

Comparative analysis of 43 VNRs submitted to the HLPF 2017



Non-paper for Discussion
by *Partners for Review*

April 2018

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Executive Summary

The paper at hand provides a comparative analysis of all 43 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that had been submitted to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in New York, in July 2017. The purpose of the analysis was to identify major commonalities and differences in countries' approaches to implementing and reviewing the 2030 Agenda. A special focus was put on the three main themes of the P4R network: (i) Institutional mechanisms for review processes; (ii) Participation of non-state actors; and (iii) Statistics and data. Based on the observed trends, the paper also provides a series of reflections that P4R members may wish to discuss at their upcoming meeting in Tiflis, Georgia, from April 11 to 12, 2018, and/or on the network's virtual discussion platform.

Overall observations

Looking at the 43 VNRs of 2017, a first observation is their great diversity. Reports vary in many aspects, such as length, structure, and thematic coverage. While this partly reflects the equally great diversity in national contexts, it seems that countries also took many different approaches to compiling the information and preparing the reports.

Despite this diversity, however, the comparative analysis revealed a range of commonalities in the way that countries approach implementation of the 2030 Agenda. For most issues covered in this report, 2-3 main approaches could be identified from which countries selected, or which they combined.

For example, the two main **institutional mechanisms** for steering the overall SDG process are to either assign the responsibility to a specific ministry, or to a cross-sectoral (and sometimes multi-stakeholder) committee or council. Among those countries that work with councils, some are building on pre-existing bodies, while others have created entirely new structures. The specific composition and mandates of these bodies, however, tend to vary greatly among countries. Where parliaments or sub-national levels are being involved, they are either directly represented in institutionalized committees, and/or participate in consultations through special events, workshops or surveys.

All 43 countries describe efforts to ensure **participation of non-state actors** (civil society, private sector, and academia) in the SDG process. While the number and diversity of actors, and the intensity of their involvement, again vary greatly, there are also two basic approaches (that correspond to the involvement of subnational levels): One is representation in institutionalized committees, the other is participation in special consultations. These two basic mechanisms are not mutually exclusive; some countries do both. The choice of either or both approaches is no indication of the intensity of involvement; both can be done to a greater or lesser degree. Beyond that, some countries engage in special projects or partnerships with the private sector, typically in an effort to mobilize additional resources. Also, in very few cases, countries have established private-sector or academic advisory committees.

Regarding the use of **statistics and data**, the 2017 VNRs show considerable variation. For example, the volume of statistical annexes alone ranges from 1 to more than 100 pages. Correspondingly, countries provide different levels and structures of (dis-)aggregated data, and chose different forms to present them, from mere numerical presentation to charts, graphs and verbal explanations. Regarding content, an interesting observation is that the selection of statistics presented by individual countries doesn't always reflect national SDG or policy priorities stated elsewhere in the same VNR. Generally, the verbal parts of the reports tend to cover more SDGs than the statistics. This may underline the difficulties that most countries express with regards to statistics.

Overall, it is interesting to observe that, again despite all the diversity among countries and their VNRs, there are also clear clusters of **challenges** that countries identified in the SDG process. These are: (i) Statistics and data, including monitoring, evaluation and (statistical) capacity building, general data availability, and the specific difficulty to compile and use disaggregated and alternative data. (ii) Alignment of national strategies and plans and their implementation, including financing and resource mobilization. (iii) Institutional challenges, including alignment of institutions, institutional capacity building, efficient governance, decentralization, ensuring policy coherence, etc.

All of this provides a broad basis for mutual exchange and joint learning. The following summary of some main reflections is intended to feed into, and hopefully inspire, the dialogue among P4R network partners.

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Main reflections

Regarding **national coordination mechanisms**, while some general trends could be identified, the details seem to depend much on the context of each country. This may be a field where exchange and mutual learning may best be facilitated by looking at the more detailed accounts of individual countries' approaches – perhaps within a region or among countries with similar social, economic or political contexts – with the intention to generate mutual inspiration rather than with the idea to achieve simple 'copying' of good practice.

