Voluntary National Reviews and National SDG Reports

OVERVIEW REPORT TO GUIDE THEIR PREPARATION
DRAFT IN PROGRESS - SEPTEMBER 2017

UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME
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Introduction
The objective of this paper is to summarize the requirements for preparing a VNR and SDGR, reflect on international experiences (particularly from countries in ASEAN) and provide recommendations on key elements of the VNR and SDGR reporting process and content.

This paper is based on publicly available information (see bibliography) as well as several informal interviews with people that have been involved in preparing VNRs and SDGRs, and in-house expertise from having supported several governments for the 2016/17 HLPFs and in the rollout of the Agenda 2030 at national level. It should be noted that the official synthesis of the 2017 VNRs is still forthcoming from the UN HLPF Secretariat in New York. Similarly, potential revisions to the UN SG’s voluntary guidelines have not been announced yet. Finally, there are no official National SDG Reports yet and therefore no information on lessons learnt from their preparation process.

Differences and complementarities between a VNR and a SDGR
The VNR and SDGR are complementary in that both are an analysis of country-level experiences, successes, challenges and lessons-learned on the implementation of the Agenda 2030. Both the VNR and SDGR are built on multi-stakeholder engagement and rely on the input of quality data.

The VNR is part of the formal intergovernmental follow-up and review process on the Agenda 2030 and will be presented at the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF). It represents a country’s progress report to its peers and other stakeholders at the global level on in the implementation of the Agenda 2030. Its preparation process needs to follow a time-line that enables the country to present to the HLPF taking place in July of each year in New York. This time-line includes not only a preparatory process within the country but also peer engagement at the regional and global levels.

The VNR is guided by the UN Secretary-General’s Voluntary Guidelines which were recognized by the UN General Assembly in 2016. The guidelines are voluntary and countries can apply them as fits their context. The use of the guidelines is recommended, however, to promote consistency and comparability between VNRs and from one year to the next.

The process for a SDGR is more flexible, and there are no formal requirements for the structure, frequency and timeline. The SDGR is meant primarily for use by the country to guide its own implementation and monitoring and can build on the experience with national reporting during the MDG era. It can provide a knowledge base upon which various policies, programmes and partnerships can be established at national and sub-national levels. The SDG Country Reporting Guidelines released by the UNDG can provide a starting point.

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1 This paper was originally put together upon request from Viet Nam which is preparing a VNR for 2018 and has been edited for wider circulation.
2 This section draws heavily on the “[DRAFT] FAQ Sheet for Voluntary National Review (VNR) and SDG Country Report (SDGR)”, UNDESA/UNDG
3 [DRAFT] FAQ Sheet for Voluntary National Review (VNR) and SDG Country Report (SDGR)”, UNDESA/UNDG
4 The Asia Pacific Sustainable Development Forum organized by ESCAP, tentative dates of 28-30 March 2018
5 Workshops hosted by UNDESA with other countries preparing a VNR for the 2018 HLPF. Tentative date for first global workshop is 4-5 December in Geneva.
6 UNDESA/UNDG (TBD). [DRAFT] FAQ Sheet for Voluntary National Review (VNR) and SDG Country Report (SDGR)
The UN FAQ Sheet for VNR and SDGRs\(^7\) states that they share very similar preparatory activities such as multi-stakeholder dialogues and workshops to take stock of progress towards SDG implementation, focusing on analyzing data and data gaps, highlighting challenges and trends. Coordination of inputs and timelines is important to ensure that activities carried out for one process reinforce and support the other.

**Differences and similarities between a VNR and SDGR**

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**Principles for national follow-up and review processes\(^8\)**

The 2030 Agenda stipulates that all review processes, including a VNR and SDGR, are guided by a number of principles\(^9\). These include among them that review processes should be:

- Voluntary and country led;
- Focused on universal, integrated, and interrelated goals and targets, including means of implementation;
- Open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people;
- People-centred, gender-sensitive, and respect, protect and promote human rights, with a focus on the people who are poorest, most vulnerable and left furthest behind;
- Built on existing platforms and processes, while taking into consideration emerging methodologies;
- Rigorous and evidence based, informed by country led evaluations and data that is high quality accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability, and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in the national context;
- Longer-term orientation, and identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors.\(^{10}\)

These principles need to be considered in the design of the preparation process for the VNR and SDGR. Some suggestions as to how some of these principles can be applied will be discussed in the following sections.

