

**Partners for Review (P4R)**

A Transnational Multi-Stakeholder Network for a Robust Review Process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Report of the Network Kick-off Meeting

*Bonn 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> of November 2016*



## Introduction

*Partners for Review* was introduced by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety (BMUB) at the 2016 HLPF: It was launched at a kick-off meeting from November 7 – 9 in Bonn/Germany and is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). *Partners for Review* seeks to encourage countries to engage in efficient review processes on national and global levels in order to spur implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development..

The initiative is intended to facilitate mutual learning and an exchange of best practices and challenges encountered in many countries with regard to national reporting cycles and review processes. Countries which had participated in the first round of National Voluntary Reviews at the 2016 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), the first HLPF after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, and countries that had already announced their plans for a National Voluntary Presentation (NVP) for the 2017 HLPF at the time were invited<sup>1</sup>. More than 60 participants from 24 countries from Africa, the Americas, Europe and the MENA region as well as UN entities and international NGO representatives participated.

## Background of Partners for Review

As an important part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations Member States established a ‘robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework (...) operating at the national, regional and global levels.’ (A/RES/70/1, §71).

A well-designed review mechanism will contribute to the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. State-led review will help to assess the implementation of sustainable development at national level. On a global level, effective national review systems will be a precondition for high-quality NVPs and mutual learning at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), for which early reporting cycles will set a precedent for review until 2030.

NVPs at the HLPF are preceded by the drafting of respective country reports. Ideally, data and information from multiple stakeholders feed into such a report. The drafting of a report thus requires effective institutional coordination between different government entities which may have differing information on the same area or different perspectives on what to highlight in an NVP. Another key issue is the involvement of civil society, business and academia in the reporting and review process. Not all SDG tracking information is available from government entities; in some cases, non-governmental actors can fill in some of the gaps. Furthermore, by contributing their own reports (so-called shadow reports), non-government actors enrich the discussion in the spirit of the Agenda’s ‘leave no one behind’ principle.

Since at the global level, no format existed to enable transnational exchange on review and reporting, including with non-governmental actors, P4R was created as a network to complement and support UN events such as the HLPF and corresponding retreats.

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<sup>1</sup> The platform is also open for countries with a general interest in the topic.

## Objectives of the kick-off meeting

The two-and-a-half-day meeting focused on the following cross-cutting topics:

- effective institutional coordination,
- multi-stakeholder involvement,
- alignment to national contexts,
- statistical capacities for SDG reporting.

Throughout the discussions on these topics, one objective was to share lessons learnt from the inaugural NVPs as well as expectations and the state of progress towards the 2017 HLPF.

## Day 1: SDGs from different perspectives, Experiences from HLPF 2016, SDG indicators

### Implementing the SDGs from different perspectives

After a short welcome by the German Government and an introduction round, the first session focused on the topic “Implementing the SDGs from different perspectives”. This issue had been chosen because the 2030 Agenda envisions an inclusive and participatory framework for follow-up and review. This means that the different perspectives and motivations of the government, civil society, academia and the private sector are taken into account.



Welcoming words by Dr. Ingolf Dietrich, Deputy Director General and Commissioner for the 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals at the BMZ

A shared conviction expressed during the panel session and taken up in the subsequent open discussion was that the task of establishing an integrated multi-stakeholder process requires sustained attention and effort. Crucial success factors named by participants included ongoing commitment, effective mainstreaming, collective and high level political ownership, meaningful participation, people-centred approaches and available resources.

The issue of duplication was raised with regard to parallel, and sometimes still evolving, review processes on national, regional and global levels. Ideally these should be coherent with each other and mutually reinforcing, but in reality contradictions between results of different reporting lines can occur. Additionally, shadow reports were welcomed as useful and necessary publications

which can complement official reporting. Strong existing institutions and a progressive civil society were named as crucial cornerstones of a robust review architecture. It was also stated that civil society involvement is important; hence policies should be designed in such a way that all voices are heard, especially the marginalized societal groups.