Three areas that require national coordination seem to be 'work in progress', often at early stages, for many countries: (i) involvement of sub-national levels, (ii) follow-up and review, and (iii) links to other international agreements. Given this similarity, even first experiences made may be interesting to exchange and discuss.

Also, especially for follow-up and review, a dialogue to clarify the meaning of different terms, and the potential benefits each approach offers, may help countries to define their own processes and feed their experiences back into the global process.

Regarding **participation of non-state actors**, any specific mechanisms may be difficult to 'transfer' from one country to another. Instead, it may be interesting to more generally discuss the advantages and drawbacks of different approaches. This may include an exchange about the extent of institutionalization or intensity of consultation that is necessary, and under which circumstances, to make participation 'meaningful'.

Also, countries seem to have varying degrees of experience and/or pursue different objectives with stakeholder involvement. This may be a field where exchange of experiences among diverse partners may be particularly fruitful in terms of mutual inspiration, the generation of new ideas, and identification of suitable mechanisms for each individual case.

Considering the great variation in the presentation of **statistics and data** in VNRs, one subject of discussion could be which aspects are most suitable for international exchange and learning. The actual 'numbers' may not be comparable among countries. However, the similarities in challenges that countries seem to be facing in collecting adequate, meaningful and/or disaggregate data may provide room for fruitful exchange, especially with regards to experiences that countries make in trying to resolve these challenges. This may also help to further specify the capacity building needs that several countries highlighted in their VNRs.

Another interesting discussion in this regard may be to what extent focusing on specific SDGs (in policies and/or in the VNR) may be necessary or useful for countries to fruitfully manage national implementation of the 2030 Agenda – or to what extent any prioritization bears the risk for countries to lose sight of the indivisible nature of the Agenda.

Also, one field where all countries still seem to be in the learning process is the use of alternative, and especially of big data. An exchange even of early experiences in this field may be inspiring for all.

Finally, many VNRs feature **case examples**, providing insights into the practice of SDG implementation. However, the examples are often not linked to any specific challenges stated. For the purpose of exchange and joint learning, it may be useful to discuss how interesting experiences or good practices may be identified and discussed that relate more directly to the challenges that countries identify, thus inspiring the global search for solutions.

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1. Introduction

The paper at hand provides a comparative analysis of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that countries had submitted to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in New York, in July 2017. It provides information about trends and tendencies in the 43 VNRs of that year, regarding both content and structure. The paper is to serve as input for the upcoming P4R network meeting in Tiflis, Georgia, from April 11 to 12, 2018.

About Partners for Review (P4R)

Partners for Review (P4R), initiated on behalf of the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, is a transnational multi-stakeholder network for government representatives and stakeholders from civil society, the private sector and academia that are involved in national review and monitoring processes towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Partners for Review builds on exchanges and meetings in the lead-up to the HLPF and helps meet the demand for extended follow-up. The network facilitates dialogue and peer learning on challenges, provides space to explore best practices and lessons learned, mobilizes knowledge, and shares expertise on new and emerging issues related to national monitoring and review processes.

About this paper

This paper was compiled by two independent consultants on behalf of the P4R secretariat. The purpose of the analysis was to identify trends and tendencies in different countries' approaches to reviewing the 2030 Agenda. To this end, the team analyzed all 43 VNRs of 2017, with a special focus on the three main themes of the P4R network:

- Institutional mechanisms for review processes
- Participation of non-state actors
- Statistics and data

These three themes provide the main chapters of this paper. Every chapter is further subdivided in 4-6 sections that highlight specific aspects of the main theme. For each aspect, all VNRs were screened and compared, with the aim of identifying major trends, commonalities and differences. As far as possible, trends were quantified, i.e. stating the number of countries that describe one or the other approach. Also, brief examples are often provided for illustration, and readers may, if they wish so, refer to the corresponding VNRs for further detail.

While the core text of the chapters focuses exclusively on observations, each chapter comes with a final section titled 'Reflections'. These final sections summarize questions that may be drawn from the observations and which might be interesting for P4R network partners to discuss. The authors would like to stress that these are mere suggestions.

