



ESDN Discussion Paper

**VOLUNTARY NATIONAL
REVIEWS: CHALLENGES,
SUCCESSSES AND
LESSONS LEARNED**

ESDN Office

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INTRODUCTION

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are an important part of the process to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). If done right, they are not only a way to report on a country's progress, but are also a useful tool in working towards achieving the SDGs. In fact, the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) recommends that governments make VNRs a part of the overall process towards the 2030 Agenda and use them as a tool for monitoring and stakeholder involvement. In order to make the most use of the VNR process, governments need to use the most effective strategies and practices.

Therefore, the 7th ESDN Peer Learning Platform will provide a space for policymakers to exchange good practices around the planning, writing, publishing of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and important governance aspects.

In the 2030 Agenda, member states are encouraged to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the

national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven" (§79, 2030 Agenda). They are the base for the annual review of progress at the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), under the auspices of UN ECOSOC. More importantly, however, these reviews are an opportunity for countries to share their experiences, good practices and tips for achieving the 2030 Agenda and progressing towards achieving the SDGs.¹

Seven years after the launch of the 2030 Agenda, many countries have already published their second VNR. In addition, the European Union is planning to publish its own VNR in 2023. The Peer Learning Platform will also be used to prepare for this process and find out more about the plans for writing this EU VNR.

This Discussion Paper serves as the basis for discussions at the 7th ESDN Peer Learning Platform. It will cover governance structures and framing, stakeholder involvement and the use and handling of data.

¹ sustainabledevelopment.un.org. 2022. *Voluntary National Reviews. Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform*. [online] Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES AND FRAMING

The general principles of the governance of sustainable development also hold true for the writing of VNRs. A whole-of-government approach and high-level leadership will ensure a coherent and comprehensive approach. In addition, it is important to assign sufficient financial and human resources to the process.²

While the primary purpose of VNRs might be the exchange of experiences and good practices, they are also a useful internal tool for tracking progress.³ This means that their results should be utilised as a basis for evidence-based policymaking and can be helpful to adjust current policies that are not yielding the desired results. When governments find that a certain policy is not working during the VNR writing process, they should outline in the VNR the steps that will be taken to address the gaps identified in the process of writing.

In preparation of writing a VNR, it is helpful to map all existing policies and analysing what SDGs they address and how they influence progress in different areas of sustainable development. In its VNR in 2018, Spain also mapped out spillover effects into other countries, both in Europe and in the rest of the world. This helps to highlight the interconnectedness of policies and their effects.

Second-time VNRs are an important next step in the process and should show the progress achieved from the time of writing the first VNR.⁴ However, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) remarked in 2021 that reporting on progress rarely happens in second time VNRs. The CDP recommends that second VNRs should also show how the results from the first VNR feed into and influence the policy process.⁵ These can, for example, happen by bringing SDG progress to parliament.

² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d. *Repository of Good Practices in Voluntary National Review Reporting*. New York: UN DESA.

³ United Nations Committee for Development Policy, 2021. *The 2020 VNRs: points for reflection in preparation for the 2021 reviews*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/CDP-Reflections-2021-VNRs.pdf>> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d. *Repository of Good Practices in Voluntary National Review Reporting*. New York: UN DESA.

⁵ United Nations Committee for Development Policy, 2021. *The 2020 VNRs: points for reflection in preparation for the 2021 reviews*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/CDP-Reflections-2021-VNRs.pdf>> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

[Annual reviews] should draw on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders, in line with national circumstances, policies and priorities. National parliaments as well as other institutions can also support these processes. (Article 79, Agenda 2030)