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\(^7\) Still in draft form, not official released

\(^8\) From the SDG Country Reporting Guidelines, which adapted the list from the Agenda 2030


\(^{10}\) SDG Country Reporting Guidelines, which adapted the list from the Agenda 2030
Preparation process

While the VNR and the SDGR are different reports, they also overlap and can complement each other. The process for the preparation of each would logically start with a discussion in (or set-up of) an institutional coordination mechanism for the Agenda 2030. Many countries have set-up such mechanisms (in the form of inter-ministerial task forces, committees or boards) to coordinate the implementation of the Agenda 2030 across government ministries and agencies, and with stakeholders. They play an important role in ensuring policy coherence and attention for the integrated nature of the Agenda. Such mechanisms can also ensure a consistent and structured engagement with stakeholders. Examples of organograms of such mechanisms are included in the Annexes.

As part of such a mechanism or for the preparation of the VNR/SDGR, working groups or committees could be set up. For example, in Malaysia such working groups were clustered around the themes of well-being, inclusivity, human capital, environment and natural resources, and economic growth. These working groups consisted of government and civil society and other stakeholders and provided inputs into the VNR.11

A second step is to involve the National Statistical System for the collection of data across ministries and beyond. A data availability assessment, the establishment of national SDG indicators and benchmarks and a data ecosystem assessment are all elements that would provide the building blocks for the data inputs for the VNR and SDGR.

As an example, the 2016 VNR of the Philippines was based on the results of a series of technical workshops on the assessment and identification of SDG Indicators with broad participation of stakeholders from government, NGOs, civil society, academia, private sector, and the UN. These workshops also discussed strategies in incorporating SDGs in the planning process such as the matching

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11 Information based on VNR of Malaysia. Text box information also only based on VNRs from Malaysia and Indonesia, acknowledging that there might be other views from stakeholders.
of the SDG goals with the Long-Term Vision. Another example is of Indonesia, which undertook a specific study on the implementation and monitoring of SDG 16 exploring alternative sources of data. Malaysia is planning to work with civil society and other stakeholders in data sharing, specifically to monitoring SDG progress at the local level.

The use of data from sources outside of the traditional statistical system could fill gaps and provide important information for the implementation of the Agenda 2030. An example of alternative data that was used widely is the My World Survey. Through this Survey over 10 million people expressed their priorities for the future which fed into the intergovernmental process on the design of the SDGs and influenced the final shape of the Agenda. At national and local level, there are experiences to build on from citizen generated data, the use of big data and perception surveys to name a few.

The “data ecosystems” approach is an inclusive and innovative method to strengthen data availability and usage for the Agenda 2030. Using such an approach means looking at all possible types of data, actors, legal frameworks, institutions, technologies, and interaction between them - going well beyond solely governmental bodies. Piloted in 6 countries key findings point at the need for opening up national statistical systems to non-official stakeholders and innovative data approaches, providing incentives for government institutions to share untapped existing administrative data, paying attention to infrastructure requirements such as ICT, and coordinating donors’ assistance on data and statistics, and strengthen collaborative partnerships.

Stakeholder engagement is the third critical element for both the VNR and SDGR. Ideally, stakeholders are engaged throughout the conception, preparation and follow-up of both reports. An institutional coordination mechanism can play a leading role in organizing sustained engagement as well as specific consultations with different groups of stakeholders. This is how Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand all structured their stakeholder engagement. Indonesia is also duplicating its national coordination mechanism for stakeholder engagement at the sub-national level.

A perception survey on civil society and stakeholder engagement in VNRs and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda found that across countries awareness of VNRs and especially how to engage in the VNR process is low. Lack of awareness and of an optimal enabling environment for participation are critical barriers for “open, inclusive, participatory and transparent follow-up processes at all levels” as stipulated in the 2030 Agenda. Various stakeholder groups have made recommendations for engagement, such as:

- Set-up a stakeholder steering committee as the first step in preparing and inclusive country-led report. This committee should include representatives from all stakeholder groups, including parliaments and national human rights institutions.
- Raise awareness on the Agenda 2030 and the VNR/SDGR process and make specific efforts to reach out to local level and grassroots organizations.