	
Panel discussion	World Café

### HLPF 2016: Collective reflection on experiences and lessons learnt

A key question of the second panel discussion was whether and to what extent lessons learnt from the MDG process may be applicable to 2030 Agenda reviews processes. As presented by UN-DESA, the mechanism to review the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) produced 95 national reports between 2007 and 2015, aligned to a *UN-centred* monitoring framework. However, the MDG reporting mechanism was not very much imbedded into the national reporting structure – rather perceived as a parallel process. The 2030 Agenda now expands review processes onto another level. As review and follow-up are an incremental part of the 2030 Agenda, they call for national ownership, a whole-of-government approach as well as participatory inclusion of non-government stakeholders both throughout the national review process as well as at the global HLPF level.

A proposed summary of lessons learnt from the 2016 HLPF, complete with clustered recommendations, was met with great interest by participants. In this regard, it was suggested that the President of ECOSOC issue a report to facilitate follow-up and collective learning. In the same vein, pre-HLPF retreats for presenting countries were appreciated since they enable collective preparation. With regard to the presentations, several countries suggested to provide a narrative of the country context and its development strategy rather than a merely factual, statistical report.

Key challenges named by government representatives were priority setting, mobilization of resources especially for LDCs and private sector integration. Furthermore, the transfer of technologies was identified as important. At this initial stage of SDG implementation, the overall quality of discussions at national level, comprising stocktaking exercises, gap analysis and strategy formulation as well as civil society involvement, were perceived to be a good start in order to seize the current momentum.

Ensuing group discussions allowed participants to intensify the debate and to share distinct national experiences of how to break down the global agenda into national contexts.

While preparations toward NVPs varied greatly among countries present, their strategy development approaches may be clustered as either i) aligning existing national agendas with the SDGs or ii) using the SDGs as a starting point to design new national agendas. For those countries with strategies for sustainable development and/or review mechanisms already in place, the priority reportedly is to test accordance with the SDGs and to make amendments via mapping exercises and gap analyses. Those countries tasked with

developing a novel strategy described the challenge to determine and prioritize targets according to the national context and then define mutually enforcing clusters.

The issue of holistic implementation was also frequently brought up: While several countries stated that no individual goals were prioritized in their national strategy, others argued that due to the complexity of the 2030 Agenda, a prioritization was necessary, in part to be able to showcase quick wins. Two countries brought up the question of how best to address trade-offs and asked whether there were tools available to deal with this issue that could be fitted to their national approach.

A third issue which was discussed was intra-governmental coordination. In some countries, individual SDGs or SDGs clusters and/ or the review of their implementation have been made the primary responsibility of one ministry or a group of line ministries. In other countries, all sectors are required to contribute to implementation and review. In both cases, policy coherence and cross-sectoral action were named as priorities for policy making. However, achieving policy coherence requires an all-of-government approach and does not simply happen, but needs to be developed and managed.

With regards to resource allocation, the concern was raised of how to ensure the *allocation of adequate financial means* to achieve the 2030 Agenda in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.

Another issue which was brought up was allocating *power* to non-governmental stakeholder groups, as achieving the SDGs requires broad societal inclusion and participation. Various approaches of how to do so were discussed.

### **Global SDG indicator framework versus national indicators**

The last panel discussion of the day on global and national indicator frameworks for reporting shed light on existing discrepancies between the intended versus anticipated reporting on the SDGs as well as on some difficulties with providing data and evidence.

The session mirrored the common observation that the 2030 Agenda's 17 goals, 169 targets and currently 231 indicators (of the global indicator framework) to be reported pose a considerable challenge to all countries. At national level, OECD countries have reportedly been found to struggle with data availability to match indicators (width). Developing countries are additionally challenged by the request for disaggregation (depth) and timeliness of data. An apparent trade-off between quality and timely reporting, which is especially manifest in developing countries, prompted the suggestion from the audience to aim for intermediate milestones in data production.

At the global level, an envisioned 'data cube', a tri-dimensional data base was introduced. Such a tri-dimensional matrix includes the xyz functions (x) time (15 years), (y) member states (190) and (z) indicators (231). This matrix will of course have significant gaps since many developing countries' currently lack the capacity to report on majority number amount of indicators.