The 2030 Agenda states clearly that stakeholders need to be involved in the review process, including groups that are hard to reach and those who are most vulnerable. Recognising stakeholder contributions promotes ownership and will facilitate further collaboration with these groups for SDG implementation. For a constructive cooperation, it is important to consider stakeholder involvement from the planning stage of the VNR. This planning process needs to account for the fact that stakeholder engagement can be time-consuming and complicated. In addition to allocating a sufficient amount of resources, the right mechanisms for including stakeholder feedback into the VNR need to be in place. It is also important that stakeholder involvement is not a one-time event, but rather happens continuously at every stage of the

process.⁶ It can even be useful to ask the different stakeholders themselves on how they can be involved most constructively. This stakeholder engagement plan should include a strategy on how to reach vulnerable groups.⁷ To make sure that participation is smooth and all groups are included, governments should map all stakeholder groups first and consider what access barriers to participation they may face. As a next step, it is important to communicate to all stakeholder groups to ensure that all groups are able to participate in a meaningful way.⁸

Reporting on how the NGO SDG Watch Austria was involved in Austria's first VNR process, Bernhard Zlanabitz highlights the importance of transparent and continuous communication between government and the civil society actor.

⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d. Repository of Good Practices in Voluntary National Review Reporting. New York: UN DESA.

⁷ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020. Stakeholder Feedback in Voluntary National Reviews – Feedback and Follow up. [online] Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/ESCAP%20VNR%20Brief_2_Stakeholder_engagement_in_VNRs.pdf> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

⁸ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d. Repository of Good Practices in Voluntary National Review Reporting. New York: UN DESA.

SDG Watch was involved both in formal and informal conversations, which were both equally important. At the end of the process, SDG Watch Austria was able to have a look at and comment on the first draft.⁹

Several countries reached out, in particular, to the private sector and the business community. For example, Denmark asked the business community to help with data collection. This was a win-win situation, as the business stakeholders were able to use the data for their own purposes.¹⁰ The Danish 92 group, an umbrella organisation for civil society organisations involved in sustainability, wrote a shadow report for the government's progress report which was included unedited in the VNR in 2021. This provided the unaltered view of civil society on national performance.¹¹

One of the key principles of the 2030 Agenda is to 'leave no one behind'. An assessment of all submitted VNRs from the year 2021 found that this principle is interpreted very differently by different countries.

The fact policies could also make people worse off is not always considered or measured. The same assessment found that there was an assumption that all policies would lead to improvements and positive outcomes, which neglects potential trade-offs or the negative outcomes of poorly designed policy. In addition, very few countries referred to structural inequalities, with the consequence that reported policies are also targeted at specific groups and do not address structural challenges.¹²

After the VNR is published, it is important that governments make efforts to distribute it throughout different stakeholder groups. They need to be written in a way that is easily understandable. This way, VNRs also serve as an accountability mechanism within the country.

⁹ Fetting, C., 2021. *Civil Society and Citizen Involvement and Engagement for the 2030 Agenda*. Vienna: ESDN Office.

¹⁰ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d. *Repository of Good Practices in Voluntary National Review Reporting*. New York: UN DESA.

¹¹ Fetting, C., 2021. *Civil Society and Citizen Involvement and Engagement for the 2030 Agenda*. Vienna: ESDN Office.

¹² United Nations Committee for Development Policy, 2021. *The 2020 VNRs: points for reflection in preparation for the 2021 reviews*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/CDP-Reflections-2021-VNRs.pdf>> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

DATA COLLECTION AND PRESENTATION

Data in VNRs should be disaggregated, of high quality and frequency, easily accessible and reliable.¹³ Data gaps and lack of data are a frequently reported issue when working on VNRs. In particular, disaggregated data is hard to obtain. The data that is collected needs to include where progress is happening, what policies are effective and who is left behind.¹⁴

The UN Statistics office has very specific recommendations for collecting and presenting data in VNRs. For example, it is important to break down the global statistical indicators to the national or even regional level.¹⁵ If data on global indicators is not available, national indicators or proxy indicators can be used to fill the gaps.¹⁶ National statistics offices are helpful partners when it comes to collecting data. They should be responsible for coordination of data collection and quality assurance. However, as data on more vulnerable groups may not always be readily available, it can also be collected at the

local level. This presents a great opportunity to involve different local stakeholders, thus creating ownership of the VNR process in the population. However, it is important to consider that this data may not be as high-quality and reliable as desired. Therefore, national statistics offices need to validate them.¹⁷

