented their VNRs during the 2020 HLPF. Both countries have presented 2 VNR reports and shared their motivation for active participation in the VNR process. One country representative mentioned that the VNRs were part of their regular monitoring and national progress reports on the SDGs. It was noted that VNR were a good opportunity for raising awareness in both the government but also the non-government sector. The panelists from a SIDs country

highlighted the importance of starting early, having a clear roadmap and fluid timelines, which can help to mitigate some of the impacts of COVID-19 and disasters such as tropical cyclones. One of the panelists noted that it was important to link the VNR processes with other international reporting processes, such UPR and SAMOA Pathway. A panelist highlighted the importance of south-south cooperation and peer-review in the VNR process.

One panelist noted that the national statistical office in the country was closely involved in developing innovative data processes and systems for monitoring and presenting data in the VNR. The country also included new ways of collecting data from the non-governmental sector, including surveys and questionnaires to civil society. One of the panelist informed the meeting that the coordination process for the VNR had been led by the country's SDG Task and that the consultative process was second VNR had been widened and that the country had institutionalized stakeholder engagement through their development strategy to have a whole of society and whole of government approach. The VNR was also used to identify gaps and areas were assistance is needed in the implementation of the SDGs.

Session 4: First, second and subsequent VNRs

Session 4 was facilitated by **Mr. Fred Soltau,** Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG), UN DESA. The session included a presentation by **Ms. Irena Zubcevic,** OISC, UN DESA, as well as an open dialogue with representatives of three VNR countries. The session focused on how to approach the VNR process and presentation when presenting for a second and subsequent times and how to build upon and reflect the implementation and impact of policy measures outlined in previous VNRs.

Ms. Zubcevic offered the purpose of the VNRs and emphasized how the accumulative VNR presentations can build upon prior ones and demonstrate progress that is substantiated by data. Member States may consider developing plans that indicate the number of VNRs they would wish to pursue as milestones until 2030. Even if all goals are not achieved, the demonstration of accumulated progress would be tangible as a result of each VNR. From 2016 to 2020, many Member States had conducted one VNR, while several had also undertaken reviews two or three times.

Each subsequent VNR need not be a "second first VNR" – rather they can bring continuity, building on the previous reviews and seek to provide deeper analysis explicitly by drawing on gaps and challenges brought in view through previous reviews. If challenges identified in the first VNR still persist, subsequent VNRs can elaborate what measures, policies or alternative solutions may be considered and what impact those measures have had. Subsequent VNRs also provide the opportunity to optimize existing mechanisms, national policies and practices and elaborate on short, medium and long-term strategic plans to pursue sustainable development.

Manifold actions can be taken between VNR reviews. There can be a debriefing of those engaged in the VNR process at the national level, including branches of government and stakeholders. These stakeholders and government entities can outline and present policies in areas where support may be needed and identify where partnership could be coming from (e.g., UN country teams, international organizations, donors, domestic private sector, etc.). There may also be a strengthening of national systems to offer data

on progress and countries can consider preparing national reports for intern application, between the VNRs that are given to the HLPF.

During the presentation of country experiences and the open dialogue, the representatives of three VNR countries shared their national experiences and lessons-learned from the preparations of a first or previous VNR. The main messages include:

- There is added value in the creation of national guidelines for the first and subsequent VNRs prepared by an internal working group such as a national council. These can identify specific work falling within various areas of substantive responsibility that, taken together, contribute to 2030 Agenda implementation.
- Creation of National Coordination Councils were also seen as instrumental to facilitate the integration of national analysis into the preparations for the VNRs.
- The preparatory process can also feature high-level national conferences, including with the parliament, on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Public awareness efforts regarding the Sustainable Development Goals and the policy of implementation remains a crucial part of the VNR.
- In view of the new global context, the 2021 VNRs can focus on a sustainable recovery from COVID-19 and emergency issues, such as recovery Action Plans supporting, for example, economic growth and entrepreneurship, employment, social-welfare and macroeconomic and financial stability.
- A main difference between the 2021 VNRs and prior ones will be concerning how national plans can finance social projects to achieve the SDGs. The 2021 VNRs can illustrate specific methods to utilize plans to encourage the engagement of private companies.
- Second or third VNRs can also focus more on further experimentation by highlighting fundamental questions and building a narrative that summarizes the key factors and SDGs that make a country's experience unique.
- The VNRs need to echo the holistic and interdependent nature of the 2030 Agenda, and each country should tailor its VNR to meet its own specific national needs.
- A VNR should not be perceived as an assessment of the performance of a country by another country nor by the UN; rather, it is as a self-assessment.
- The VNR can incorporate the SDGs and targets and cover the 2030 Agenda as a whole.
- The VNR presenters had conducted several rounds of consultations and informal dialogues with stakeholders, such as NGOs and business and trade unions, as an integral part of the reviews. The feedback received has been incorporated into their VNRs.
- The VNR can build upon the national Sustainable Development Strategy and many aspects of the national strategy can be demonstrated in the VNR.
- Opening up the VNR preparations to the advice of experts from other countries was seen as adding value. This could involve a substantive peer review. In one example, a peer review and dialogue with experts from another VNR country took several months and led to the creation of a report, which was presented to the Prime Minister and incorporated into the national Sustainable Development Strategy.

