Supporting Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

Options for informed Reviews

Balakrishna Pisupati
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1. Executive Summary

With the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2018 round-the-corner, countries are preparing the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to provide details of national actions to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Review of the VNRs presented during 2016 and 2017 indicate that there are several challenges in the process and details presented through the VNRs. According to UNDESA, no uniform way of reporting on SDG-specific implementation in the VNRs exist and countries chose numerous different methods depending on their national circumstance.

With the option for member states of the United Nations to present their VNRs at least twice before 2030 and with in-depth discussions related to implementation of specific SDGs also slated two times before 2030, it is important for countries to prepare better VNRs, using the guidelines provided by the Secretary General.

Considering the current challenges to the VNRs, both in process and detail, such as options to nationalize the SDGs, dealing with data and statistics, coordination and ownership, finances and foresight, it is time to provide some additional guidance to countries in dealing with the VNRs.

This paper provides some further options for preparing better and measurable national reviews through following key observations and suggestions.

- While there is no clarity on the linkage between the overarching theme of annual HLPF meetings and the specific SDGs selected for in-depth review, there is also limited focus on VNRs and the specific SDGs. This needs review now.

- The VNR Synthesis should be a global progress report on the SDGs in light on the submitted VNRs that can serve as an example to nations as an example of evaluation in reporting rather than just a summary.

- Though many institutions, ranging from those belonging to United Nations to local level community-based organizations have significant programmes related to implementation of actions on SDGs, the VNRs are silent on their contributions that will make the VNRs incomplete both in content, detail and impact.
• The environmental dimension is significantly missing from several of the VNRs. If one considers environment as a critical and key pillar of sustainable development, lack of focus on the environmental dimension in strategizing actions for achieving SDGs is a concern and this shortcoming should be corrected urgently.

• Evaluations of action points under each Goal and related target should be undertaken by a related multilateral international agency, if possible, to illustrate global cooperative initiatives towards Agenda 2030.

• A section on best practices should be created in the VNRs that could refer to programs beyond the ones reported in the submitted VNRs.

• Countries should be encouraged to evaluate Goals and targets that they think do not apply to them as well. For example, landlocked countries should also address Goal 14. They can refer to impact of infrastructure projects on trans boundary rivers and consumption patterns in their countries that promote illegal fishing, especially of threatened/endangered species.

• Though only a small number of countries are submitting VNRs, the discussions at HLPF can be better moderated to seek inputs from countries that have not submitted VNRs for that year.

• Second round of VNRs for each country should address the progress on challenges faced in the first VNR report.

• The current decision by HLPF to discuss a small and select number of Goals during each year and the possibility of such agenda providing opportunity for in-depth consideration only twice during the life time of SDGs is a concern. This will, particularly, be a challenge if there is no link between the timeline for a country deciding to submit a VNR and the agenda for in-depth discussion on specific SDGs.

• Lastly, and importantly, it is time for HLPF and member states to review the current form and format of VNRs. Though the Secretary General’s guidelines are available, it has to be reviewed whether we are better placed to prepare the VNRs with actions grouped under the three pillars of sustainable development so that all the three pillars of sustainable development receive their due.
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2. Introduction

In September 2015, Heads of State and Government agreed to commit themselves to achieve sustainable development by adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which set out quantitative objectives across the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

The goals provide a framework for shared action “for people, planet and prosperity,” to be implemented by “all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership.”

As articulated in the 2030 Agenda, “never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavour across such a broad and universal policy agenda.” 169 targets accompany the 17 goals and set out quantitative and qualitative objectives for the next 15 years. These targets are “global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities.” A set of 230 indicators and a monitoring framework will also accompany the goals.


The HLPF is the main United Nations platform on sustainable development and it has a central role in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level. General Assembly resolution 70/299 provides further guidance on the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The Forum adopts inter-governmentally negotiated political declarations.

1 https://sdg.guide/chapter-1-getting-to-know-the-sustainable-development-goals-e05b9d17801
2 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/futurewewant.html
3 https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/299
3. Implementation of SDGs

- **Key issues and challenges**

As with many commitments made at global level using multilateral platforms, commitments made to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and related SDGs need to be translated to national and local actions. For the purposes of assessing progress being made to realizing the SDGs, member states also agreed to have Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that will be presented during the HLPF meetings. Such VNRs were already presented during the 2016 and 2017 HLPF meetings and their assessments, as well as a series of related assessments of implementation indicate that usual challenges exist for countries to realise the SDGs.

