

What happens after the VNR? Lessons Learnt and Policy Recommendations from the VNR Process

Documentation paper on a Side Event during the Third meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development on Friday, 26 April 2019, 1:00 to 2:30 pm, CEPAL, Aula I, Sector ILPES

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to ‘conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels’¹. **Reviewing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is not an end in itself but a means to improve and accelerate implementation.** Understood in this light, effective follow-up and review is critical: Governments and all other concerned stakeholders need to act upon the lessons learnt, good practices and policy recommendations identified during the review processes at global, regional, national and local levels.

By 2019, 144 countries will have presented their Voluntary National Review (VNR) before the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), of which 13 will have handed in a second or even third report². The trend towards repeated reporting within just a few years is increasing. However, until now, there seems to be **no common understanding of what follow-up in the context of the 2030 Agenda means.** In addition, insights arising from experiences with national follow-up are not yet widely shared. However, precisely this information is crucial to lead a concerted discussion and inspire global learning

about how to convert the lessons drawn from review exercises into political action that is conducive to the achievement of sustainable development worldwide.

This issue has been addressed in a Side Event during the Third meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development³, jointly organized by ECLAC, the GIZ Partners for Review⁴ network and the GIZ project ‘2030 Agenda Guatemala’ with the aim to showcase country experiences of follow-up to the 2030 Agenda review process.

With a focus on the transformational potential of VNRs, key questions addressed a range of issues, such as:

- challenges national governments face vis-à-vis review and follow-up,
- evolving institutional mechanisms within government and with stakeholders,
- lessons learned from VNRs and their translation into political action,
- communication and awareness raising strategies employed to include stakeholders, and
- changes in the methodology of reporting, respectively.

¹ A/RES/70/1 §79

² Azerbaijan, Benin, Chile, Colombia, Egypt, Guatemala, Indonesia, Mexico, Philippines,

Qatar, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Togo, Turkey and Uruguay



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At the time of the event, the governments of Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala, were set to present their consecutive VNR in 2019 after having first reported in 2017⁵. The governments presented imminent insights from the current review exercise, while the governments of Colombia and Mexico, having both reported in 2016 and 2018, were invited to reflect upon how lessons identified do inform ongoing implementation efforts.

Stakeholder dialogue is key

National approaches to follow-up and review vary greatly in many aspects. In terms of the actors involved, the mandates they are given and the strategies that result, as well as in terms of which lessons are identified and prioritized to inform future implementation processes. Interestingly enough, when asked about which challenges their governments were confronted with and how the VNR exercise helped address these, **one common finding is that the review process has helped strengthen and institutionalize broad stakeholder dialogue.**

With the aspiration that the review exercise provide not a snapshot but a bigger picture about the national situation vis-à-vis sustainable development, the speakers highlighted that inclusion of stakeholders and continuous dialogue are key. In the case of **Guatemala**, whose first VNR reported the challenge of political coordination both within government as well as between government and stakeholders, the follow-up process allowed for intensified dialogue with stakeholders in the first place. Moreover, a

common understanding between diverse perspectives and an alignment of common goals for the further implementation process was achieved, which in turn allowed for the visualization of stakeholder contributions to the Agenda, and consequentially for a better collective reporting process for the second VNR. In this light, the countries do perceive the VNR process not as reporting burden, but an opportunity for an internal stock taking and to spur implementation efforts.

From government strategy to national strategy

Similarly, **El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico** departed from a centrally orchestrated review process in 2016 – in the former case led by the Technical and Planning Secretariat of the Office of the President, in the case of Guatemala by the Planning Secretary (SEGEPLAN) and in the latter by the Office of the Presidency – to the benefit of broader consultation processes in 2018. All countries highlight that their VNRs have evolved from government strategies to national strategies.

In the case of Mexico, this has resulted in the foundation of a consultative council, which divides work among six technical committees. Stakeholder dialogue is furthermore perceived as guarantor of policy consistency, be it in the event of political change after recent elections as in **El Salvador and Mexico**, or over time as in **Colombia**, where the national SDG council had been created by presidential decree as early as February 2015 and since has functioned to bring about the

⁵ Shortly after the event, El Salvador announced it would not present a VNR in 2019.



