



ESDN **REPORT**

VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS: CHALLENGES, SUCCESSSES, LESSONS LEARNED

Peer Learning Platform Report

ESDN Office



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INTRODUCTION

The 7th Peer Learning Platform revolved around the topic of Voluntary National Reviews. In 2022, which is the halfway mark to achieving the 2030 Agenda, most European countries have submitted at least two VNRs. In addition, the European Commission will publish an EU-wide VNR in 2023, with preparations already underway. The upcoming EU VNR was the reason why this Peer Learning Platform took place in Brussels, on June 14, 2022. It took place under the Chatham House Rule, which ensures that the identity of participants is not revealed, allowing for deeper exchange of experiences, successes and challenges. This is why this report only contains affiliation but no titles or names.

The 7th Peer Learning Platform was attended by over 50 policy makers 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 VNR. These were followed by three country examples; Finland, Switzerland and the Netherlands. After a break, there was a fishbowl discussion between representatives of the Commission, the EESC, the ESDN, and the EEAC. Finally, participants discussed and exchanged good practices in breakout groups. The following report summarises the key points and most important findings from those discussions and presentations.

WELCOME AND OPENING

Representatives from the two co-hosts, the ESDN and the EEAC welcomed participants to the 7th Peer Learning platform and framed the day. The occasion for the Peer Learning Platform is mostly the fact that the European Union is planning to conduct its first Voluntary Report in 2023. In addition, as it is half time for the achievement of the SDGs and most countries have already submitted two VNRs, it is time to take stock.

The VNR should not only be seen as a document, but as part of the policy process. VNRs are a tool reflecting on all that has been achieved and what still needs to be achieved. The document can only be good if good work has been done before.

In addition to the two co-hosts of the event, two representatives of the Romanian government also welcomed participants, as the event was kindly hosted by the Romanian Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels. They underlined that Sustainable Development is more important than ever, even though political priorities have shifted over the time of the pandemic. This day should be an opportunity to share national experiences of coping

with the pandemic and building back better.

One of the Romanian representatives had been a rapporteur at the HLPF and explained that all countries' VNRs are always very well prepared. However, the situation on the ground is always very different. The challenge is not to have good ideas, but to implement them and to monitor them.

The Importance of Voluntary National Reviews

The representative of **UNECE** started by reiterating that VNRs are important, because times are difficult for sustainable development. We cannot be sure where the Covid-19 crisis is going and the war in Ukraine is adding more uncertainty. It is difficult to keep SDGs high on the governments' agenda, due to many competing priorities. However, it is more important than ever. VNRs are probably the most important tool for achieving the 2030 Agenda.

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 we need to use synergies and a whole-of-government and whole-of society approach.

From 2016–2022, there have been more than 200 VNRs, even though, as the name suggests, they are voluntary. They are the centerpiece of the HLPF, and it has been challenging to fit them all into

the HLPF, because so many countries want to present every year. At last year's HLPF, there was a review of the process, but there were no major changes which suggests that Member States find them useful in their current form.

By now, most countries presenting to the HLPF are presenting their second or even third VNR. A first report 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 focus on continuity and comparability, analysis of the progress and reporting on the process. Reporting also becomes more detailed. VNRs highlight follow-up activities and provide recommendations for the next report. Responsibilities may have shifted or been added to existing structures. Recent VNRs suggest that stakeholder engagement has broadened over time and work on statistics has advanced. There is also progress on the awareness of the SDGs and of their implementation. However, according to the UNECE representative, there could be more systemic approaches and more feedback loops from one VNR to the next.

The process offers numerous occasions to exchange best practices. These opportunities have expanded over time, for example, with regional and local workshops. UN ESCAP has set up a twinning programme, where countries from one region support each other.

There are some lessons learned that can be universally applicable:

- Developing work plans
- Early consultations
- Early drafting arrangements,
- Timely preparations of presentations
- Add a statistical annex (so far ca. 50% of VNRs)

While reporting generally has improved, there remain challenges. For example, data availability is still not at the desirable level. The progress in the entire UNECE Region can be measured for 105 targets, which is an improvement from the beginning of SDG reporting, but 40% of targets can still not be measured for the region. The impact of Covid-19 is still not reflected in the available data.

Voluntary Local Reviews have gained momentum in recent years. They are important accelerators of the SDG localisation process, improve

inclusiveness and strengthen multistakeholder engagement.

Cities, which should be seen as microcosms of development, have been using many different methods for their VLRs. This is why this year UNECE has published guidelines to promote the VLRs.

The representative of UNECE finished their presentation by highlighting that VNRs remain a critical tool in maintaining momentum and measuring process and VLRs are a powerful complementary method.