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12 2016 VNR Philippines
13 UNDP 2016, Final Report on illustrative work to pilot governance in the context of the SDGs
14 2017 VNR Malaysia
15 Undertaken by Together2030 and Newcastle University
- Outsource any background research to local researchers instead of international ones and utilize multi-stakeholder review of research.
- Organize multi-stakeholder consultations for inputs to feedback on draft reports and validate findings.\(^{16}\)
- Encourage and support coalition building among civil society organizations and stakeholder groups.

While every effort should be made to engage stakeholders, civil society also plays a key role in ensuring accountability. At the national level, several civil society coalitions have prepared shadow reports for the 2016 and 2017 HLPF. Examples from the region in 2017 include shadow reports from India and Nepal. Some of these shadow reports have been critical of the mechanisms for civil society engagement and the limiting of civil society space. Several have noted a gap between words and action from government at national level.\(^{17}\) Notably, the civil society report from Kepa in Finland defined the collaboration between government and civil society as exemplary in the context of the drafting of the action plan for sustainable development.\(^{18}\)

At the global level, civil society participates in the HLPF and, through the major groups organizing mechanism, is invited to respond and ask questions to the VNR presenting countries during the official session. National civil society shadow report and other key issues for civil society are also highlighted through the organization of side events. Several of the major groups have also produced position papers or statements, such as the Women’s Major Group for example, which called for stronger language on SDG5 in the ministerial declaration at the 2017 HLPF.\(^{19}\)

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**ASEAN My World Survey**

The UN MY World 2015 survey showed how it is possible to bring people’s voices into the heart of global policy making. Over 1000 civil society partners helped to bring the survey to 10 million citizens across the world, including a quarter of a million from the ASEAN region. This made it an integral piece of the Global Conversation to define the 2030 Agenda and the results have fed into every part of the political process for creating the new goals.

ASEAN is now launching its own tailored edition of the My World Survey, which will capture public awareness, priorities and perceptions of progress on the Agenda 2030 and the ASEAN Vision 2025. The results of the survey could help shape policy recommendations and plans of action for ASEAN Member States. Ultimately ASEAN MY World aims to put people’s voices at the heart of the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the SDGs. Available at asean.myworld2030.org

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16 SDG Country Reporting Guidelines, UNDG  
18 KEPA (2016). Integrating the 2030 Agenda into Finland’s Domestic Policy Framework  
19 Statement from Women’s Major Group on the High Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development Ministerial Document
Depending on the scope and focus of the SDGR, the preparation process would start to deviate from the VNR to focus on the specific audience of each. The VNR is to include a review of Means of Implementation (formerly the Global Partnership for Development, MDG8), with specific messages for the international community. The SDGR is better placed to include a more in depth review of policies and programmes and recommendations for follow-up at national level. An SDGR could also include analysis at sub-national or city level, as was done in some countries during the MDG implementation period.

A Human Rights Based Approach to follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda

While the Agenda 2030 is only recently adopted, many of the issues it covers are included in other international agreements and as such have existing reporting requirements. The foremost example is the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council. The Agenda 2030 is firmly grounded in human rights principles and there is a high degree of convergence between human rights and the SDGs. 156 of the 169 SDG targets have substantial linkages to human rights and labor standards.

As such, there is a potential for utilizing human rights mechanisms to assess and guide the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. More specifically, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) can provide systematized qualitative analysis and data through institutionalized reporting mechanisms as well as best practices on stakeholder engagement, methodologies for innovative and participatory data collection and identification of systemic implementation challenges.

At a minimum, NHRIs should be involved in the preparation process of a VNR or SDGR.

Content

2018 will be the third year that countries are presenting VNRs to the High Level Political Forum. Over the past two years, the average quality in both content and process of the VNRs has risen. For 2017 several countries have prepared comprehensive reports following extensive preparation processes. For 2018 there will be an increased expectation as to the steps countries have taken to integrate the 2030 Agenda and the level of monitoring and reporting they are able to present. For example, in 2016 some countries indicated to have done a data availability assessment against the SDG indicators. In 2018, countries will likely be expected to have established baselines and be able to report progress against Tier 1 indicators at a minimum.

Each year the High Level Political Forum has a theme which countries are invited to reflect upon in their VNR. For 2018 the theme will be that of “Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies” with the subset of SDG 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17. For 2017, some countries only reviewed the subset of SDGs related to the 2017 theme. However, the voluntary guidelines, as well as civil society groups, recommend the inclusion of a review of all SDGs in the VNR.

The UN SG’s voluntary guidelines can be used as a content index for the VNR (see annex). Following are several issues that require specific attention in preparing the content of the VNR.

