Policy Brief
Conducting 2nd VNRs

In 2022, which is the halfway mark to achieving the 2030 Agenda, most European countries have submitted at least two Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). In addition, the European Commission will publish an EU-wide VNR in 2023, with preparations already underway. The upcoming EU Voluntary Review (VR) was the reason why this Peer Learning Platform took place in Brussels, on June 14, 2022.

The 7th Peer Learning Platform was attended by over 50 policymakers from all over Europe. It started with two presentations to explain the importance of VNRs and to provide more information about the EU Commission's plans for the upcoming VR, as well as looked into countries that had recently completed their second VNRs in an effort to learn from how, and upon what, they improved.

The preparation of VNRs serve as national reviews, help with sharing and peer learning, increase stakeholder engagement, strengthen policy coherence and support priority setting. Policy coherence, especially, is very important in Covid Recovery, because to achieve a green recovery, synergies and a whole-of-government and whole-of society approach need to be used.

A first VNR should focus on the alignment of national goals with the 2030 Agenda, setting up a framework for follow-up and establishing mechanisms for review. Subsequent VNRs should focus on continuity and comparability, analysis of the progress and reporting on the process.

Challenges

o   Collecting data and data availability;
o   Policy Coherence;
o   Improving the participatory approach and getting inputs from stakeholders;
o   Strengthening civil society's voice and transparency; and
o   Influencing governmental sustainable development policies.

Recommendations

1) Foster data collecting coherence

2) Develop detailed VNR plans (work plans, timelines, early consultations and drafting schedules)

3) Build mutual trust and respect between government and stakeholders

4) Influence the policy process with the VNR

1) Foster data collecting coherence

When it comes to fostering data collecting coherence, there are a few measures that countries and civil servants can undertake to improve the data that feed into indicators.

Firstly, **indicators should be developed first**, then data collected that match the indictor and not the other way around. Governments need to ask themselves what it is they want to measure, then collect the data that best matches with the information the Government wants to have. Often, indicators are made based on the available data. A shift to a more indicator first process would identify gaps in data collection and allow governments to take steps to close the gaps, through which they would not only introduce more coherence between the indicators and the data, but also accuracy and a truer scope of the status quo.

Another coherence issue in data collection is in the relationships between governments and their statistical offices (**horizontal policy coherence**). As was mentioned in the previous point, that which governments may want to know about indicators may not be what is actually measured by their statistical offices. VNRs can be helpful in bringing those two sectors together to discuss the types of indicators for which the Government wants data, and for statistical offices to devise the best ways to collect the desired data.

In addition to horizontal policy coherence issues, there can also be differences in the way subnational regions collect and relay data, so it can also be helpful to not only have **horizontal policy coherence** at the national level between governments and their statistical offices, but also

vertical policy integration between the government at the national level and governments at the regional and local level. This can help to make sure indicators are aligned and the same type of data is being collected, so that accurate assessments can be made and progress can be tracked.

One useful solution is to use visuals that are easy to understand. Estonia, for example, has the "Tree of Truth", which shows the current status of indicators important for the country, comparing actual results on the basis of three development plans. The "Tree of Truth" was created by the Government Office and Statistics Estonia to make the objectives of the country more understandable to the general public, the governance more transparent and performance-based.[1]

2) Develop detailed VNR plans (work plans, timelines, early consultations and drafting schedules)

One of the first recommendations regarding the steps it takes to develop detailed VNR plans is to begin the process early by **communicating it early** and communicating the roadmap early. Not only does this help the government to structure what it needs to include in the VNR, but it also alerts stakeholders that such a process is being undertaken, giving them time to participate in the process, which in turn raises the **transparency** of the VNR.

Along the same vein, a **timeline should be provided**, so that milestones are met and adequate time is taken for the entire process. This includes the involvement of stakeholders and their coordination, so that pertinent information can be included in the VNR, such as

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[1] https://tamm.stat.ee/?lang=en&valdkond=haridus

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through consultations or feedback rounds, as these take time to conduct.

Governments should also endeavour to have staff in place, who are highly skilled, to coordinate the entire process, as there is a high degree of complexity, but that when it is well managed increases the **legitimacy** of the VNR.

It is also helpful in the VNR process to keep it as short and concise as possible by using different instruments, such as graphs instead of block texts, or using online tools and websites.

3) Build mutual trust and respect between government and stakeholders

VNRs not only serve as stocktaking exercises by governments to assess progress they have made on the SDGs, but can also serve to enhance trust between stakeholders and the government when it comes to sustainable development, as stakeholders can contribute a lot of data and information to governments.

One recommendation is to increase trust and respect. This can be done by not only having a wide variety of stakeholders, but to **involve them in the VNR process along the entire way**, which includes the different stages of process design, data collection, format of the VNR and its presentation. Governments should be alert for tokenism and resorting to *ad hoc* or one off consultations, especially if there is little chance the feedback by stakeholders in these consultations can be taken up in the VNR. Not devoting enough time to participatory processes can lead to the drafting of **shadow reports** by stakeholders.

There should be an **institutional framework** to have a coalition that includes different stakeholders and can be used outside of the VNR process, so that **trust and**

understanding can be built up between the government and stakeholders over time, such as through advisory councils for sustainable development or some other similar mechanism. These mechanisms should be **employed regularly** and not only when a VNR needs to be submitted. Such cooperation between stakeholders and governments has a wider range of applicability for issues relating to sustainable development and should be used. Both governments and stakeholders benefit from such institutionalized set-ups.

As is the case with any stakeholder engagement endeavours or participatory approach, there needs to be a certain degree of **expectation management** from the side of the government and from the stakeholders. For example, not all stakeholders will be able to have a seat at the table, as this makes it not only harder to reach consensus, but is also a very time and resource intensive undertaking. Governments also need to communicate the extent to which stakeholders can participate and reach decisions, as well as how such decisions will be reflected in the VNR.

In effect, expectation management necessitates honesty and transparency between all actors to decrease disillusionment with the process, which could weaken a VNRs legitimacy.

4) Influence the policy process with the VNR

When it comes to the VNR, and to sustainable development, in general, the legislative branch and executive branch need to complement each other. It is also very important that the parliament is involved, as the main legislative decision-maker, as it is often the case that political will is the most important criteria for progressing quickly on sustainable development issues. Therefore, having parliaments on-board in the

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VNR process helps ensure sustainable development is in the focus, as well as providing an up-to-date analysis of where the country stands.

Problems include the **lack of continuity** when teams and strategies change, and a **lack of political consensus**. There is a diversity of views and expectations on achieving the 2030 Agenda and many in the ministries are sceptical whether it is realistic to achieve the SDGs by 2030. It is important to stay in **dialogue with all ministries** to accelerate implementation. However, there might also be a difference in perception about what should change after the VNR. Such dialogue and coherence can be built up and improved through establishing cross-sectoral collaboration between ministries on sustainable development.

To **implement results** of the VNR, it can be helpful to have an **action plan** for the policy cycle. The elements should build on each other. This action and implementation plan should **address policy gaps** identified in the VNR. For policy coherence, it can be useful to have a **working group or steering group** with representatives from all ministries.

The results of the VNR can also influence policy through governance structures to promote interactions between the SDG targets. These government structures should be codified in law, as **legitimacy is important**. There should also be an evaluation of the SDG law.

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