All country examples referred to in this paper are exclusively for illustration. References to individual countries are neither comprehensive, nor do they express any judgment or evaluation.

About Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

The 2030 Agenda encourages all Member States to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven. The primary purpose of national reviews, and of the processes that lead to them, is to enable countries to assess their own progress and draw lessons learned on their way to achieving the SDGs.

At the same time, these regular national reviews may serve as a basis for VNRs submitted to the HLPF, a voluntary process that aims to facilitate the international exchange of experiences and enable joint learning. As the name implies, VNRs are voluntary and state-led. The first HLPF in 2016 saw 22 countries presenting, while there were 43 country presentations of VNRs at the HLPF in 2017.

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According to UNDESA's recommendations, countries are asked to make their official VNR reports and main messages available in one of the six official UN languages. While the UN Secretary General suggested voluntary common reporting guidelines (A/70/684), there is no fixed template to prescribe either the content or the format of a VNR.

2. VNRs 2017: general features

Among the 43 countries that submitted VNRs to the 2017 HLPF, there were 11 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 7 from Africa, 12 from Europe, and 13 from the Asia Pacific region,¹ as shown on the following map²:



As countries are free to decide what and how to report, the VNRs tend to be quite diverse, in focus and coverage as well as in form.

Volume and coverage

All 43 countries submitted both a full report and an executive summary of main messages. The length of the full reports varied considerably, ranging from 40 to 400 pages.

Regarding thematic coverage and focus, there were three different approaches: One group of countries (11) reported about all 17 SDGs. A second group (16 countries) focused the report on those SDGs that were reviewed in depth during the HLPF 2017 thematic sessions. The third group of countries (16) reported on their own selection of goals, mostly related to national development plans and priorities.

The structure of reports came in two main forms: 34 countries structured their VNR by SDGs, while 9 countries used structures based on their own national plans and priorities, typically mentioning or referring to specific SDGs where appropriate.

¹ Afghanistan, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Botswana, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Luxemburg, Malaysia, Maldives, Monaco, Nepal, Netherlands, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Portugal, Qatar, Slovenia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Thailand, Togo, Uruguay, Zimbabwe

² Source: P4R

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Languages used

Countries can use any of the six official UN languages for their VNR reports and main messages. In 2017, English was the most widely used language (30 countries), followed by Spanish (9 countries from Latin America and the Caribbean), French (3) and Russian (1).

Statistical annexes

Corresponding to the diversity of the reports, countries chose very different approaches regarding the provision of statistical annexes. Generally speaking, there were again three groups: 28 countries provided either no statistical annex or just a small set of sectoral statistics. 10 countries provided statistical annexes about the thematic focus SDGs of the HLPF 2017. The smallest group of countries (5) covered all 17 SDGs in the statistical annexes.

The volume of statistical annexes varied greatly, too, ranging from 1 to more than 100 pages. Correspondingly, countries provided different levels and structures of (dis-)aggregated data, and chose different forms to present them, from mere numerical presentation to charts, graphs and verbal explanations.

Finally, not all annexes were limited to statistics. Some countries included other documents, such as their National Vision or overall strategy, case studies, stakeholder contributions, etc. Further sections of the report at hand will discuss relevant observations relating to the three main themes of the P4R network.

Reflections

An interesting observation is that the thematic coverage of the reports is not necessarily mirrored in that of the statistical annexes. The reports tend to cover more SDGs than the statistics. This seems to underline the difficulty that many countries still express to support qualitative statements with statistics.

The great variation in length, coverage and form of the VNRs, and of their statistical annexes, confirms observations from the VNR presentations at the HLPF 2017: While countries are free to choose what and how to report, and the resulting diversity is interesting to observe, it seems that countries had rather different ideas in that year about the nature and purpose of VNRs. Occasionally, this brought about difficulties to compare the information provided in the reports. The guidelines and the support provided by UN DESA to countries in preparing their VNRs, is expected to promote a more common understanding, which will help facilitate mutual exchange of experiences and joint learning.

