

13. DESIGNING THE VNR FOR POST-VNR IMPLEMENTATION AND INSTITUTIONALIZING REPORTING STRUCTURES

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What Is It and Why Is It Important?

Reviewing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda should not be regarded as an end in itself, but a means to improve and accelerate implementation. If designed and conducted effectively, a VNR can be an engine for action and transformation.

During the VNR, countries take stock of progress and shortcomings in the implementation of the Goals and targets. They assess the synergies achieved between different SDGs and consider potential and actual trade-offs. This process needs to be designed in a way that facilitates the systematic identification of lessons learnt, good practices and policy recommendations. While some aspects of SDG 16 may be politically sensitive, countries should assess their progress and explore existing challenges and possible solutions during each VNR (as is the case with all other Goals, independent of the fact whether a Goal is being thematically reviewed at the HLPF during a particular year).

After the VNR, effective follow-up is critical to ensure that the implementation process moves forward. Governments and all other concerned stakeholders need to act upon the lessons learnt, good practices and policy recommendations identified during the review. Naturally, this process is cyclical and dynamic. Countries are constantly implementing, assessing and readjusting their policies to achieve the SDGs.

At the outset of its first VNR or sometimes even immediately after adopting the 2030 Agenda, countries typically set up reporting structures to ensure the smooth coordination of the review process and the meaningful engagement of non-state actors. Institutionalizing these structures helps sustain the momentum created by the VNR and supports post-VNR implementation on SDG 16 and the other Goals.

How Can This Be Used?

As explained, the VNR should not only review past implementation, but also aim to arrive at policy conclusions and agree on the next steps necessary to move the post-VNR implementation forward. When determining the VNR process, these objectives need to be taken into account.

Achieving them requires not only time and resources (e.g., for stakeholder consultation, policy evaluations, background research), but, above all, effective horizontal and vertical coordination and meaningful engagement of non-state actors, so that multiple perspectives are considered in the development of recommendations and next steps.

In addition, establishing broad and inclusive reporting structures increases the likelihood of sustained post-VNR implementation, because state and non-state actors have higher ownership and joint implementation by multiple stakeholders and across sectors is more likely. SDG action on the ground also increases when sub-national actors have already been involved in the review.

One country decided to put a focus on a locally particularly pressing sustainable development issue and to review it in a systematic and integrated manner. It conducted a systems analysis of drivers, bottlenecks and impacts, developed short- and long-term actions to tackle this issue and dedicated one chapter to the results in the VNR report. A similar approach could also be adopted for an issue related to SDG 16 and one its targets.

When designing the VNR process, immediate next steps need to be identified as well, such as reporting back to parliament and/or the media about the VNR presentation at the HLPF or organizing roundtables to further discuss the recommendations that have emerged from



The institutional mechanisms established at the outset or before a VNR should be institutionalized and continued after the VNR. More and more countries report that their mechanisms were further improved after the VNR. A number of countries have started reviewing the SDGs in years when they do not conduct a VNR and, in some instances, report their results to parliament. Others have decided to hold annual stakeholder forums to discuss implementation progress.

Designing and Conducting the VNR During the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 has affected the conduction of the 2020 VNRs and will likely do so again for 2021 countries. It is also hampering post-VNR implementation efforts. The restrictions enforced in most countries in response to the pandemic have created obstacles to broad and inclusive consultations within government at all levels and with non-state actors. Virtual consultations and online surveys are very useful tools in this context, but depend on digital infrastructure and technology, which is not equally available everywhere. Data collection has also become much more difficult, which is of particular concern for SDG 16 because of the already large data gaps under normal circumstances.

In some countries, the pandemic is being used as grounds for governments to enact emergency measures and extend their control. For instance, where access-to-information laws can help empower citizens and hold dutybearers accountable in times of crisis, restrictions on access to official information and delays in responding to public requests for information

have been recoded in some countries 

²⁹⁶ In these cases, it is even more important that citizens and institutions such as the parliament and media organizations hold them accountable and demand that civic space be restored during recovery.

At the same time, COVID-19 demonstrates the interconnectedness of the SDGs, as the impacts of the health crisis are closely related to, for example, human rights and inequality. It also reinforces the relevance of the 2030 Agenda, because progress on the SDGs will not only reduce the negative impacts of COVID-19, but also increase resilience to future shocks.

the VNR process. Furthermore, issues related to budget allocation and SDG data need be addressed not only during the VNR, but also subsequently. Actions that are not necessarily directly related to the VNR, but that can also drive post-VNR implementation, should also be considered, e.g., conducting a peer review or a performance audit.

296 RTI and Centre for Law and Democracy (2020). Database: COVID-19 Tracker. <https://www.rti-rating.org/covid-19-tracker/>

Lessons Learned from Repeated VNRs in Colombia

Colombia has so far presented two VNRs: one in 2016 and one in 2018. The most important step after the 2016 VNR was for the government to initiate a multi-stakeholder process to develop the national SDG implementation strategy. This took more than one year of workshops to raise awareness and build capacity and of consultations and technical discussions with line ministries, local and regional governments and non-state actors.

A key motivation for Colombia to present a second VNR after only two years was to share its experience of the strategy process. Besides documenting central government action and achievements, the government also highlighted the contributions of other actors. While not all of these are labelled as SDG initiatives, they significantly contribute to sustainable development. This meant approaching stakeholders in a different way, stipulating new types of cooperation with and among them, and appreciating all contributions.

With civil society, a mapping exercise with umbrella organizations provided an overview of who is doing what in the country. Public surveys, open for anyone to register projects, complemented the process and helped identify relevant initiatives. A series of regional workshops involved documenting what CSOs are doing and how. With the private sector, a pilot project to design indicators based on the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards – developed with the support of the UNDP country office and the GRI, regional partners and sectoral associations – helped measure businesses' contributions to the SDGs.

As a result, the 2018 VNR contains five stories about different stakeholders' contributions to the SDGs. An important element in working with all those stakeholders was the web portal that Colombia developed with support from the Swedish Government and that became a key communication tool in the process.

The participatory strategy development and the 2018 VNR broadened public awareness and strengthened local processes. This also helped carry the vision and spirit of the 2030 Agenda through the transition after the 2018 presidential elections. The broad commitment fostered continuity and the SDGs provided a transcending element for the 2018–2022 National Development Plan.

Resources:

- [SDG review as an engine for action: Promising practices from around the world](#), Partners for Review (2020);
- [Multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation: A review of Voluntary National Review Reports \(2016-2019\)](#), UN DESA (2020);
- [Progressing National SDG Implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum in 2019](#), Canadian Council for International Co-operation (2020);
- [Voluntary National Reviews submitted to the 2019 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development – a Comparative Analysis](#), Partners for Review (2019);
- [What happens after the VNR? Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations from the VNR Process](#), Partners for Review (2019);
- [The whole of government approach: Initial lessons concerning national coordinating structures for the 2030 Agenda and how review can improve their operation](#), Partners for Review (2019);
- [Second Generation Voluntary National Reviews: Renewing the commitment](#), Cepei (2019).