Planning the European Union's 2023 VNR

The representative of the **European Commission** stated that the Commission is fully committed to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The SDGs are considered to be a guide to the twin digital and green transitions. In the Commission's Staff Working Document 'Delivering on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – A comprehensive approach', the Commission already announced that it would like to submit a VNR. 2023 is a good year to do this, because it is midway through implementation, so it is a good point in

time to see what has been achieved and what still needs to be improved. In 2023, there will also be the SDG Summit, which is a crucial moment for providing leadership on global action.

The EU Delegation in New York has already notified the President of ECOSOC that it would submit a VNR in 2023 and it is now officially registered. This will be the first ever VNR to be presented at the HLPF by an entity that is not a country. Since the EU has full participant status at the HLPF, it is compatible with presenting a VNR.

The Commission aims to develop a comprehensive and fact-based VNR, guided by the Handbook and guidelines provided by the UN. It has already prepared the first outline of the document and held several workshops to find out about good practices.

The Commission considers internal and external dimensions as equally important and wants to cover both of them in the VNR.

While it is important to showcase important developments at the EU level, the challenges should also be well presented. The Eurostat report will be very useful, especially as next year's

edition will be better able to fully cover the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to the first outline, there will be a general part and then several annexes. The Commission aims at staying with the average length of VNRs, roughly 100–120 pages. The general part will explain how the SDGs are an intrinsic part of policy making at EU level and how the Five 'Ps' are maintained (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership). This will include internal and external actions across all areas. It will also explain the processes to cooperate and engage with Member States and stakeholders. The external part will fully integrate the joint synthesis report on the EU Consensus on Development, how the EU and its Member States support countries to implement the SDGs and reporting on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development. In addition, there will be the more detailed Annex with a detailed description of all actions, as well as a part on the role of Youth. The Annex will also include selected examples, the Eurostat report, as well as a section on Voluntary Local Reviews.

To make the report inclusive, the Commission is planning to engage with Member States and Stakeholders. For the

Member States, there is the Council Working Party on the 2030 Agenda, but the Commission also wants to organise additional meetings on more specific and concrete areas. There will also be meetings with the Committee of the Regions, the EESC and the EU representations in different Member States.

The plan is to have a first draft ready by mid-autumn 2022, after which the participatory process will start. The document should be adopted by April or May 2023. Then they will establish concrete plans for the presentation at the HLPF in New York.

SESSION 1: VNR SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

During the first session, representatives from the governments of Finland, Switzerland and the Kingdom of the Netherlands presented their experience with compiling their VNRs.

Finland

The representative from Finland explained that Finland had done two VNRs, one in 2016 and the second one in 2020. Some key questions to improve the second process were as follows:

- How to improve the participatory approach and get inputs from the stakeholders?
- How to strengthen civil society's voice and transparency?
- How to get international/external views to the national process and assessment?
- How to highlight the most important changes and lessons learned in the past 4 years?
- How to make interesting communication so that the results of the VNR reach all relevant parts of civil society.

The second VNR process was building on many national process review mechanisms that already existed, as well as monitoring mechanisms, studies and an external evaluation. The focus of this second VNR was on the progress that had been achieved since 2016. The 2020 VNR also included two independent assessments of progress, one done by government officials and the other compiled by over 50 civil society actors. This second part was added to the VNR unedited. These two sides were shown next to each other in the final VNR, each side filling one page per SDG. The government side included an assessment of all targets, the overall situation in Finland, Finland's challenges and successes, Finland's global responsibility and key policy instruments. The Civil Society report assessed the overall trend in the particular SDG, the actions that Finland must take and a list of the NGOs that participated in the assessment of that SDG.

There are also chapters written by stakeholders and institutions. In the end, the government wanted to make sure they did not miss any important details and initiated a peer dialogue on the VNR. They chose one partner from the Global South, Mozambique, and one with more

similar conditions as Finland, Switzerland. The VNR has two annexes, a statistical report with the statistics office and one with national indicators, of which some are more disaggregated and developed than the SDG indicators.

The government took away several good practices and lessons learned from the process. A genuine involvement of stakeholders builds on mutual trust and respect. It is important to accept different opinions and assessments. Every main chapter of the VNR 2020 starts with 'Key changes/lessons learnt' and there are boxes with good practice examples. The Peer Dialogue with Switzerland and Mozambique pointed out some gaps and inconsistencies in the draft report that were corrected. The assessment also revealed data gaps. This means that the work with gaps needs to continue, especially concerning spill-over effects. It was decided that the next VNR will be published considering the national policy cycle. The next government implementation plan will be prepared in 2023/2024 and the next VNR will come in 2025.