The UNDESA and the UNDP assessment of 60 national reports prepared for Rio +20 indicate the challenge is mainly implementation and there is gap between commitments and actions. The Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future study that assessed the state of implementation of Agenda 21 concluded that though there are good examples of successful implementation of the Agenda, actions to realize the Agenda has been variable.

A quick review of implementation challenges related to SDGs indicate the following:

**Nationalising SDGs** - Countries are using various approaches and options to deal with achieving the SDGs. According to the review of VNRs presented during the HLPF in 2017, many countries elaborated on their “nationalization” of the goals and targets.

While some countries organized the SDGs according to nationally-defined focus areas, others utilized the 2030 Agenda’s “5 Ps”, People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnerships, to guide their national integration of the SDGs, others have reported outlining the national policies and frameworks that are being used to achieve the SDGs. Key challenge identified in nationalizing SDGs indicate both institutional and coordination issues.

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**Dealing with Data and Statistics** - Several of the countries, both developed and developing, have reported challenges that exist with regard to availability of base lines and data that are statistically relevant and significant to undertake target specific assessments. With continued challenges to dealing with data and related assessments, that are consistent and timely, the critical challenge countries will face problems in reporting on progress of implementation using the globally adopted indicators as suggested by the UN Statistical Commission. However, little proof exists on how countries are using and/or going to use such global indicators.

“Overall, the top three challenges highlighted by reporting countries include the lack of disaggregated data, the lack of capacity in data collection and management, and insufficient financial and technical support.”

**Coordination and Ownership** - Review of VNRs indicate that several countries are either establishing national level mechanisms to improve cooperation and coordination to design and deliver actions related to SDGs or reviewing existing mechanisms. However, key challenges exist with regard to spreading the ownership of achieving SDGs and consolidation of programmes at sub-national and national levels to deliver actions.

**Finances and Foresight** - Given the challenges countries face in addressing additional and predictable finances needed to implement actions related to SDGs, a large number of countries are looking at using current and ongoing programmes to deliver on SDGs rather than developing SDG-specific initiatives. This will pose serious challenges in uneven implementation of SDG-related actions.

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**Box 1: Leaving No One Behind - the tag line of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

To address the needs of ‘those left behind’, we first need to know who they are. The truth is, there is remarkably poor knowledge on who is being ‘left behind’, particularly within countries but also between them. In fact, there isn’t a single five-year period since 1990 where we have enough data to report on more than 70% of MDG progress (UN Independent Expert Advisory Group, 2014). Perhaps more worryingly, no more than half this data was based on firm country-level surveys; the rest comprised estimates, modelling and global monitoring). Data is very often missing in those countries where it is needed the most. MDG4 (child mortality) is widely assumed to be the goal in which data availability is at its best. Of 161 developing countries, 136 have data to track this goal. Yet over two thirds of the 75 countries accounting for more than 95% of all maternal, new-born and child deaths do not have registries of births and deaths. Twenty-six countries have no data at all on child mortality since 2009.

Even where data appears rigorous and comprehensive, certain groups are often missing, such as ethnic minorities or regional groups. Indigenous populations and slum-dwellers are consistently left out of data-sets. It is still impossible to know with certainty how many disabled children are in school in many countries. Issues of most concern to women are poorly covered by existing data. For example, only just over half of all countries report data, of varying quality, on intimate partner violence; data is rarely collected from women 50 and over; and little is available on the division of money and labour within households.

Governments and their national statistics offices need better funding and training. Traditional data-collection techniques such as household surveys, censuses and registers should be made more frequent, rigorous and universal. At the same time, traditional data needs to be married up with new forms of data. For instance, a project in Uganda is using satellite data to distinguish between different types of roofs as a proxy measure for poverty in remote areas. Many countries could also make better use of ‘open data’. A website set up in Tanzania allows families to examine school results, increasing pressure on school performance and allowing for easier targeting of schools in need of support.

4. Review of Implementation of the SDGs

The HLPF is a crucial annual conference held every year where a few countries volunteer to present their progress in achieving the SDGs through the presentation and submission of their VNRs.