- The input and engagement of highly regarded experts and stakeholders was emphasized. Whether from the government or from NGOs and science institutions, they serve an important role in the preparation of a VNR or of similar national plans and policy strategies to implement the Sustainable Development Goals.

Session 5: Regional experiences and lessons from the regions on conducting VNRs

Session 5 focused on examples of innovative and best practices from the experiences in the regions in conducting VNRs. The session will also share some of the regional support and processes for conducting VNRs. Presentations were offered by **ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP** and **ESCWA.** The session was moderated by **Ms. Patricia Chaves**, OISC, UN DESA.

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) discussed major takeaways from their VNR engagement experience. ECA highlighted that it is imperative to strengthen the engagement of cities and other subnational governments, as well as that of youth and other stakeholders with a focus on inclusion in the VNR process. The VNRs need to be evidence-based and a showcase demonstrating not only successes, yet also challenges. Furthermore, both sector reviews and VNR findings need to be further incorporated into policy reforms in order for real transformations to take place. ECA also highlighted the value added of collaboration with intergovernmental bodies and experts for building on the VNRs.

The Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) presented and gave background regarding progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The region is on track to eradicate poverty yet needs solidarity because the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated persistent inequalities and continues to disproportionately affect women and people living in poverty. ECE continues to support Member States with tools to implement the Sustainable Development Agenda. These relate to access to clean water and sanitation, support to governments in providing affordable and decent housing for all, and the promotion of sexual reproductive health. European recovery packages implemented as a result of COVID-19 need to mobilize future investments to promote a sustainable recovery that addresses climate change and promotes a circular economy.

Fifty-four of the 56 Member States comprising the ECE region have conducted at least one VNR and see monitoring systems as crucial for building on consecutive VNRs. ECE has encouraged Member States to share success stories and lessons about implementing the 2030 Agenda, as well as the impact of different policy measures. The ECE Statistical division conducted a webinar dedicated to learning from previous VNRs to track progress towards achieving the SDGs.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) stressed the need for evidence-based technical expertise and the convening of Member States to discuss common challenges and best practices. ECLAC convenes regional forums on sustainable development to give Member States an opportunity to engage further among each other and discuss issues, most notably financing for development strategies and stakeholder engagement.

ECLAC hosts regional workshops with technical teams to develop strategies to build on previous VNRs and track progress and works closely with national statistical systems to strengthen capacities to monitor indicators on progress toward the SDGs. The recent 38th session of the Commission focused on South-

South and triangular cooperation and specific challenges for middle-income countries and SIDS. The outcome of the session was several policy recommendations for Member States to recover sustainably from the pandemic. The integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda is at risk due to COVID-19 and the region faces a 9.5 per cent contraction in regional GDP and a projected 14% unemployment rate in 2020.

ECLAC is advocating for a progressive structural transformation in the region with a specific focus on knowledge-intensive sectors with higher rates of demand and employment growth that do not sacrifice the environment. These types of sectors especially can be incorporated into the VNRs and include renewable energy, the digital revolution, healthcare manufacturing, and sustainable tourism.

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) emphasized the unique importance of the upcoming VNRs in focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalized communities and in identifying policy opportunities in line with the 2030 Agenda that encourages sustainable recovery. Twelve countries from the ESCAP region will be offering VNRs at the 2021 HLPF, and two have yet to conduct presentations. The ESCAP Twinning Programme facilitates peer learning by pairing countries that have presented VNRs with those that have not.

ESCAP provides tools to assist countries in the VNR process, including an SDG progress dashboard that supports analysis on progress towards achieving the 17 SDGs and various tools to calculate SDG investment requirements. ESCAP also provides a model to assist countries in designing integrated policies and responses in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholder engagement planning and assessment tools are also provided to assist countries in encouraging national involvement and participation in the VNRs at both the national and sub-national levels. The regional commission provides on-site and online training to support capacity development in developing a VNR plan and roadmap.