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20 The theme of the 2019 HLPF is that of “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”, with the subset of SDG 4, 8, 10, 13, 16, 17.
Interlinkages between the goals/policy coherence

One of the characteristics that makes the Agenda 2030 different from the MDGs is its indivisibility. The SDGs as its results framework are all interlinked and should be approached as such. Sustainable development will not be achieved without concerted effort to balance the social, environmental and economic dimensions. To apply this indivisibility, implementation of the Agenda and the SDGs should not be undertaken in silos. It requires an integrated and coordinated approach in policy making, programming and budgeting. It requires looking at optimizing synergies and minimizing trade-offs. The VNR and SDGR provide an opportunity to spur momentum across government ministries and agencies and strengthen policy coherence.

As an example, Malaysia’s VNR explicitly states the government’s recognition of the multi-dimensionality of development and how it is working on multiple facets at once, not only focusing on economic growth. Malaysia also commissioned a study on policy coherence, governance, human capital and data responses for the SDGs. In the VNR it links each of the goals reviewed to the main “thrusts” of its 11th National development Plan, showing the interlinkages between the three dimensions of sustainable development. Indonesia in its VNR addressed the interlinkages of several goals and their impact on poverty reduction. The importance of cross-sectoral approaches also comes back in different parts of the report, including as a lesson learned on SDG 3 on health.

Leaving no one behind

Ensuring that no one is left behind is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. Special attention needs to be given to those that are being left behind, and to reach the furthest behind first. To apply this principle, many countries first need an honest assessment of who is being left behind, where and how. Such an assessment should also look at policies, programs and budgets to see where changes are needed.

Malaysia in its VNR describes programs for the bottom 40, the collection of disaggregated data and working with CSOs and NGOs to reach people at local level. It does not, however, specify who might be left behind and how it would go about reaching the further behind first. Indonesia’s report admits the challenge of ensuring that no one is left behind in the context of its archipelagic nature and cultural,

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The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has launched a “leave no one behind index”, which measures how government are set-up to meet the commitment. The index measures governments’ readiness in three areas:

1. **Data**: have household surveys been conducted recently?
2. **Policy**: do countries have some of the core policies in place: are health services free at the point of access; are there anti-discrimination policies in employment; and can women own land?
3. **Finance**: do governments meet agreed spending targets in health, education and social protection?

ODI reviewed all the 2017 VNR countries against this index and assessed 25 as ‘ready’ to meet ‘leave no one behind’ commitments and 18 as ‘partially ready’. Based on this index, Indonesia is assessed as only partially ready to fulfill the commitment to leave no one behind, mainly because it does not meet spending targets on education, health or social protection\(^1\). Malaysia is equally assessed as only being partly ready.
ethnic and religious diversity. It also indicates that the discussions for the indicators analyzed disaggregated data by socio-economic status, gender, age group, domicile, as well as administrative level to address the principal of leaving no one behind. Thailand in its report mentions several specific vulnerable and marginalized groups, as for example under SDG 4 on education where it talks about equal access to education for underprivileged children, children with disabilities, children of ethnic groups and children in marginalized groups.

Content of the SDGR
The issues of policy coherence and leaving no one behind are of course equally relevant for a national SDGR. In fact, the SDGR would be an ideal platform to explore and analyze such issues in more depth. The SDGR can include data and analysis from the sub-national or even city level, and a more in-depth look at policies, laws, programs and budget from a perspective of policy coherence and leaving no one behind.

To date, there are no national SDGR reports available. Several countries are in the process of preparing one but have not made them public yet. One example is Laos which is working on a report that looks at available data for all MDGs and SDGs (including an added national goal 18 on reducing the impact of UXO) and analyzes localization and monitoring issues as well as development issues and challenges per goal.21

The SDG Index and Dashboards Report is a report card for country performance on the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is based on available data for 149 countries and the Dashboard uses a traffic light chart to show where countries stand on the SDGs.

The report is produced on an annual basis by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the Bertelsmann Stiftung. They encourage government and other stakeholders to use the SDG Index and Dashboards to “identify priorities for action, understand key implementation challenges, track progress, ensure accountability, and identify gaps that must be closed to achieve the SDGs by 2030.”1
(http://www.sdgindex.org/overview/)

The report has been presented at the High Level Political Forum and some countries have adopted it for national use. Japan included the chart in its VNR in 2017.