The representative from Finland concluded their presentation with some

practical tips. They recommended to make as detailed of a content plan as possible. UNDESA guidelines include a lot of overlapping issues, plan where you present what. It is advisable to make limitations to the amount of pages in advance. The VNR becomes more reader-friendly with pictures, graphs and animations. It is recommended to plan and take a lot of time for the translation and layout processes. For political approval it is helpful to discern in advance from whom, when and how government approval is needed from the 'government' machine. Finally, transparent and constant communication is key.

Switzerland

The Swiss representative started their presentation by giving a short overview of the insights that were gained from its third VNR in 2022. While Switzerland is improving in many areas, its patterns of consumption and production are based on high resource use. It is very ambitious to achieve the sustainable use of natural resources by 2030. There are high negative spill overs of Switzerland's consumption patterns on other countries. Developing a sustainable food

system will be one of the main tasks to achieve the related SDGs.

In the area of climate, energy and biodiversity, the representative highlighted that in Switzerland, more than 30% of animal and plant species and almost 50% of habitats are at risk. Some 37,400 species around the world are facing extinction. Switzerland has an ambitious target of reducing emissions to net zero by 2050. It will also develop a conscious and anticipative approach to natural hazards. It will be important to expand power generation to renewable energies, increase energy efficiency and reduce energy consumption. Finally, Switzerland needs to preserve, promote and restore its biodiversity.

Regarding equal opportunities and social cohesion, the representative explained that while there are high standards in the education system, there are challenges related to social mobility and migratory backgrounds. It is important to increase the proportion of women in the national as well as cantonal parliaments. Switzerland has adopted the Gender Equality Strategy 2030 and enacted amendments to the Equality Act. Marriage has been extended to same sex couples.

The process of compiling the third VNR was highly digitally innovative. Building on the first VNR, there were already structures in government and those organising the VNR process knew who to talk to. In Switzerland's decentralised political system, over 50 agencies and colleagues were involved in the process. The goal of using a digital tool was to simplify, structure and decentralise the process. In addition, it facilitates the inclusion of new stakeholders. The tool allowed for a combination of input and output and created a database for years to come.

The innovation of the digital tool lies in the so-called 'data bus', a data-centric software framework for distributing and managing real-time data. It allows applications and devices to work together as one, integrated system. The input side can be displayed in real time on the output side. The output side is a website with a database. This database is used for the website as well as the report. Thanks to the more exhaustive website, Switzerland was able to keep its report short, to only 45 pages.

The input side is a decentralised system, where those registered can add actions and others can comment on them. On

the output side, the website is connected to the VNR through a QR Code.

For stakeholder engagement, the stakeholders were asked to answer the same questions as government officials, through the same tool. The answers are put next to each other, without any comment from the government on the stakeholder response. This is similar to the Finnish approach and was inspired partially by the peer dialogue. However, the actual report does not have this feature, in order to keep it short.

The conclusions from the digitalisation of the process were that it was an initially big, but a sustainable investment, as it will hopefully be used for many years. It is a modular system that produces modular outcomes. The benefits are the automatised possibilities. The decentralised approach meant that there was less control on the side of the civil servants compiling the report. There was a greater heterogeneity in the contributions. It was important to first familiarise people with the new approach and build on what they already know. The decentralised approach also meant that there was more ownership by stakeholders and other government officials. For this,

legitimacy and clear rules are key. The views of different stakeholders are contrasted, but not interpreted. Currently, the Swiss Government is exploring ways with the UN to make the tool available to other countries.

Kingdom of the Netherlands

The Dutch representative first explained that the VNR covered the entire Kingdom of the Netherlands, which includes three Caribbean islands that are part of the Netherlands and three islands that are autonomous, Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten. The three autonomous countries have their own chapters each. There is a chapter on the challenges on small islands and one on mainland Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, there are already yearly reports on progress to parliament, which are compiled together with stakeholders. The Chapter on the Netherlands focused on national policies, including policy coherence for sustainable development. The report was based on data from Statistics Netherlands and the yearly Monitor on Wellbeing and the SDGs. The qualitative review of the data was conducted in cooperation with stakeholders based on

six entry points. These entry points were based on the Global Sustainable Development Report:

1. Human well-being and capabilities
2. Sustainable and just economies
3. Food systems and nutrition patterns
4. Energy decarbonisation and access
5. Urban and peri-urban development
6. Global environmental commons

The stakeholder consultations were very helpful with this review, as there were many different experts on the entry points. However, there was not enough time for the stakeholder reviews as there was the hope to conduct them in-person. Due to the Covid-19 situation, they were always pushed back and, in the end, they were conducted online anyway. A lesson learnt was to leave enough time for stakeholder consultations.