For transparency reasons, statistics should be made available to the general public and displayed in a way that is easily accessible, for example with graphs and other visuals. This ensures that many different stakeholder groups are able to monitor and assess their country's progress towards the SDGs. For example, to visualise progress, Estonia has developed an open-access dashboard that visualises all goals and sub-goals and how the country is progressing towards them in a tree-graphic, the [Tree of Truth](#).¹⁸

¹³ Sdgs.un.org. 2022. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development | Department of Economic and Social Affairs. [online] Available at: <<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

¹⁴ UN Vienna Statistics, 2019. *How can data be best used for national implementation of the SDGs and VNRs*. Accessible at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/meetings/vnr-workshop-dec2019/2.1-UNSD-Incorporating-Data-into-VNRs.pdf>

¹⁵ Min, Y., 2019. *Data Disaggregation and Voluntary National Reviews*. Accessible at: Min, Y., 2019. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/meetings/sdg-inter-workshop-jan-2019/Session%2013.a_VNR.pdf

¹⁶ UN Vienna Statistics, 2019. *How can data be best used for national implementation of the SDGs and VNRs*. Accessible at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/meetings/vnr-workshop-dec2019/2.1-UNSD-Incorporating-Data-into-VNRs.pdf>

¹⁷ Min, Y., 2019. *Data Disaggregation and Voluntary National Reviews*. Accessible at: Min, Y., 2019. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/meetings/sdg-inter-workshop-jan-2019/Session%2013.a_VNR.pdf

¹⁸ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d. *Repository of Good Practices in Voluntary National Review Reporting*. New York: UN DESA.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

In order to gain the most benefits from the VNR process, governments need solid strategic planning of resources. The 7th ESDN Peer Learning Platform will address questions regarding the planning, data collection, stakeholder involvement and presentation of VNRs. There will be several presentations:

Monika Linn (UNECE) will explain more about the importance of VNRs. Ongoing VNRs are also addressing how progress in advancing the SDGs has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and how the 2030 Agenda can be used as a framework for a sustainable recovery.

In the last years, Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have gained significant momentum, reflecting the importance to accelerate SDG implementation through increased action at the local level. This localization of SDGs contributes to inclusiveness and the strengthening of multi-stakeholder engagement.

Laia Pinos-Mataro (European Commission, Secretariat General) will inform participants about the European Commission's plans for the EU's VNR in 2023.

This question will also be addressed in a fishbowl discussion with representatives of the ESDN, European Commission, the European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils Network and the European Economic and Social Committee.

Three countries will present their lessons learned from the VNR process: Finland (Annika Lindblom), Switzerland (Andrina Frey) and the Netherlands (Bas Muntinga). A brief excerpt from the Swiss presentation is below.

Andrina Frey (Switzerland) will discuss more about how digital innovation can facilitate lasting momentum for the SDGs. Through its VNR process, Switzerland has learned that it can foster a more democratized process by using its new digital tool "SDGital2030". It allows for a more transparent and interactive process, provides a growing data base over the years to come and can include different sectors of government as well as stakeholders from cantonal and local governments, academia, economy and civil society. Furthermore, it can facilitate better cooperation and more policy coherence, both between stakeholders and within the government.

In addition to presentations, participants will have the opportunity to discuss the following questions in breakout groups:

- **Methods/Approaches:**
 - What methods & approaches did you use?
 - What different approaches or methods did you choose when drafting the first and the second "VNRs"?
- **Stakeholder involvement:**
 - Methods to have the different actors on board.
 - Ways of communication with the stakeholders.
 - How did you involve the regional level, the ministries and the other relevant stakeholders, especially the representatives of business and industry? What are the particularities of each group?
- **Data collection and presentation:**
 - What are good practices to collect information / data from different actors (municipalities, business, youth...)
- What are good practices to integrate the data in the VNR report ?
- Other than integrating in the report, what else did you use the data for?
- **Learnings/improvements:**
 - What did you learn from VNR1 to VNR2?
 - How was the learning process organized / how should it be organised?
- **Policy influence:**
 - How did the VNR influence your policy process?
 - How should it influence national/EU policy processes?