In 2016, 22 countries submitted VNRs and the number doubled to 43 countries in 2017. For 2018, about 47 countries will be submitting their VNRs for the HLPF (See Annex 1 for list of countries). It has been recommended that each county should conduct at least two VNRs by 2030.\(^9\)

Though there are 17 SDGs, the annual HLPF meetings are focused around a thematic collection of pre-determined SDGs that are to be discussed. The theme for 2016 was “Ensuring that no one is left behind” where the discussions focused on generic issues of implementation.\(^10\) In 2017, the theme was “Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world” and Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14 and 17 were subjected to discussion. The theme for 2018 is “Transforming towards sustainable and resilient societies” and the Goals up for discussion are 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17. For 2019 the theme of “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality” has been chosen that focus on Goals 4, 8, 10, 13, 16 and 17.

4.1 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

According to UNDESA, voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are part of the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As stated in paragraph 84 of the 2030 Agenda, regular reviews in the HLPF are to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders. VNRs make possible the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda\(^11\).

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\(^11\) UNDESA 2018 Handbook for preparation of Voluntary National Reviews
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4.2 Principles for the VNRs

Below are the principles laid out for the VNRs in the Agenda 2030\textsuperscript{12}

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<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>They will be voluntary and country-led, will take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and will respect policy space and priorities. As national ownership is key to achieving sustainable development, the outcome from national level processes will be the foundation for reviews at regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on national official data sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>They will track progress in implementing the universal Goals and targets, including the means of implementation, in all countries in a manner which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development.</td>
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<td>c.</td>
<td>They will maintain a longer-term orientation, identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices. They will help mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships, support the identification of solutions and best practices and promote coordination and effectiveness of the international development system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>They will be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support the reporting by all relevant stakeholders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>They will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind.</td>
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<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>They will build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist, avoid duplication and respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities. They will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.</td>
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| g. | They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. |
| h. | They will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programs, particularly in African countries, LDCs, SIDS and LLDCs and middle-income countries. |
| i. | They will benefit from the active support of the UN system and other multilateral institutions. |

4.3 Preparing VNRs

The UN Secretary General issued a set of voluntary guidelines in 2016 to help countries prepare the VNRs\textsuperscript{13}. The suggested structure of the VNRs consists of an opening statement by a high-ranking Government official to highlight key messages, synthesis of the process and findings, introduction that includes setting the context and objectives of the review, methodology and process used, policy and enabling environment, critical initiatives taken by the Governments to achieving the SDGs and their targets according to national circumstances, means of implementation, steps being taken to enhance implementation and a conclusion presenting the analysis. The guidelines also suggest that countries include a statistical annex with data using the global SDG indicators\textsuperscript{14}. Though these guidelines are available for countries to use, not all countries have used the guidelines in preparing the VNRs. The following box illustrates the approaches taken and focus on VNRs presented in 2016, as an example.

\textsuperscript{13} https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9768Guidelines%20from%20SG%20report.pdf
\textsuperscript{14} https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9768Guidelines%20from%20SG%20report.pdf
Box 2: Review of National Context

In the VNRs, countries provided information on the broad context within which they are implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and particularly the overarching challenges they face. Contexts vary widely, as countries participating in the VNRs ranged from least developed countries to some of those with the highest per capita income, but among them were: high levels of poverty and inequality (Madagascar, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Togo); a fragile economy (Sierra Leone); economies dependent on natural resources and agriculture, facing the effects of a prolonged fall in commodity prices (Sierra Leone, Uganda); epidemics and their aftermath (the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone); a growing population (Egypt and Uganda); low economic growth and high unemployment, and in particular youth unemployment (Sierra Leone, Georgia, Egypt, France, Uganda); conflict and post-conflict situations (Georgia, Colombia); economic performance reflecting adjustments of the transition period (Montenegro); vulnerability to disasters and the consequences of recent disasters, including massive flooding (Sierra Leone), tsunamis and flooding (Samoa); vulnerability to climate change (Samoa), structural characteristics of a small island developing state - small size and extreme isolation, limited and narrow resource base, geographic dispersion and isolation from markets, diseconomies of scale, capacity limitations (Samoa); weak multi-sectoral implementation planning, coordination gaps, data and reporting inadequacies, weak public private partnership and limited financial resources (Uganda); gaps between social groups - including gaps in pay between men and women - and challenges to securing the welfare society (Estonia, Finland); long chronological perspective of Agenda 2030 in relation to other political cycles; strengthening ownership Synthesis of Voluntary National Reviews 2016 UN/DESA/Division for Sustainable Development Page 16 and commitment and the government’s facilitating role; and ensuring the synergy of implementation in execution at various levels (Finland).