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) highlighted that the region is not on track to achieve the 17 SDGs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first-of-its-kind Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 offered a qualitative and quantitative report for the region to identify structural barriers to achieving the 17 SDGs. The report allows Member States to view issues through a regional lens and identify common problems and similar barriers that inhibit the implementation of the Agenda for the region as a whole. The approach to achieving the 2030 Agenda is by nature a collective one. Implementation needs to be pursued in a regionally coordinated manner to create economic integration, harmonization of standards and capacities in transport and connectivity, the ability to produce data on behalf of natural ecosystems that cross-national boundaries, and water governance across countries. ESCWA is also launching a large knowledge hub containing data and publications in Arabic that is meant to serve as a peer learning mechanism for the region. ESCWA also recently concluded their second regional VNR workshop for the year.

The current primary concern among Member States in the Arab region is recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Member States are particularly interested in the VNR process because it provides an opportunity for countries to identify COVID-19 recovery methods that also promote sustainability. Some other specific concerns that have arisen thus far in the region's VNR process include incorporating the SDGs in local and municipal budgets, conducting VNRs in conflict countries and stakeholder engagement.

Session 6: Stakeholder engagement in VNR process

The sixth session focused on how countries can engage with various stakeholders to contribute to a robust VNR process. The session also looked at how the contributions from stakeholders can be reflected in the VNR reports and addressed the impact of COVID-19 on the stakeholder engagement processes. The session was facilitated by **Ms. Ann Makome**, OISC, UN DESA. A presentation was given by **Ms. Naiara Costa**, DSDG, UN DESA, and three countries offered national perspectives.

Ms. Costa indicated that the 2016-2019 VNRs showed that around 75 per cent of countries reporting to the HLPF from 2016-19 noted inclusion of non-state actors. Of the VNR reports, 80 per cent highlighted activities to inform the public and diverse stakeholders, and 80 per cent also provided information on multi-stakeholder engagement to nationalize the 2030 Agenda and generate ownership. In 2020, there was an increase in the inclusion of local government in the VNR reports. Another trend was further inclusion of non-state actors in the drafting of the VNRs.

Stakeholder engagement in the VNR process involved managing expectations, communicating broadly, and being able to manage interests. Lessons-learned emphasized the value of a clear purpose, having a plan, communicating a plan and strategies, and considering offering opportunities in capacity building.

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting more the "left-behind" and vulnerable groups. In this context, significant contributions from stakeholders remain desirable, yet there may be additional challenges for participation and inclusion in the processes in 2021. The VNRs can include insight on the why, who, what, when, where and how of multi-stakeholder engagement as well as challenges, lessons-learned and good practices. Guides and courses were available for enable such engagement.

Country experiences were offered by the representatives of three VNR countries on their national experiences and lessons-learned regarding stakeholder engagement in the VNR process. The lessons learned include:

- Seamless collaboration is key: milestones in planning include political leadership, a roadmap accepted across ministries, stakeholder mapping, an action plan for inputs, assignments to ministries, special assignments to public agencies, and plan for digital consultation.

- It is crucial to start early and on time and keep relevant actors updated on the status of the report throughout the process. Since everything cannot be included in the report, it is important to manage those expectations and be clear on how inputs will be used.

- The current context of the COVID-19 pandemic can be reflected through engaging even more non-state actors to showcase as many of their contributions to the SDGs as possible, including their contributions to addressing the impacts of COVID-19.

- Opportunities for a participatory process through digital meetings can be pursued. Lessons learned include that these need not be longer than 1.5 hours and questions/comments can be received through text, e-mail and social media interaction.

- The quality of the engagement can be enhanced through dedicated participation platforms in SDG implementation, which are government and parliament, philanthropy and business, civil society organizations and media, and academia and experts. This can involve online public consultations

that involves state and non-state actors at national and sub-national levels, including the SDG centers at universities.

- A reference group can be appointed from selected stakeholders, such as academia, civil society and private sector.

- It is valuable to use existing structures and networks for public agencies and umbrella organizations for the private sector and civil society. At the local level, regular meetings with cities that expressed interest are helpful.

- Presenters had engaged multiple stakeholders, such as women, indigenous people, workers' organizations, universities, public institutions and the private sector, among others, over numerous national workshops. The formulation of the VNR can also involve the Supreme Audit Board and Parliamentary Body for Interparliamentary Cooperation.