Furthermore, there was some confusion among participants about the relationship between national indicators and the global SDG indicator framework.

Furthermore, the diverse needs for reporting and review on municipal and sub-state levels were mentioned. In a similar vein, comparability of data was cited as a further impediment to global review, as indicators and methodology often vary across countries and governance levels.

A concern shared by many participants was the urgent need to strengthen the capacity of national statistical offices – in particular regarding leadership, innovative data production via new technologies and availability of resources - in addition to quality-checks for data production. While it was acknowledged that NGOs have been crucial in providing input and filling data gaps, the shared view was that this cannot compensate for lack of capacity of official authorities.

In this regard, it was suggested that national statistical offices should evolve from providers of data to providers of policy-oriented information, implying that data be perceived as means for coherent policy making. ‘Data communication’ as well as ‘data literacy’ were cited to coin the two-fold significance of data production and data use for effective review: rather than serving abstract purposes, data should allow for responsive, people-centred and accountable policy review.

**Day 2: NVPs at the HLPF, current and desired national approaches to SDG review concerning institutional set-up and multi-stakeholder processes**

Day 2 centered on group work both among stakeholders of one group and between different stakeholder groups. Using design thinking methods, participants were asked to showcase their “SDG review mechanism nightmare” and their ideal prototype approach towards review for the future.

<p>Design thinking via Lego Serious Play</p>	<p>Plenary discussion with caravans in the back, which served as safe work spaces</p>

**National Voluntary Presentations at the HLPFs 2016 and 2017**

The group sessions were organized along guiding questions around the topics: what were the experiences from HLPF 2016? And which recommendations can be given to countries reporting in 2017? In addition, participants discussed what kind of support countries lacking capacity to conduct review and reporting should ideally receive.

The majority of countries which had presented to the HLPF in 2016 appreciated their NVP as an opportunity to advance the 2030 Agenda in their domestic arena. While some participants said that respecting the variety of national contexts when designing a national report is important, some countries nevertheless urged that the UN reporting guidelines be followed

as closely as possible to ensure a level of comparability among reports, as this is crucial in order to generate recommendations and extract lessons learnt.

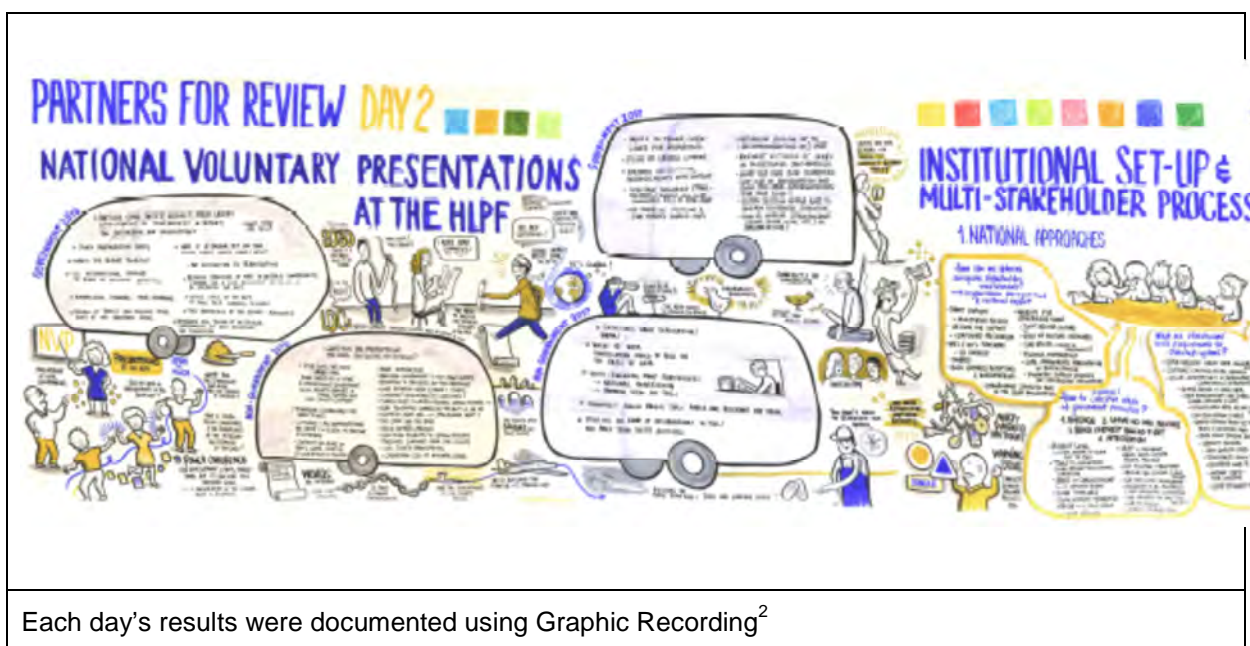
Participants also described the early involvement of civil society as a partner in the reporting process as a factor which contributed to a quality review. It was said that this ensures the integration of alternative perspectives, can help to heighten the ambition of the report and can lend the national review process increased transparency, legitimacy and credibility. Shadow reports were also acknowledged as a potentially critical complement to official reporting.