Source: UNDESA 2016 Synthesis of Voluntary National Reports.
5. Using VNRs to review implementation progress

As a follow-up mechanism for the SDGs, the VNRs are a summary of the reporting countries' progress towards attaining the SDGs. More importantly, the VNRs convey a nation’s political decision-making backdrop against which the SDG program is being implemented. This is evident by the structure and content of VNRs that have been presented thus far.

Along with the selected VNRs that are submitted to the HLPF, the Division for Sustainable Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs at the United Nations came out with a synthesis of the VNRs presented at the HLPF\textsuperscript{15, 16}.

5.1 Review of VNRs - Key messages and lessons

In 2017, in a majority of VNRs, countries included SDG-specific analysis and reviews. About a third of countries addressed all the SDGs. A similar number of countries covered the set of SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14 and 17 that were subject to in-depth review at the 2017 HLPF. Other countries included a set of goals of their own choosing, based on national priorities.

“No uniform way of reporting on SDG-specific implementation in the VNRs exists, and countries chose numerous different methods depending on their national circumstances.” UNDESA, 2017

Key issue that can be highlighted from our examination of the VNRs are as follows:

1) The VNRs largely consist of reports of summaries of actions undertaken under reported SDGs but this summary is not a review. The VNRs are not evaluative in nature and hence do not contribute to the knowledge base of good and sustainable practices. The same can be said of the 2016 and 2017 VNR Synthesis.

2) In reporting programs undertaken under a Goal, most countries have only addresses a selected few targets. With each country having their prerogative to design their own unique path to the attainment of the SDGs, it is not necessary that the program(s) undertaken and reported by a government to accomplish a particular

\textsuperscript{15} https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/126002016_VNR_Synthesis_Report.pdf  
Goal match all the targets stated in the SDGs or reflect a government’s urgent priorities. It is also not a given that all targets in a stated Goal are relevant to a particular county, but a problem that arises is in not addressing most. This is a challenge since this approach overlooks the multi-dimensional and interlinked nature of the SDGs.

3) The underlying theme of the SDGs, “Ensuring that no one is left behind”- has been addressed in most VNRs but has a very heavy human bias. The needs of the environment, ecology and biodiversity are not addressed satisfactorily.

4) Though many institutions, ranging from those belonging to United Nations to local level community-based organizations have significant programmes related to implementation of actions on SDGs, the VNRs are silent on their contributions that will make the VNRs incomplete both in content, detail and impact.

5) Amongst the three dimensions of sustainable development- economic, social and environment- the social dimension has been addressed mostly in terms of pan demographic equality, but the demography is only one aspect of it. Considerations of culture and aesthetics play a major role in this dimension too. The ‘social’ dimension also involves challenging normative ideas of modernity against traditional practices. Considerations of culture and aesthetics play a major role in this dimension too.

6) The environmental dimension is significantly missing from several of the VNRs. If one considers environment as a critical and key pillar of sustainable development, lack of focus on the environmental dimension in strategizing actions for achieving SDGs is a concern. As mentioned previously, implementation and reporting on MDGs did miss out on the environmental dimension significantly.

6. Improving the effectiveness of VNRs

Given this, it is appropriate for the governments and the HLPF to consider a set of actions to make the VNRs more robust, data and information centred, inclusive that cover all SDGs, in spite of having a small number of SDGs for in-depth review.

With close to a fifth of timeline that has been crossed to achieving the SDGs, if the HLPF does not consider the following elements to encourage countries to come up with

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A comprehensive and predictable framework of actions being undertaken, there is an imminent danger that we will be grappling to understand the impacts and relevance of actions related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Experiences from other processes, such as the one currently being followed under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) where countries report on a set of global targets (the Aichi Biodiversity Targets 2011-2020) using their own nationally designed indicators, reveal that reviews undertaken either at regional and/or global level for actions and impacts related to the targets are near to impossible. Currently, the CBD process is attempting to understand a set of 2000 Aichi-like targets that countries are using and reporting on against the 20 global targets\(^\text{18}\). The complexity of SDG targets and indicators in terms of sheer numbers will be daunting if one needs to undertake an assessment mid-way through the 2030 timeline.