Before the HLPF, there would be a larger VNR launch at the end of June 2022, together with the stakeholders, in order

to get their input to the presentation at the HLPF. The VNR would be presented by Liesje Schreinemacher, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, the Netherlands, Evelynna Wever-Croes, Minister-President of Aruba and Sarah Oey, UN Youth Representative for Sustainable Development.

There were several differences in the process between the VNRs in 2017 and in 2022. In 2022, there were more extensive consultations with stakeholders. The government strengthened meaningful youth participation. Another addition was the integrated chapter of the four countries of the Netherlands (mainland and three islands) as well as separate country chapters for the autonomous countries. There was also a special chapter on the challenges of small islands. The focus in 2022 was on the interlinkages of the SDGs and lessons learned were included in every chapter.

Lessons learned from the process revolve mostly around stakeholder engagement. Stakeholder consultation is a time-costly process and should be started early (ideally in November or December of the previous year). Good facilitation is key, using an experienced

moderator and reporter. It can be helpful to use many different working methods, such as a padlet. Expectation management is key, so that stakeholders know what will happen with their input from the consultation to the product. The follow-up with stakeholders is also important, which is the reason for the launch event of the VNR right before the HLPF.

SESSION 2: PANEL DISCUSSION WITH THE EU COMMISSION – HOW CAN THE MEMBER STATES SUPPORT THE EU’S VNR 2023 PRORCESS?

The fishbowl discussion format encourages the audience to participate in the discussion by joining the panel. The original panellists can also leave the panel to make room for audience participation.

This fishbowl discussion started with five panellists, two representing the European Commission, one representative of the ESDN, one representative of the European Economic and Social Committee and one representative of the European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Council Network. They were joined by different members of the audience at different times.

One can find a summary of the most important points below. They discussed the question how Member States can support the European Commission with the VNR in 2023, but also what the key considerations for the Commission should be.

The activities surrounding the VNR 2023 are supported at the highest level in the European Commission, which will help make it a smooth process. The Commission plans to work with Member States and with the subnational level.

The Voluntary Review is a great opportunity to establish a clearer vision of what the EU wants to achieve with the SDGs. There had been the perception that this vision was lacking. It will also give the opportunity to show what has been done and what the influences on the external side are. The VNR will not be reinventing the wheel, but will mostly focus on what has worked so far to achieve the SDGs and what has not worked and needs to be improved.

The intention is to do an internal assessment and also look at the spill overs. Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development will be an important concept, also for assessing the spill overs to developing countries.

Careful and detailed preparation is an important element of compiling a powerful VNR. There is a perception that the Commission is engaging in thorough preparatory work. However, the Commission also needs to manage expectations. There is no perfect VNR and there are always limits to what can be done. The Commission should soon publish an outline or concept of the VNR.

In addition, the Commission needs to communicate what focus and on which

priorities it will choose. As the Commission want to limit the number of pages, having, for example, five pages per SDG is not realistic. They have sent out a questionnaire to identify best practice examples on implementing the SDGs and on governance solutions to be shown in addition to European policies. However, due to the limited space, only very few national examples will be shown.

Another suggestion is for the Commission to publish a roadmap outlining what all the bodies of the EU Commission need to do and the role of the Working Party on the 2030 Agenda. It should also communicate how it will use other European mechanisms, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Semester, which now has the SDGs in its annex. This is also an opportunity to make an inventory of all the existing mechanisms.

The European VNR will not duplicate national VNRs, but will find digital solutions to link them with the report.

It is important to highlight that this VNR will be seen as Europe's report and we need to think of it that way. It is a

summary of all Member States' VNRs and then adding an extra layer.

In many national VNRs, the EU is invisible, they do not look like they are part of the EU. This has been discussed before. The VNR can be the trigger to think more European also at the Member State level.

The EU Commission intends to make the VNR inclusive and work with all stakeholders. Again, expectation management is crucial, with transparent communication to stakeholders about what they can expect. There will be a stakeholder plan from the Commission's side, including best practice lessons from the OECD, the UN and other sources.

It is important to integrate diverse stakeholders. Not all stakeholders are always on the same page, but they always ask for effective participation of civil society. Stakeholders are almost always invited to consultations, but hardly ever part of the drafting or the follow up. This is an opportunity to be more inclusive and transparent. It is also important to include new people and new organisations, and also people who are not yet so convinced of the process, as this will improve the political standing

of the SDGs that is now coming under attack.

It will be difficult to put together data. Internally in the EU there is Eurostat, but externally it will be more difficult. Not all UN Member States report statistically on the SDGs and methodologies are not harmonised.