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political compromise necessary to advance implementation efforts. In this vein, the stance of **Colombia** is work within existing institutional mechanisms and concentrate efforts on more intensive multi-stakeholder dialogue.

Along the vertical line of government, the countries equally report broader involvement. For instance, **Guatemala** will report that in 45% of all municipalities, continuous work was undertaken since 2017 to align local development plans with the 2030 Agenda - an exercise that at the same time provided a mapping of implementation efforts undertaken by sub-national governments. Similarly, **Colombia**, in preparation of the first VNR, conducted a workshop with local governments to include the 2030 Agenda in respective development plans, which however did not provoke the intended impact. The strategy was then altered to specifically convince candidates for municipal-level elections to include the SDGs in their electoral programs and communicate the importance of the Agenda in development plans.

Mexico equally highlights the importance of localizing existing efforts as sub-national levels carry the majority of implementation responsibilities and efforts. **Chile**, in comparison, will be seeing a three-fold trickle-down effect of decentralization, regionalization and localization with regards to strategy formulation.

Essence of follow-up is increased involvement and communication

Examples of concrete measures to follow up on lessons and recommendations identified during the first VNR may be subsumed under the topic of broader

involvement and improving communication. For example, **El Salvador** introduced an online platform that provides official statistics and infographics to make accessible information on the progress towards SDG indicators. **Guatemala** launched an online platform to register and visualize activities by government and stakeholders that contribute to the implementation of the Agenda in the country, which has been received as a welcome incentive to make efforts by diverse parties visible. **Chile** has engaged in an initiative led by the Finnish government in order to evaluate the implementation progress in different countries, focusing on the alignment of i) government policies, ii) implementation systems such as budgetary processes or activities by Ministries, and iii) plans and programs including those of civil society, with the 2030 Agenda. The aim of this initiative is to identify suitable evaluation mechanisms for each area, as challenges associated with each are diverse.

Colombia, with the intention to demonstrate the value of multi-stakeholder partnerships, maps initiatives that are sustainable, innovative and multi-stakeholder contributions to the 2030 Agenda implementation and has issued a nation-wide call for good practices to be provided with micro-grants to support implementation. The country has also, after having invited 68 businesses to report against 11 of its national SDG indicators, launched the 'corporate tracker' online platform to visualize contributions by the private sector.

Vis-à-vis broader inclusion, **Guatemala** and **El Salvador** specify the need to develop adequate mechanisms and formats for the different forms of



engagement, such as information, consultation, collaboration and participation. In the same vein, **Guatemala** voices the tension between broad participation and legitimate representation in consultation mechanisms that needs to be dissolved by combining physical and digital participation opportunities.

As a central follow-up measure, **Mexico** has involved the Ministry of Finances to map all applicable budget lines and programs with SDG indicators to better visualize how opportunities and synergies for sustainable development may be driven through the budgetary process. Similarly, **Colombia's** budget will soon reflect individual SDGs and targets.

Next steps after HLPF 2019

While the VNR process is generally seen as a conversation starter and vehicle to engage with stakeholders and the greater public, the countries acknowledge that communication post-HLPF has been little. From this perspective, **Chile** has committed to increase communication and dialogue as part of a circle that leads from information to understanding, to consensus, to compromise and ultimately to action.

Guatemala is planning to host a series of workshops to identify recommendations evolving from the VNR process and thus create a feedback loop to ensuing evaluation. The country has also announced a process to communicate recommendations from the review exercise to sector ministries – as results of a consultative process, not by governmental

capacity. In this regard, an obligatory national-level consultation with the Presidency of the State, the Congress and the Judiciary will be conducted.

Conclusion

The thought-provoking panel discussion that took place during this event highlighted the **value of experience sharing among peers** and the importance of continuing to convene global and regional platforms of exchange to tap into the knowledge and good practices generated through the implementation, follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

If the currently emerging trend of states submitting subsequent VNRs within a few years should continue, it is likely that follow-up VNRs will become an integral part of future HLPF sessions, and that a considerable amount of countries will present even several VNRs until 2030. **Only if these reports present clear, continuous and coherent reviews of national efforts to implement the SDGs, they will provide an insightful source on national sustainability policies.**

Against this background, **it is crucial that the debate on review and follow-up be intensified within the international community**, that good examples be identified at an early stage and that peer learning between states be promoted.

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