- The capacity of CSOs in data collection, data auditing, and interventions on implementation needs to be bolstered. This could involve the identification of hot spots where the situation is worse than the nation average.

- On data, there is no on-size-fits-all answer to data collection; however, it does require sufficient time and starting early, as integrating data from multiple sources is a significant pursuit.

- Digital tools can facilitate stakeholder engagement and can require capacity building because of digital gaps, particularly in rural areas. Technical teams consisting of both state and non-state actors can be helpful.

- Partnerships created through previous VNR experiences can be built upon and strengthening instruments with local governments is key. The partnerships created through consultations can have added value beyond the VNRs, for example, in aiding a national response to COVID-19 that is implemented locally. Expanding stakeholder engagement to new substantive areas and widening dialogue allows equipping people with tools to respond to a future crisis.

- The VNR can present non-state actors' best practices and data, thereby enriching the analysis of target performance.

- Challenges in VNR formulation regarding stakeholder engagement include:
  - developing a VNR framework and scheduling timeline with all stakeholders from the earliest step in order to ensure that the principle of inclusivity is implemented,
  - data preparation supported by the statistics bureau and line ministries, including data disaggregation, remains a challenge,
  - integrating local government progress in reports, particularly if not all provinces have SDG Action Plans, and
  - formulating the interlinkages and interconnectedness framework among Goals and targets through in-depth analysis and stakeholder agreement.

- The support of the UN system for VNR stakeholder engagement was emphasized, including for consultations across countries.

Session 7: Institutional arrangements for SDG implementation and VNRs

Mr. David Le Blanc, Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG), UN DESA began the session 7 by giving an overview and noting that the session focused on the topic of national institutional arrangements for SDG implementation and VNRs. The session aimed to foster the exchange of experiences among countries on two aspects: (i) how countries have addressed institutional issues in their VNR reports, and how the conclusions of the VNR process have informed governments in the adjustment of their institutional arrangements to implement the SDGs; and (ii) the processes that countries have followed to gather information on institutional aspects for their VNRs.

In preparation for the session, the Secretariat had made a call for short videos reflecting each country's key messages on these two issues. Thirteen countries shared such videos with the Secretariat, allowing all participants to benefit from their insights. The following aspects were addressed during the meeting, both through the videos shared by countries and through interventions made during the session.

Substance: how VNRs address institutional issues

Participants emphasized the articulation of national institutional arrangements for SDG implementation, including national goals and SDG roadmaps, with national development plans and national planning processes. They highlighted the role of high-level coordination mechanisms, as well as the role of technical committees and workings groups. Emphasis was put on whole-of-government and whole-of society approaches. Several speakers provided details on how the national Parliament had engaged in SDG follow-up and review. Interventions emphasized the importance of SDG localization and the critical role of national monitoring and evaluation systems. The role of international cooperation in supporting national SDG implementation was also highlighted.

A number of participants provided examples of how lessons drawn from VNRs had guided the government in adjusting their institutional arrangements for SDG implementation over time. Also highlighted was the importance of the VNR process itself for mobilizing all the relevant institutions and making them "look in the same direction".

The question of continuity of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation through electoral cycles was posed several times.

Process: how countries gather information on institutions for their VNRs

Participants shared a great variety of examples in terms of how they organize data gathering from all institutions. This included mobilizing information from all ministries and networks of institutions, using SDG data hubs and dashboards, reaching out to sub-national governments, and engaging stakeholders. In addition to official statistics, countries have used interviews with key actors, surveys, and other non-traditional data sources to prepare their VNRs.

Many participants shared their view that stakeholder consultations were one of the cornerstones of the VNR process. Arrangements in this regard have included facilitated ministerial workshops with the public, targeted consultations of stakeholder groups, open consultations where the public can provide written inputs, webinars, and many more. In some countries, the government is engaging with umbrella CSO

networks to collect information. Having institutional mechanisms or platforms for civil society engaged in SDG implementation can increase participation of CSOs in VNRs.

Participants shared experiences in organizing consultations, and the VNR data gathering process more broadly, in the COVID-19 context. It was mentioned that this required a clear strategy, elaborated early in the VNR cycle. Many countries have already engaged in some type of consultation for their 2021 VNRs. Many participants referred to the support provided by the UN for conducting their VNRs.

Several participants indicated their intention to seek peer reviews of their VNR reports, and peer learning through contacting other countries, either directly or through institutions such as the UN Regional Commissions, UNDP, or Partners for Review.