Communication is key. Outside of the SDG bubble, sustainability is still referred to as greening. It is important to build an image of the future that is worth striving for, in the middle of the pandemic and war in Europe.

The superpower of civil servants is to design processes, and this can lead the attention of decision makers on certain things and certain issues. We also need to convince the political side, in general, that this is an important document.

The process, in general, needs to take the principles of the SDGs into account, too. For example, they should be CO₂ neutral, and look at a gender balance and on including diverse groups already in the design of the process.

The VNR should kick off a virtuous cycle of improvement. There should be a

mechanism where monitoring is not just an annual cycle. The report is not a static point and follow up is key.

Other institutions, such as the EEAC or the EESC, should validate the report.

SESSION 3: BREAKOUT GROUPS ON DIFFERENT VNR ISSUES THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO COUNTRIES WHEN CONDUCTING THEIR VNRs

For this session the participants split up into groups to discuss different aspects of VNRs. They collected their answers on a flipchart paper and presented them to the group afterwards.

Data Collection and Presentation

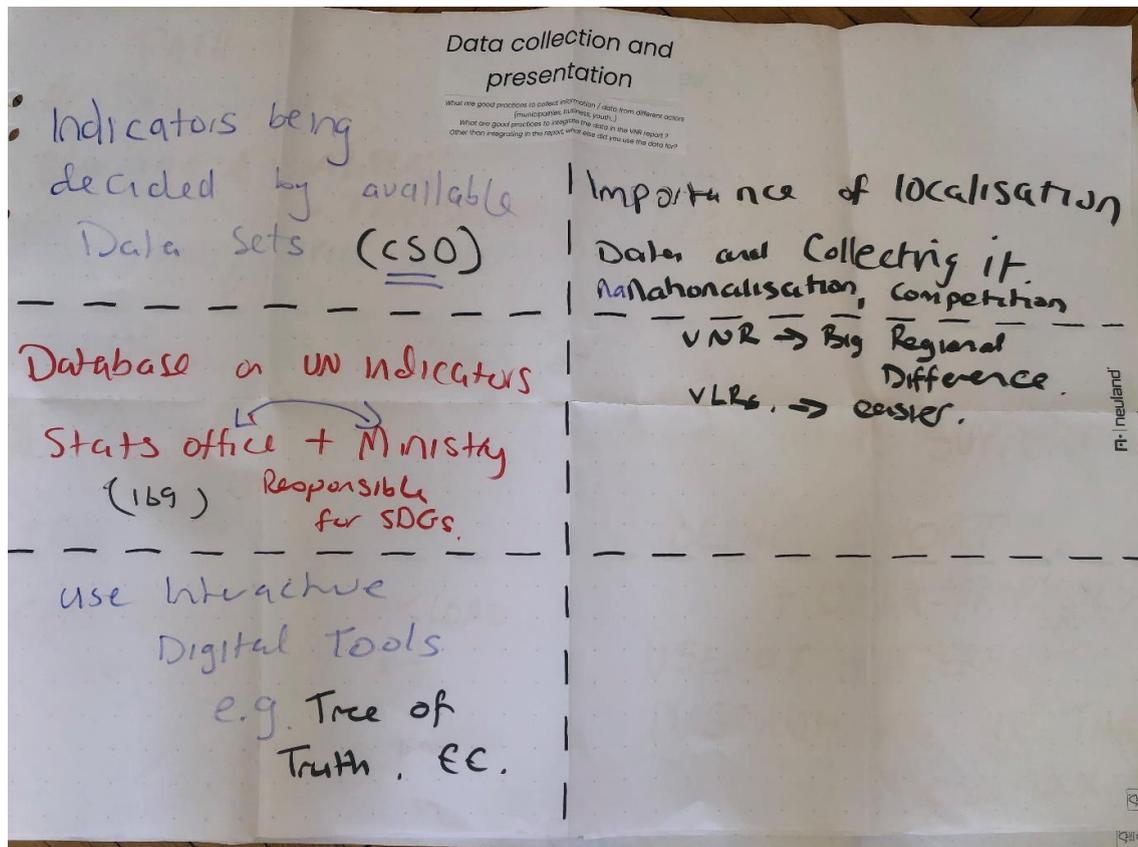
Guiding Questions:

- 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?

Often, what data is available determines the indicators and not what the government would actually like to measure. To try and minimise that issue, it can be helpful to look at what



indicators you would ideally like to have and how you can close that gap.

There can be a good or a bad relationship with national statistics offices. Sometimes there is not so much coherence between what the government wants and what the statistics office assesses. VNRs can help that relationship.

There can also be big regional differences in how data is collected. This is why VLRs are often easier to compile.