Challenges and lessons from other countries
Many countries have said that the VNR process itself was highly important and contributed to generating momentum for the implementation of the Agenda. This has also been echoed in the VNRs of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. Based on a survey from the UN, the 2016 HLPF reporting countries cited some of the following challenges in the preparation of their VNRs22:

- Translating the SDGs from the global to the national level and reviewing existing policies
- Collection of high quality data

21 Internal sources, not publicized yet.
- Ensuring an accountable and transparent review process
- Coordination and consultation with stakeholders
- Time pressure combined with the objective of involving the “whole of government” and all relevant stakeholders in the preparatory process
- The integration of cross-cutting themes
- Translation

These countries also shared the following lessons learned:

- Government staff to compile the report rather than outsourcing to a consultant
- Securing political leadership and deciding who will lead and draft the report early in the process
- Utilizing a coordination mechanism for engagement with civil society
- Recognizing the important role of parliaments, private sector, civil society and academia
- Looking at the experiences of MDG reporting
- Promoting an open dialogue
- Increasing the use of online consultations

There is little comparable experience yet on preparing a National SDG Report. A few countries in the region – Bangladesh, Laos, Nepal – are in the process but have not finalized their reports yet and no specific lessons are available. There are, however, relevant lessons drawn from MDG reporting. A global review noted some of the following from MDG monitoring and reporting:

- The MDG reporting process garnered attention for the need for reliable, quality and accessible data. The subsequent improvements in data “enabled governments to extend services to people and communities that were once “blank spaces” in planning processes and implement cost-saving efficiencies.”
- Local and non-traditional data sources were instrumental for MDG tracking.
- Disaggregating data by all relevant characteristics helped guide implementation.
- MDG Progress Reports were an impetus for action and learning.

While the SDGs are considerably different from the MDGs, these lessons are still relevant and applicable to SDG reporting.

**UN support to follow-up and review of the Agenda 2030**

Over the past two years, the UN has provided support to many of the VNR reporting countries and has also extended support for the preparation of SDGRs. This support has taken on various forms, depending on the country context. As an example, in the Maldives, UN’s support included a Rapid Integrated Assessment to provide recommendations on the country’s readiness to monitor and implement SDGs as well as the organization of multi-stakeholder dialogues in the VNR preparation process. Indonesia was supported in the undertaking of a data availability assessment and currently in the localization of the Agenda to sub-national level. The UN Country Team, led by the Resident Coordinator’s Office, supported Malaysia in the organization of its Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Conference and in the development of its national SDG roadmap. The UN also has a history in strengthening of local data collection and analytical capacities, participatory reviews of the MDGs, and

23 UNDP (2016). *From the MDGs to Sustainable Development for All; Lessons from 15 years of practice*
24 UNDP (2016). *From the MDGs to Sustainable Development for All; Lessons from 15 years of practice*
the production of regular nationally-owned MDG Reports (MDGRs)\textsuperscript{25}. For the SDG, several UN agencies act as custodians for specific indicators and collect data that can support the preparation of a VNR or SDGR.

At the regional level, UN-ESCAP organizes the annual Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), which is the official regional mechanism part of the follow-up and review architecture for the Agenda 2030. The APFSD is meant as a regional event for peer-learning on the implementation of the Agenda, the outcomes of which are forwarded to the High Level Political Forum at global level. In 2018 the APFSD will take place 28-30 March.

Further opportunities for peer-learning and knowledge sharing are created through workshops for VNR preparing countries, hosted by UNDESA and UN-ESCAP (dates not announced yet). UNDP also hosts an annual Regional Knowledge Exchange which focuses on the implementation of the Agenda 2030 more broadly. For 2017 this Exchange is taking place from the 2-4 October in Manila, the Philippines.

**Recommendations for key elements of a VNR and SDGR**

The preparation of a VNR and SDGR present an opportunity to strengthen the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and increase stakeholder engagement and partnerships. While constituting two specific outputs, they should be seen a part of a larger and longer-term process leading towards the achievement of the SDGs. Following are several recommendations on both content and process of the two reports for countries to consider:

**Content**

- It is recommended that all countries follow the UN SG’s voluntary guidelines to determine its content for the VNR, including a reflection on each of the SDGs. In addition, the voluntary guidelines recommend a thematic analysis on the theme of the 2018 HLPF, which is that of “Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies with the subset of SDG 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17\textsuperscript{26}. Such an analysis would take an integrated look at how the subset of goals impact on the theme of sustainable and resilient societies.