Among the concrete recommendations formulated for future presenters were:

- early engagement in the review process,
- broad participation of non-state actors and lively multi-stakeholder dialogue,
- genuine authorship on behalf of the government agency in charge (instead of outsourced authorship),
- correct translation of jargon/technical terms,
- and timely national follow-up to seize momentum.

To facilitate mutual learning and follow-up, all countries including those presenting in the future voiced demand for a UN-issued summary of recommendations and lessons learned.

Non-governmental representatives encouraged countries to report on success stories as well as challenges and failures. Participants echoed the recommendation of governmental representatives to design NVPs so as to make them engaging instead of purely reporting on facts; to structure presentations so as to render their content comparable; and to involve stakeholders in the presentation. Furthermore, the use of more sophisticated presentation technology and the dissemination of results and information materials on the web were encouraged.



<sup>2</sup> Find quality version for download at [www.partners-for-review.de](http://www.partners-for-review.de)

HLPF 2017 countries voiced the following suggestions and expectations.

They reiterated the call for a UN HLPF summary report with policy recommendations for the national level.

Alternatively to such a UN HLPF summary report it was suggested to integrate these recommendations and lessons learnt into the Ministerial Declarations. Some participants suggested that these declarations ought to be disseminated at country level after each HLPF in order to inform the public on the status of implementation and review.

Another suggestion for sharing NVP/ HLPF experiences was that instead of relying on a UN-report, a group of committed countries (or an international expert group) should work on such a report to better align the recommendations to needs of countries.

Since at the HLPF 2016, stakeholder groups had very limited time to comment on country reports during the NVPs, participants suggested to address the issue of time constraint. In addition to the country presentations, the NVP sessions should provide more time for dialogue between stakeholders and country delegations. No other sessions of the Ministerial Segment should be organised parallel to the NVP sessions.

While respecting the need to allow for (individual) national reporting approaches, most government representatives did welcome more detailed reporting guidelines to facilitate comparability. It was also encouraged to provide success stories and challenges encountered instead of factual reporting to enable mutual learning. Among possible areas for improvement, private sector involvement, shadow reporting and municipal engagement in the review and reporting process were named by participants.

Non-governmental representatives agreed that lessons learned ought to be included in national reports and that countries should refrain from giving purely technical presentations. Given the novelty of SDG review and respective mechanisms, one participant encouraged to refer to established review processes – such as the Human Rights review - vis-à-vis uncertainties associated with the HLPF. Other participants raised the issue of conflicts of interests – within and across sectors as well as stakeholder groups - in reporting and suggested the establishment of a complaints mechanism for SDG review.

### **National approaches to SDG review: institutional set-up, multi-stakeholder processes and statistical capacities**

This group work session focussed on the whole-of-government approach as well as on needs and requirements for statistical systems.