One good practice is to use digital interactive tools, for example, the Estonian Tree of Truth.

Methods and Approaches

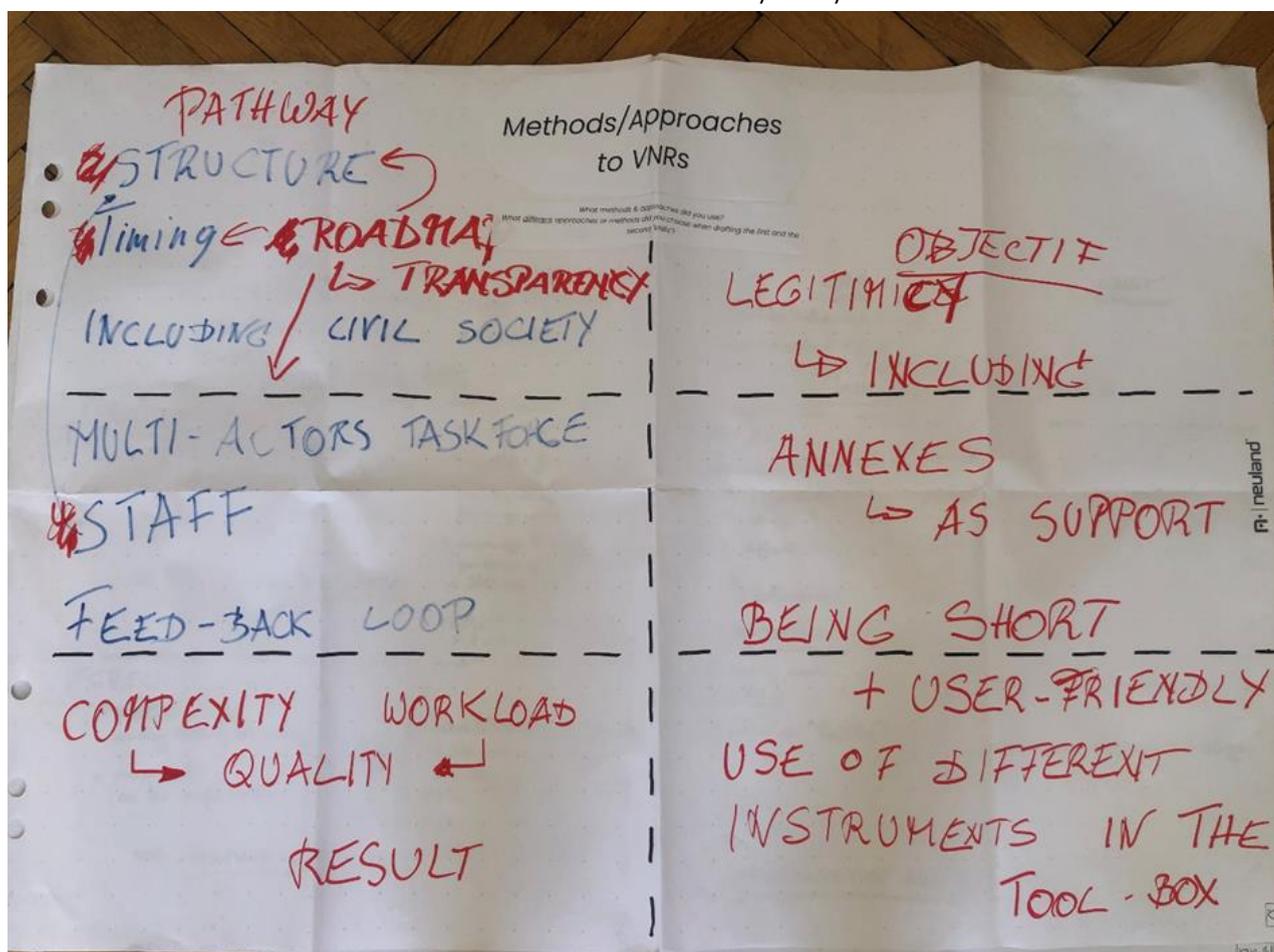
Guiding Questions

- What methods & approaches did you use?
- What different approaches or methods did you choose when drafting the first and the second VNRs?

The group recommended to develop a roadmap with a structure, that structure should be communicated early.

It is important to have enough time, and to give yourself a timeline.

A multi-actor taskforce may be helpful with their networks for collecting information and dissemination, so as the coordinator you do not need to know everybody.



It is crucial to have good staff to process all the information and to analyse it well. The objective should be to increase the legitimacy of the document and the process. The complexity of the process and workload will be high, but that is essential to guarantee quality.