7. Need for coming up with a reporting framework

To make the VNRs more informative and inclusive, a few suggestions have been listed below. An important objective behind the exercise of countries formulating and reporting on their SDG progress is, to critically evaluate and reflect on their activities and contribute to the knowledge base of development planning for nations, both through their achievements and failures.

An important obstacle in the reporting of VNRs is to create an environment for Governments to be open to addressing the challenges faced by them, specifically in reporting the drawbacks of on-going policies, without the fear of losing vote banks and receiving hard criticisms. The lack of substantial analysis in the VNR could be an indicator of this fear.

7.1 Suggestions for preparing the VNRs for HLPF 2018

1. While there is no clarity on the linkage between the overarching theme of annual HLPF meetings and the specific SDGs selected for in-depth review, there is also limited focus on VNRs and the specific SDGs. Some countries have focused on

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preparing the VNRs relating to the discussions on specific SDGs (for example, Afghanistan, Bangladesh) while a number of them focused on overall SDGs. This has contributed to some level of asymmetry in the VNRs. The HLPF 2018 should discuss this disconnect and come up with ways and means to make VNRs more effective. De-linking the overall theme with the discussions on specific SDGs may not an option.

2. The VNR Synthesis should be a global progress report on the SDGs in light on the submitted VNRs that can serve as an example to nations as an example of evaluation in reporting rather than just a summary. Governments should not shy away from their obligation to report on actions to commitments that were made in 2015 to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Undertaking a self-assessment of actions with limited or no benchmarks being set will undermine the seriousness of actions.

3. Additional reporting by organizations, ranging from the United Nations to local community-based organizations should be considered as a part of mainstream discussions. Countries can set a number of thoroughly reviewed criteria that will check the robustness and credibility of information emanating from these organizations than the current practice of each of the group of organizations preparing their own reports. Consolidation should be seen as the strength of VNRs.

4. The VNRs submitted for the 2016 and 2017 countries have covered most countries in regions like South America and South Asia. Hence a regional VNR analysis could be undertaken to address trans boundary regional issues that encourage cooperation. Regional UN Commission can be encouraged to do this as they did for MDGs.

5. Review of the regional synthesis of actions, presented during HLPF meetings in 2016 and 2017 indicate that even these reviews are heavily biased towards actions related to economic and social dimensions and not so much on the environmental dimension. With the current regional preparatory meetings going on in preparation for the HLPF 2018, this should receive attention and corrections be made to the outcomes.
6. A section on best practices should be created in the VNRs that could refer to programs beyond the ones reported in the submitted VNRs.

7. Evaluations of action points under each Goal and related target should be undertaken by a related multilateral international agency if possible to illustrate global cooperative initiatives towards Agenda 2030.

8. Evaluation of implemented policies should be stressed in working groups of VNRs prior to the HLPF meeting. Additionally, each goal summary should evaluate implemented solutions from the perspective of economics, social and environment-the three dimensions of sustainable development. This will comprehensively display the shortcomings in implemented policies. At minimum, shortcoming in programs should be highlighted.

9. The reported shortcomings would not necessarily be perceived negatively. Agenda 2030 acknowledges the multi-dimensional approach to achieving the SDGs and governments can undertake thematic analysis under each goal (or they can club together the summaries of more than one goal) to address shortcomings in one program by linking it to benefits in another. Thematic analysis could also be linked to academic knowledge. For example, food security in many academic researches is evaluated on three dimensions- availability, access and absorption.

10. A section on lessons learnt from challenges faced for the benefit of other countries should be inserted in VNRs.

11. Countries should be encouraged to evaluate Goals and targets that they think do not apply to them as well. For example, landlocked countries should also address Goal 14. They can refer to impact of infrastructure projects on trans boundary rivers and consumption patterns in their countries that promote illegal fishing, especially of threatened/endangered species. The targets formulated for the Goals define the Goal in a multi-dimensional manner. Hence countries should try to address as many of targets as they can.

12. Evaluation of projects from a cultural and aesthetic perspective should also be considered. Questions like - are the modern norms of development in the west of
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Should be raised. Impact of programs on culture and society should be evaluated.