- The preparation processes of the VNR and SDGR should be utilized to strengthen policy coherence and multi-stakeholder engagement for the longer term. By involving all government ministries and agencies, analyzing data, policies and plans from an integrated perspective and engaging external stakeholder consistently these processes could help countries to improve their policy making and progress against the SDGs. Previous countries have stressed the importance of government leading the preparation and drafting of the reports to reap these benefits.

- As part of the review, countries should pay attention to the concept of leaving no one behind and of reaching the furthest behind first that underlies the Agenda 2030. This could be through explicitly identifying vulnerable and marginalized groups in the VNR and SDGR, including disaggregated data and analysis, and indicating what steps have and will be taken to meet the commitment to leave no

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\textsuperscript{25} UNDP, Guidance note – data for SDGs, April 2017

\textsuperscript{26} The theme of the 2019 HLPF, which is that of “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”, with the subset of SDG 4, 8, 10, 13, 16, 17.
one behind and to reach the furthest behind first. A study could be undertaken on who is being left behind to inform the reports, including an analysis of policies and budgets.

- While the VNR should be geared to an international audience, the SDGR is mainly for national use. Its emphasis should therefore be more on policies and programmes, with the possibility to also include sub-national data and analysis. A SDGR could focus on the concept of leaving no one behind vis-à-vis the SDG targets and indicators and review policies, programs and budgets in how they address leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first. Although mainly geared for national use, such a SDGR could prepare countries well for the 2019 HLPF which will coincide with the opening of the General Assembly and take place at Heads of State/Government level with the theme of “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”.

- In addition to reporting progress against the SDGs, the VNR should focus on analyzing and sharing lessons learned and providing information that can support other countries both in their preparation of a VNR and implementation of the Agenda 2030. It should identify obstacles and areas where support is needed. Openness about possible shortcomings is appreciated by the international audience. As an example, the Netherlands was commended for its honesty about areas for improvement during the 2017 HLPF. Japan in its VNR report included critical results from the SDG Index.\(^\text{27}\)

- Countries preparing a VNR or SDGR could become an exemplary model by exploring and utilizing alternative sources of data, outside of the traditional statistical system. This could include citizen generated data, the use of big data and perception surveys.

- From a perspective of accountability, the section on next steps in the VNR is critical. Clear and concrete follow-up actions will help keep the momentum for sustained progress against the SDGs. The VNR is part of a longer-term process and should not be seen as an endpoint. To facilitate this, it is also recommended to organize a form of post-HLPF feedback to stakeholders.

- To demonstrate a country’s commitment to the Agenda 2030 the VNR and SDGR could include a foreword by the highest political office. For example, Malaysia’s VNR included a foreword by the prime minister, Indonesia a preface signed by the minister of national development planning.

### Preparation process

- Countries should start with making the VNR and SDGR a standing item on the agenda of their institutional coordination mechanism for the Agenda 2030. In addition, a unit or team needs to be appointed to lead the preparation and writing of the report. Alternatively, working groups can be set up, like was done in Indonesia and Malaysia. Inputs requested from such working groups need to be well prepared as synthesizing can otherwise be very difficult. It is important that this process is being led by the government.

\(^{27}\) Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2017). The SDG Index and Dashboard Report.
Simultaneously, through the institutional coordination mechanism and the National Statistical Office, a data collection exercise needs to be undertaken. If not already done, a data availability assessment, the establishment of national SDG indicators and benchmarks and a data ecosystem assessment should be started. The process for the VNR and SDGR are an opportunity to identify further gaps in data and capacities and to strengthen inter-ministerial coordination and collaboration around data, as well as explore alternative sources of data and partnerships with external stakeholders.

If not yet existing, a formal mechanism should be set-up for the engagement with stakeholders. In addition, consultations with different groups should be included and coalition building by stakeholders should be encouraged and supported.

To promote engagement and transparency, governments should consider creating a website with up to date information on the VNR/SDGR, holding online consultations and in the long term create a dashboard and/or scorecard for SDG progress.

Sufficient time should be allocated for translation, editing and design, as well as the summarizing of key messages. A well drafted executive summary of the VNR (or key messages) is critical for accessibility and broad dissemination. For the 2017 HLPF, countries were asked to prepare key messages by mid-May, which were translated in the six main official UN languages and put on the UN website. This will most likely be the case again for 2018 and should be factored into the timeline for the preparation.