The report should be short and user friendly, even though that is very challenging. To help with that, you can make use of different instruments, videos, online questionnaires or a related website.

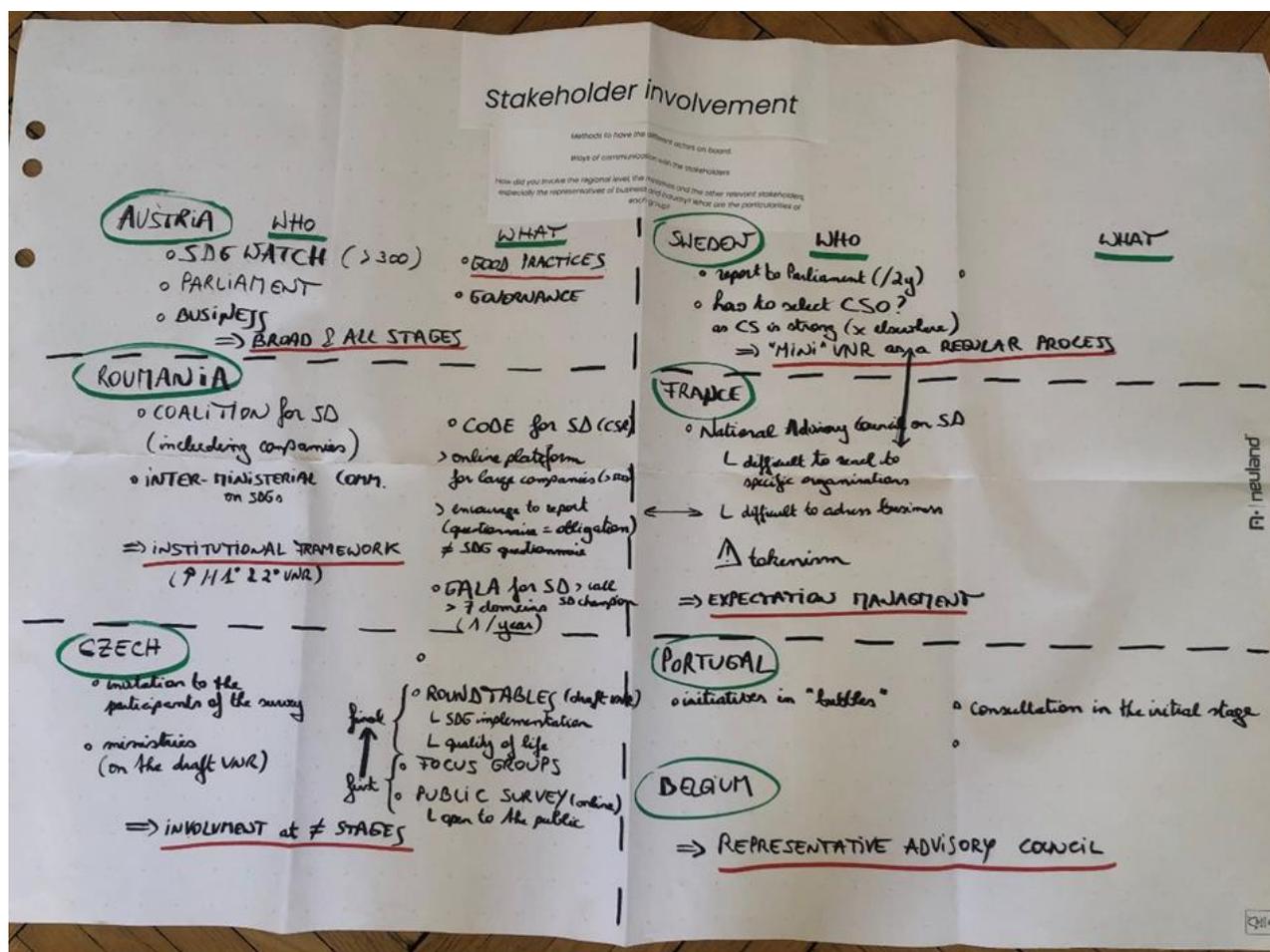
Stakeholder involvement

Guiding Questions

- 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?

The group on stakeholder involvement collected good practice examples from different countries. These can be seen in the picture of the flipchart below. The group also came up with several general recommendations:



- Broaden the base of stakeholders as much as possible and involve the stakeholders at different stages, not only at the beginning or at the end.
- There should be an institutional framework to have a coalition that includes different stakeholders
- Expectation management is key. This prevents disillusioning stakeholders throughout the process and avoids tokenism.

Influence of VNRs on the Policy Process

Guiding Questions

- How did the VNR influence your policy process?
- How should it influence national/EU policy processes?