Session 8: Financing for SDGs and how to present it in VNRs

Session 8 focused on financing and means of implementation for the SDGs, and how countries can present progress and challenges in this area in their VNRs. Topics of discussions included an overview of major sources of financing; how to track them, assess financing needs and SDG financing gaps; and how to best align financing with the SDGs and track their impact on progress.

During the opening plenary discussion, **Mr. Oliver Schwank**, Financing for Development Office, UN DESA provided an overview of SDG financing, with a specific emphasis on major elements that should be included in the VNR. To this end, integrated national financing frameworks (INFFs) were introduced as a comprehensive tool to for countries to align their financing sources with national priorities and to link planning, financing and delivery. INFFs also lend themselves to structure reporting of progress and challenges in SDG financing at the national level. They consist of four building blocks: assessment of financing needs, flows, risks and binding constraints; financing strategy to match resources with needs; mechanisms for monitoring and review; and governance and coordination.

Representatives of the VNR countries shared lessons learned on SDG financing. One country representative noted that they had issued a sovereign SDG bond, which raised resources for SDG-related projects. SDG linkages of those projects were determined as an ex ante condition, as eligibility criteria for the bond. They then used a geo-spatial approach and open and public data to identify local and municipal projects and programs with the biggest effects. The bond sets out clear criteria for monitoring and is governed by a national council headed by the country's President. The government also worked with UNDP and a private consulting form to channel resources effectively and avoid greenwashing.

Another country representative reported on its efforts and success in integrating the SDGs into its national plans and programs, due to the close alignment between the SDGs and its gross national happiness (GNH) strategy. The country had launched a funding initiative, which serves to mobilize additional domestic and external resources. The country has also developed a 'Dashboard to Enhance Wellbeing of All' to track the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda, towards GNH and its Five-Year Plan priorities. While SDG achievement itself has not been costed, the five-year plan, which is closely aligned with the SDGs, is costed.

A country representative noted that they developed an INFF, based on a Development Finance Assessment carried out in 2018. To develop its INFF, this country brought together all partners and

stakeholders in the country. One of the most important lessons learned was the need to work with local actors, especially since most of the national population is located in rural areas.

In the break-out sessions, countries discussed major sources of financing and their respective efforts to mobilize and align them with the SDGs. They include domestic resources, taxation and national budgets, international development cooperation, domestic and international private finance, and other sources such as philanthropy. All country representatives spoke to the need to mobilize a variety of financing sources to address financing needs, using approaches tailored to their specific national contexts. Some examples mentioned included: engaging both traditional and South-South development partners to align development cooperation activities with national priorities; identifying and tackling suitable approaches to mobilize private finance, such as engagement with the banking sector, issuance of green bonds or other innovative financing instruments, and efforts to incentivize alignment of corporate action with the SDGs, e.g. by encouraging companies to integrate SDGs in their business plans. Several countries highlighted their use of public private partnerships (PPPs), but discussions also noted the challenges associated with PPPs, and the need to assess opportunities and risks on a case-by-case basis.

Countries have developed innovative approaches to track financing sources and their impact on the SDGs. These include assessments of financing gaps for specific SDGs, which help identify need for accelerated action in specific financing areas; or the use of dashboards with outcome-based indicators.

In terms of governance, countries pointed to the importance of having a dedicated oversight and coordination body to monitor SDG planning and financing. Such bodies need high-level leadership and should facilitate coordination across all levels of government while also fostering multi-stakeholder dialogue to bring in the private sector and other actors. Countries who had set up high-level coordination mechanisms explained that they used existing mechanisms and fora. Another lesson highlighted by participants was that governance initiatives should include capacity building for parliamentarians to support their ability to monitor and review SDG budgeting and implementation.

Overall, discussions highlighted difficulties that many countries still face in collecting all relevant information on financing for sustainable development. This underscores the role of institutional arrangements to facilitate the collaboration within and beyond national governments. Countries also indicated that they would need further assistance to better align medium- and long-term plans with budgeting processes and less-traditional forms of SDG financing. Countries also highlighted the significant additional challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic and how this has underscored the need to better incorporate risk in financing strategies.

Session 9: Data on SDG progress and how to present it in VNRs

The session began with a presentation by **Ms. Yongyi Min**, Chief of SDG Monitoring Section, Statistics Division, UN DESA. In her presentation Ms. Min highlighted that timely, quality, open and disaggregated data is critical for the successful implementation of the SDGs, in order to track performance; design evidence-based policies; allocating resources; hold stakeholders accountable and better communicate the SDGs. She also noted that during the COVID-19 crisis data has been vital in understanding, managing and

mitigating the human, social and economic effects of the pandemic. Data can be used to effectively guide decision-making at each step of the pandemic responses.