Governments should consider their minister of foreign affairs or higher level for the presentation of the VNR at the HLPF. They should also consider bringing a stakeholder representative as part of the delegation and allowing speaking time within its assigned slot. This has been done by several countries in both 2016 and 2017 and was well received. For example, in 2017 the Netherlands brought its youth representative who spoke during the official presentation following the minister for development. Finland included civil society, private sector and youth representatives in its official delegation to the HLPF.

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28 UKSSD/Bond, Progressing National SDG Implementation: Experiences and Recommendations from 2016
Annex 1: Examples of institutional coordination mechanisms

Institutional coordination mechanism - Malaysia

Institutional coordination mechanism - Indonesia
Institutional coordination mechanism - Thailand

The National Committee on Sustainable Development (NCSD) chaired by PM

The Cabinet
- Provide recommendations
- Request for approval

Sub-Committee Implementing SDGs
Sub-Committee Enhancing Understanding of & Evaluating SD with Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy
Sub-Committee Developing Information System to Support SD

SDGs Integration & Prioritization
SDGs Reporting
Economics, Social & Legal Measures to Promote SDGs Implementation

Snapshot of Indonesia SDG website
Proposal for voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum

(as presented in the annex to the Secretary-General’s report on critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level, A/70/684)

In the 2030 Agenda, Member States decided that the high-level political forum, when it meets under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, shall carry out regular voluntary reviews. As stipulated in paragraph 84 of the Agenda, those reviews will include developed and developing countries as well as relevant United Nations entities and other stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector. They shall be State-led, involving ministerial and other relevant high-level participants. They shall provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders. In paragraph 84 of the Agenda, Member States are also encouraged to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels which are country-led and country-driven. Voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum will likely build on such reviews.

The following components are suggested as a way to help countries to frame the preparations for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum, bearing in mind that each country will decide on the scope of their review and the format in which they want to present their findings.

The expectation is that each country being reviewed may present a focused report to the high-level political forum and make brief presentations during its meeting.

1. **Opening statement.** An opening statement by the Head of State or Government, a Minister or other high-ranking Government official could highlight the key messages from the review and touch on critical issues in implementation of sustainable development that the country wishes to highlight.

2. **Summary.** A one-to-two page synthesis of the process and findings of the review highlighting two or three good practices the country wishes to share, two or three lessons it has learned in trying to accelerate implementation, two or three challenges on which it wishes to hear about other countries’ good practices and two or three areas where it would need support in terms of finance, capacity-building, technology, partnerships etc.

3. **Introduction.** The context and objectives of the review could be presented here. The introduction may briefly describe key features of the country context as it pertains to the 2030 Agenda, with a discussion of national priorities and targets for sustainable development and their relation to the Sustainable Development Goals, and a discussion of critical challenges.

4. **Methodology and process for preparation of the review.** This section may discuss the methodology that was adopted for the review, including its scope, depth and limitations. Information on the process for preparation of the national review may be presented, including, for example, how different levels and sectors of Government contributed to the review, whether parliaments were engaged, whether national evaluation/oversight institutions contributed, how stakeholders from civil
society, academia and the business sector were involved, which consultations took place, and possibly whether another Member State or institutions contributed to the review, etc. Lastly, the country may indicate what support it received. The sources used for the review may be discussed. This could include, as per paragraph 74 (f) of the 2030 Agenda, how existing platforms and processes have been built on, as well as how existing national reports have been used in the process.

5. Policy and enabling environment.

(a) Creating ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals. The review could outline efforts made towards all stakeholders to inform them on and involve them in the Goals and targets, including national and local government, legislative bodies, the public, civil society and the private sector. It could indicate how it is planned to keep the Goals under review at the national level and, including the possible dissemination of reviews and their findings.

(b) Incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals in national frameworks. The review could outline critical initiatives that the country has undertaken to adapt the Sustainable Development Goals and targets to its national circumstances, and to advance their implementation. It may describe national efforts made to integrate the Goals into the country’s legislation, policies, plans and programmes, including the sustainable development strategy, if there is one. The review could indicate the main challenges and difficulties experienced in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals as a whole. It could also highlight additional goals, beyond the Goals, which are national priorities. Countries could consider referring to major efforts undertaken by local authorities and non-State actors to implement the Goals, including partnerships.