The group presented ideas on governance structures that would promote an influence of the outcomes of VNRs on the policy process.

Legislative and executive need to complement each other. It is also very important that the parliament is involved, as the main legislative decision maker. When this does not happen, it is problematic because political interests will take over.

The government level needs to build coherence and harmonise all different layers and sectors in the administration. In addition, there needs to be cross-sectoral collaboration.

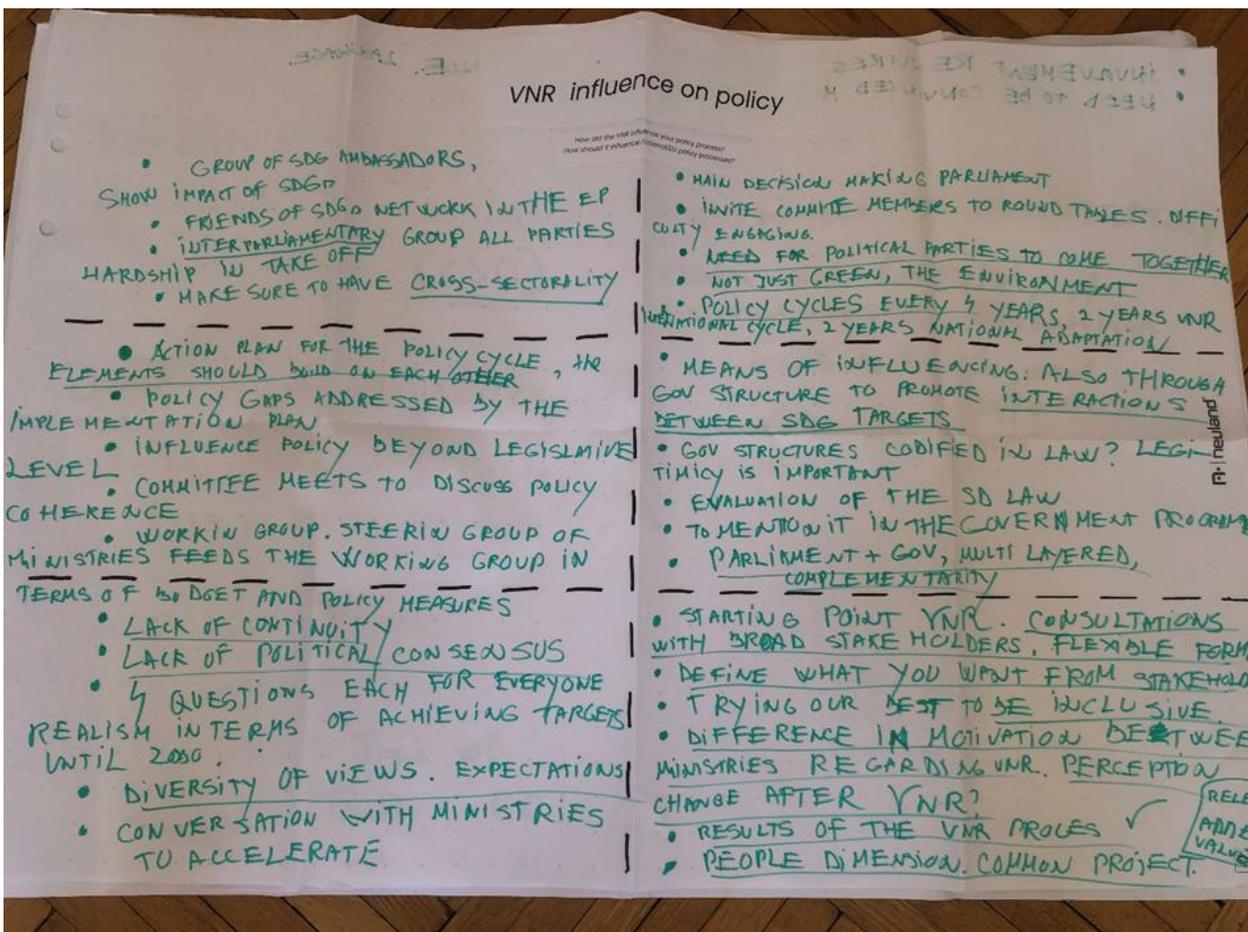
Problems include the lack of continuity when teams and strategies change, and a lack of political consensus. There is a diversity of views and expectations on achieving the 2030 Agenda and many in

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.

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. The starting point for this is the VNR and then there

should be inclusive and broad stakeholder consultations.



EEAC AND ESDN FAREWELL

A representative from the ESDN concluded the Peer Learning Platform by thanking all participants for coming. They briefly summarised the main learnings from the day and presented an outlook on the next ESDN events for the year.