13. Developed countries (and developing countries where relevant) should analyse the impact of their contributions abroad under each Goal. Evaluative analysis on not only the impact of their aid but also the type of aid given should also be carried out. For instance—specific goal-linked funding the best way to achieve a goal or more general, non-specific funding, that supports infrastructure and support-systems/mechanism a better route to achievements of Goals.

14. Though only a small number of countries are submitting VNRs, the discussions at HLPF can be better moderated to seek inputs from countries that have not submitted VNRs for that year.

15. Second round of VNRs for each country should address the progress on challenges faced in the first VNR report. Though the intent of current discussions is to expect two-round of VNRs during the lifetime of the SDGs, it is clear that reviewing actions only twice in a fifteen period makes limited contribution to understanding the actions and their impacts.

16. The above point also related to the current decision by HLPF to discuss a small and select number of Goals during each year. The possibility of such agenda providing opportunity for in-depth consideration only twice during the life time of SDGs is a concern. This will, particularly, be a challenge if there is no link between the timeline for a country deciding to submit a VNR and the agenda for in-depth discussion on specific SDGs.

17. Lastly, and importantly, it is time for HLPF and member states to review the current form and format of VNRs. Though the Secretary General’s guidelines are available (see annex 2), it has to be reviewed whether we are better placed to prepare the VNRs with actions grouped under the three pillars of sustainable development so that the environmental dimension receives its due.
8. Conclusions

While the political nature of discussions and decisions related to implementation reviews are pertinent and understood, key challenges do exist in HLPF not having specific mandate to review progress critically and suggest options. HLPF is currently a platform for countries to merely present the VNRs, with varied sets of details than a platform to critically review progress.

It is understandable not to have rigid reporting structure and framework that is set guiding in content due to the differential national circumstances. But, if there is limited focus on some level of uniformity in the kind and detail of information presented through VNRs, it is unclear what the VNRs could be used for.

Suggestion for countries to opt for presenting at least two VNRs between 2016-2030 and for in-depth discussions on specific SDGs planned also twice in the above period is a cause of concern owing to disjointed efforts at country level to prepare VNRs and to have a regular update on progress being made.

Lastly, though enormous amounts of time, resources and energy were spent on a range of related global frameworks such as the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, the Small Island Developing State Accelerated Modality of Action (SAMOA) Pathway, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) on financing, there is little information in the VNRs on how countries are using these frameworks to strengthen action towards achieving the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It is therefore pertinent to say that the VNRs are useful starting points to move towards national realization of SDGs but they should be further strengthened, fine-tuned and presented with more thought and rigor, periodically. In order to ensure no one is left behind in the process of development, the HLPF should have more focused discussions, review progress, suggest actions and connect the dots. After all, the HLPF is currently the highest available platform for all stakeholders to look up to for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and accompanying SDGs.
Annex 1: List of Countries Submitting the VNRs

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19 Highlighted countries are those who have/going to submit more than one VNR.
# Supporting Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

*Options for informed Reviews*

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(Source: [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/))
Annex 2: Secretary-General’s Proposal for voluntary common reporting

The following components are suggested as a way to help countries frame the preparations for Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF, bearing in mind that each country will decide on the scope of their review and the format in which they want to present their findings.

1. **Opening statement:** An opening statement by the Head of State or Government, a Minister or other high-ranking Government official could highlight the key messages from the review and touch on critical issues in implementation of sustainable development that the country wishes to highlight.

2. **Summary:** A one-to-two pages synthesis of the process and findings of the review highlighting two or three good practices the country wishes to share, two or three lessons it has learned in trying to accelerate implementation, two or three challenges on which it wishes to hear about other countries’ good practices and two or three areas where it would need support in terms of finance, capacity building, technology, partnerships etc...

3. **Introduction:** The context and objectives of the review could be presented here. The introduction may briefly describe key features of the country context as it pertains to the 2030 Agenda, with a discussion of national priorities and targets for sustainable development and their relations to the SDGs, and a discussion of critical challenges.

4. **Methodology and Process for Preparation of the Review:** This section may discuss the methodology that was adopted for the review, including its scope, depth and limitations. Information on the process for preparation of the national review may be presented, including, for example, how different levels and sectors of Government contributed to the review, whether parliaments were engaged, whether national evaluation/oversight institutions contributed, how stakeholders from civil society, partnerships etc...