Ms. Min highlighted the role of national statistical offices in SDG monitoring and some of the challenges in relation data collection for the VNRs. She also noted some ways that countries can strengthen their national statistical capacity for evidence-based VNRs, such as creating ownership for data collection and reporting by designating the national statistical office as coordinator of the national statistical system; using technology to improve data collection, analysis and accessibility; mobilization and assistance from partnerships and other stakeholders; and identification of non-traditional data sources to fill in data gaps. Presenters from four VNR countries shared presentations on their national SDG monitoring mechanisms and processes.

Ms. Heather Page, Statistics Division, UN DESA delivered a presentation on Data disaggregation and the VNR data preparatory process: approaches, steps and deliverables. In her presentation she highlighted that with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, Member States have pledged to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first. However, those who are the furthest behind are often uncounted. Ms. Page highlighted methods to gather disaggregated data for VNRs. Firstly, is important to identify vulnerable population groups. Countries can also identify policy priorities of vulnerable groups. Countries can link policy priorities to national SDG indicators. Countries can also map data sources and analyze data availability. It is also important to highlight countries' experiences in the production of disaggregated data. Countries may seek to use disaggregated data for making policies to ensure that no one is left behind. Two VNR countries gave presentations on their work on collecting disaggregated data for their VNRs.

Ms. Elena de Jesus, Statistics Division, UN DESA gave a presentation on how to communicate data in VNRs. In her presentation Ms. de Jesus focused on user engagement in the VNR data context. Her presentation also highlighted tools for engagement that could be used during the pandemic, such as virtual conferences, virtual focus groups, national SDG data platforms, user satisfaction surveys, social media, toll-free lines, radio shows. The presentation provided guidance and tips on how to use numbers to tell stories in VNRs and effectively communicate with data.

The session also featured breakout group sessions. During the breakout groups highlighted that data is critical for designing evidence-driven policies, programmes, and projects. They can tell how a country fares in achieving the SDGs, what progress has been made, and what challenges a country is facing; Data and statistics are essential for monitoring and ensuring targets can be reached – leaving no one behind. It was noted that national and local government should raise the awareness of how data can be used: data helps identify the opportunity in the most vulnerable groups and different geographical settings where SDGs lag. It was also highlighted that the VNR should make people more aware of the challenges by engaging them in the discussion and alerting the data as the validity of the discussion.

During the discussion many participants emphasize that decentralization, and coordination is vital for an evidence based VNR. NSO should have the government mandate to coordinate. It was also noted that data collection at the local/provincial level that feeds to the national level helps to leave no one behind.

The session also highlighted that to solve the data gap caused by COVID-19, government needs to adopt new technology and methodology. One VNR country representative shared that an Inter-Ministerial Committee was formed by a decree from the prime minister to follow up on the SDGs' implementation, including the national statistical office as the primary source and coordinator of data required for the SDGs. Some countries noted that they have been using existing mechanisms, such as focal points in the Statistics Bureau and line ministries, to help with coordination. However, there are challenges due to limited capacity.

Participants noted that the pandemic has affected the achievement of evaluation and monitoring of SDGs, especially those related to economic, health, and social areas. It was also discussed that many indicators could be monitored in 2021 VNR through the report preparation at the local level, focusing on the most affected sectors and preparing a recovery plan. Some countries noted that the 2020 round of census has been affected by the pandemic. The national statistics agencies have had to use new methods to collect the data for planning its pandemic response and national policies. It was highlighted that countries can only use various sources to supplement the current data without exclusively relying on official data sources since a lot of data has not been produced officially caused by the pandemic. Participants discussed that the impact of the COVID-19 would be most considerable on the social side such as SDG 1 (Poverty), 2 (Hunger), 4 (Education), 5 (Gender equality) and 16 (Peace).

Knowledge Exchange

UN DESA organized knowledge exchange where over 50 UN entities and SDG-related organizations showcased their tools, approaches and methodologies that can support VNR countries in their preparations and SDG implementation. The objective of the event was to facilitate exchange and networking between VNR countries and partners on key themes of the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The entities showcased their tools and approaches under the following themes: Leaving no one behind; Health issues and COVID-19; Financing, investment & private sector engagement; SDG Localization; Synergies and integration; Data; Engagement of stakeholders; and VNRs analysis and reporting including use of science.