(c) Integration of the three dimensions. The review might discuss how the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) are being integrated and how sustainable development policies are being designed and implemented to reflect such integration. The review could also assess how other principles of the 2030 Agenda, for example, leaving no one behind, have been mainstreamed in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

(d) Goals and targets. The review may provide brief information on progress and the status of all Sustainable Development Goals, and critical difficulties encountered in reaching them, making reference, when appropriate, to data provided in the statistical annex (see sect. 8 below). The review may indicate whether a baseline for the Goals has been defined and remaining obstacles to doing so. The review may also provide a more in-depth analysis on a few selected Goals and targets. Those may be chosen by the country in the light of its priorities but also because they were tackled through innovative policies, are relevant to other Member States, and can be addressed in an international context. The discussion could focus on trends, successes, challenges, emerging issues, and lessons learned, and describe what actions have been taken to address existing gaps and challenges. It could support the identification of gaps, solutions, best practices and areas requiring advice and support. The review may examine the agreed global indicators for those goals and targets identified as priorities. Countries may choose to refer to complementary national and regional indicators.

(e) Thematic analysis. As appropriate for the country, the review could include an analysis of progress and initiatives related to the high-level political forum’s thematic focus for that year.
(f) **Institutional mechanisms.** The review could provide information on how the country has adapted its institutional framework in order to implement the 2030 Agenda. This could include information on how the views of different ministries, agencies, levels of government and non-governmental stakeholders are taken into account and on the institution in charge of coordination and integration. The review could consider highlighting efforts to mobilize institutions around the Sustainable Development Goals, improve their functioning, and promote change. Information may also be provided on how responsibility is allocated among various levels of Government (national, subnational and local) for coherent implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. It would be useful to highlight how the country intends to review progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, including possible plans regarding the conduct of national reviews.

6. **Means of implementation.** Based on the above challenges and trends highlighted, the review may discuss how means of implementation are mobilized, what difficulties this process faces, and what additional resources are needed to implement the 2030 Agenda, including in terms of financing, capacity development needs, including for data and statistics knowledge-sharing, technology and partnerships.

7. **Next steps.** The review could outline what steps the country is taking or planning to take to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

8. **Statistical annex.** Countries may include an annex with data, using the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators to be proposed by the Statistical Commission as a starting point and adding priority indicators identified at the regional and national levels. They may highlight whether statistics were collected from the national statistical system and pinpoint major gaps in official statistics on indicators.

9. **Conclusion.** The section may present a summary of the analysis, findings and policy implications. It may discuss new or emerging issues identified by the review. Lastly, the country may indicate what lessons it has learned from the review process, what support it would need in the future for preparing such reviews and any adjustment it believes should be made to the guidelines to ensure that they are useful.

10. The report could have a link to more in-depth national reports and reviews through the dedicated United Nations Secretariat website.
Annex 3: Suggested structure of a national SDG report

The following structure is suggested for a national SDG report:

**Introduction:** This can set the context, state the purpose, describe the structure and provide a summary overview.

**Tracking progress:** This can identify where the country is on track, slow or falling behind in achieving national targets; compare national progress with that of countries at a similar stage of development and circumstances; and assess national progress in light of the global targets.

**Assessing means of implementation:** This section can assess means of implementation—such as domestic resource mobilization, external resource flows of different kinds, access to external markets, access to technology and life-saving medicines, etc.—as well as the overall domestic and global economic environment. In particular, the section can examine how integrated the means of implementation are, relate them to the extent of progress, and discuss impacts from the domestic and external economic environment.

**Analysing thematic issues:** In light of the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs, this section can cover thematic issues with cross-cutting implications—such as inequality and discrimination, gender equality, peace, climate change, food security, the data revolution, poverty, etc.—and relate global/regional issues to the national context.

**Evaluating policies and strategies:** This section can scrutinize policy gaps and deficits in national strategies, especially in terms of their integration of different elements of the 2030 Agenda and emphasis on targeting those furthest behind. It may draw on lessons from other countries facing similar development stages and circumstances.

**Concluding with recommendations:** This final section can synthesize findings and offer possible policy options and strategies to accelerate progress.

**Statistical annexes:** These can include basic data, their sources and definitions (metadata), as well as discussions of methodologies. A section assessing data availability and discussing plans to work on data gaps can also be optionally included.

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29 UNDG, Guidelines for SDG Country Reporting
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