Regarding the whole-of-government approach, countries described the engagement of all relevant government entities as crucial. However, it was agreed that there is no one-size-fits-all scheme, but that a variety of equally valid national approaches for the institutional set-up exist. Key mandates, cross-sectoral coordination, resource allocation and policy coherence were agreed to be necessary yet individual choices for the successful implementation of the SDGs. The implementation must go beyond the merely budgetary dimension and must become more multi-dimensional and also include sub-national levels. Participants also mentioned that not merely organised stakeholder groups, but also the general public should be addressed and involved in review processes in order to achieve holistic approaches.

A whole-of-government approach and its extension by involving non state actors was also said to help realize the 'leave no one behind' principle. Reaching the "furthest behind first" was suggested as a more radical approach than "leave no one behind" in order to guarantee



that all layers of society including minorities and the oppressed will benefit from SDG implementation.

Regarding the matter of accountability, participants discussed the challenge of assessing whether governments and institutions would act according to the Agenda principles and proposed the expression of existing problems at the HLPF in order to find solutions for these issues.

As an integral element of a review process, statistical capacity for sustainable development is a globally shared challenge. Nevertheless, participants expressed optimism that the current momentum can be seized to tackle data requirements. The key challenges in the field of data – quality, availability, timeliness and use of existing data as well as the enhancement of statistical systems including big and open data from “new data providers” and how to tackle remaining gaps – are shared to a certain extent by both developed and developing countries. The lack of baseline disaggregated data is, however, particularly urgent for developing countries: without a sound information architecture and access to data on global, regional, national and local levels, inequality within and among countries cannot be adequately addressed. The main conclusion drawn from the discussion was the need for

- increased capacity building for the collection, processing and interpretation of data,
- quality checks for official statistics and alternative big/open data sources
- and increased use of open data to complement official reporting.

Despite diverse national contexts and levels of development, surprisingly similar challenges and obstacles for well-functioning review structures exist:



Results of Lego Serious Play

Building bridges was one common approach to achieve cooperation among governmental sectors, consultation with stakeholders, and communication with the general public to achieve holistic sustainable development.

Putting people first as second quintessential feature illustrated that review should ideally serve as a responsive and engaging means of change management.

A common platform signified the importance of shared goals, committed leadership, strong institutions and broad engagement to achieve sustainable development.

As the greatest challenges to successful national review, participants named lack of leadership, transparency and data, closed-box thinking and unresponsive policy making, unilateral decisions, incoherency vis-à-vis a complex task, missing inclusion of interest groups and alternative voices.

### **Day 3: Next steps, activities and prospects for *Partners for Review***

Looking back on two previous days of workshops and group debate, participants discussed their impressions and wishes for a future *Partners for Review* network. The demand for continued exchange e.g. via an interactive website was voiced by many participants, both from government as well as stakeholder representatives.

Based on the expressed needs of the participants, the interactive website will not duplicate general SDG information, which is available at already existing websites, but will focus on P4R related news.

Further, the main feature of the website - apart from conference news and information related to P4R activities – will be access-restricted virtual exchange rooms for safe discussions among the respective peer groups (government, civil society etc.) and among P4R members.

Feedback, provided in form of questionnaire responses, indicates that participants were overall quite satisfied with the inaugural network meeting, while also encouraging extended discussion, smaller groups, and opportunities for sharing best practices and more detailed focus on national approaches of review in future meetings.

Participants appreciated the creative and innovative setting, interactive formats and agenda-setting. For future network meetings, respondents asked for some more concise exchange of lessons learnt from presenting countries, more keynote speeches and to maintain a flexible, demand-oriented and informal atmosphere.

Participants requested to further exchange on the following issues in future meetings:

- how exactly to organise a whole of government approach;
- how to work with non-state actors regarding review and reporting;
- how to translate review results back into national policy agenda setting;
- how to base these transformative policy suggestions on evidence and facts deriving from official statistics or trustworthy alternative sources accepted by all involved parties.

The next P4R meeting will take into account the feedback expressed, possible new UN and national follow-up documents as well as ongoing discussions with all stakeholders involved in P4R.