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20 [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9768Guidelines%20from%20SG%20report.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9768Guidelines%20from%20SG%20report.pdf)
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academia and the business sector were involved, which consultations took place, and possibly whether another Member State or institutions contributed to the review, etc.

Lastly, the country may indicate what support it received. The sources used for the review may be discussed. This could include, as per paragraph 74(f) of Agenda 2030, how existing platforms and processes have been built on, as well as how existing national reports have been used in the process.

5. Policy and Enabling Environment

a) Creating ownership of the SDGs: The review could outline efforts made towards all stakeholders to inform them on and involve them in the SDGs and targets, including national and local government, legislative bodies, the public, civil society and the private sector. It could indicate how it is planned to keep the SDGs under review at the national level and, including the possible dissemination of reviews and their findings.

b) Incorporation of the SDGs in national frameworks: The review could outline critical initiatives that the country has undertaken to adapt the SDGs and targets to its national circumstances, and to advance their implementation. It may describe national efforts made to integrate the SDGs into the country’s legislation, policies, plans and programmes, including the sustainable development strategy if there is one. The review could indicate the main challenges and difficulties experienced in implementing the SDGs as a whole. It could also highlight additional goals, beyond the SDGs, which are national priorities. Countries could consider referring to major efforts undertaken by local authorities and non-state actors to implement the SDGs, including partnerships.

c) Integration of the three dimensions: The review might discuss how the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) are being integrated and how sustainable development policies are being designed and implemented to reflect such integration. The review could also assess how other principles of the 2030 Agenda, for example leaving no one behind, have been mainstreamed in the implementation of SDGs.

d) Goals and targets: The review may provide brief information on progress and the status of all SDGs, and critical difficulties encountered in reaching them, making
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reference, when appropriate, to data provided in the statistical annex (see section 8 below). The review may indicate whether a baseline for the SDGs has been defined and remaining obstacles to doing so. The review may also provide a more in-depth analysis on a few selected SDG and targets. Those may be chosen by the country in light of its priorities but also because they were tackled through innovative policies, are relevant to other Member States, and can be addressed in an international context. The discussion could focus on trends, successes, challenges, emerging issues, and lessons learned, and describe what actions have been taken to address existing gaps and challenges. It could support the identification of gaps, solutions, best practices and areas requiring advice and support. The review may examine the agreed global indicators for those goals and targets identified as priorities. Countries may choose to refer to complementary national and regional indicators.

e) **Thematic analysis:** As appropriate for the country, the review could include an analysis of progress and initiatives related to the HLPF’s thematic focus for that year.

f) **Institutional mechanisms:** The review could provide information on how the country has adapted its institutional framework in order to implement the 2030 Agenda. This could include information on how the views of different ministries, agencies, levels of government and non-governmental stakeholders are taken into account and on the institution in charge of coordination and integration. The review could consider highlighting efforts to mobilize institutions around the SDGs, improve their functioning, and promote change. Information may also be provided on how responsibility is allocated amongst various levels of Government (national, sub-national and local) for coherent implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. It would be useful to highlight how the country intends to review progress in implementing the SDGs including possible plans regarding the conduct of national reviews.

6. **Means of implementation:** Based on the above challenges and trends highlighted, the review may discuss how means of implementation are mobilised, what difficulties this process faces, and what additional resources are needed to implement the 2030 Agenda, including in terms of financing, capacity development needs, including for data and statistics knowledge sharing, technology and partnerships.
7. **Next steps**: The review could outline what steps the country is taking or planning to take to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

8. **Statistical Annex**: Countries may include an annex with data, using the global SDG indicators to be proposed by the Statistical Commission as a starting point and adding priority indicators identified at the regional and national levels. They may highlight whether statistics were collected from the national statistical system and pinpoint major gaps in official statistics on indicators.

9. **Conclusion**: This section may present a summary of the analysis, findings and policy implications. It may discuss new or emerging issues identified by the review. Lastly, the country may indicate what lessons it has learned from the review process, what support it would need in the future for preparing such reviews and any adjustment it believes should be made to the guidelines to ensure that they are useful.

10. The report could have a link to more in-depth national reports and reviews through the dedicated UN Secretariat website.
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