3. Institutional mechanisms for review processes

There is a broad variety of institutional settings and mechanisms that countries have chosen for national review of SDG implementation. Approaches differ in aspects such as institutional leadership, cooperation mechanisms, roles of actors at different levels, and links to other national and international processes. The following is an attempt to identify patterns for certain aspects of these approaches.

Lead institution and coordination with other national institutions

Institutional responsibility and coordination at the national level is typically structured along one of three main approaches.

The first approach, used by 23 countries, is to assign the lead for SDG implementation to a specific ministry or the Centre of Government (offices of the Presidency / Prime Minister). The most typical lead ministries are Foreign Affairs, Economics / Planning, and Finance. These institutions have typically created specialized SDG coordination secretariats or offices.

In **Nigeria**, for example, the Office of the Senior Special Assistant on the SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs) was established by the President and works directly under his auspices. The Office is fully staffed and has the mandate to coordinate all SDG-related interventions in the country.

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The second approach, which a smaller number of countries seem to have taken, is to build on pre-existing sustainable-development related councils, commissions or committees to coordinate SDG planning and review.

For example in **Argentina**, the National Council for Coordination of Social Policies was established in 2003 to support MDG implementation. The mandate of the council has since been strengthened, and it is now entrusted to coordinate implementation and monitoring of the country's 2030 Agenda.

The third approach is for countries to have established entirely new bodies to steer and coordinate implementation of the 2030 Agenda. A relatively large number of countries used this approach: the VNRs of 16 countries refer explicitly to recently established lead councils, commissions or committees.

The composition and mandate of these bodies vary greatly among countries. At one end of the spectrum, they are exclusively composed of ministry representatives and/or are responsible only for inter-departmental coordination. At the other end of the spectrum, they include a broad variety of actors, including major stakeholder groups and/or are responsible for implementation, review, monitoring and evaluation.

Bangladesh, for example, established a new inter-ministerial SDG monitoring and implementation committee that represents 21 ministries. The committee's principal coordinator is based in the Prime Minister's office.

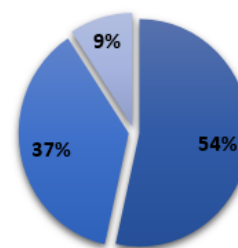
Thailand's National Committee for Sustainable Development (CSD) has a broad mandate to suggest sustainable-development related policies and strategies, provide recommendations, and support corresponding public and private sector activities. While the CSD is chaired by the Prime Minister, the Secretary General of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) leads the CSD secretariat. The NESDB, in turn, includes 37 members from public and private sector, academia and civil society.

In **Brazil**, the government created the National Commission for the SDGs. It is of an advisory nature and responsible for conducting the process of integration, engagement and dialogue with federate entities and civil society. The commission consists of 16 representatives, bringing together the views of federal, state, district and municipality governments, several major umbrella organizations from the private and third sectors, and academia. In addition, two national research institutes serve as permanent technical advisory bodies.

Beyond these three general approaches, actual mechanisms for and practices in SDG coordination seem to depend much on the national context. For example, the number of involved ministries alone varies greatly among countries, reaching up to 30. The nature and number of other institutions that participate in the process is also very diverse. It is therefore difficult to derive more specific tendencies from a cross-country comparison.

Also, the extent of detail provided in VNRs about national-level coordination and other institutions involved varies considerably among countries. Some merely mention the number of institutions, providing no further specifics. Others show tables (e.g., **Guatemala**) or organizational charts (e.g., **Benin, Maldives**) that specify ministries and other bodies involved in the process. A third group uses VNR annexes for extensive verbal explanations (e.g., **Peru**) about the institutional framework. A fourth group of countries, which also use annexes, provides detailed lists of responsibilities for every SDG target on which they are working (e.g., **El Salvador, Argentina**).

Institutional coordination



- Assigned specific ministry or the Centre of Government
- Established entirely new bodies
- Built on pre-existing councils, commissions or committees

Figure 1: Institutional responsibility and coordination of review processes at the national level

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Role of parliaments

Most countries mention parliaments as important actors. Specific roles of parliaments in the 2030 Agenda process are described in 31 VNRs. Again, three main approaches become apparent.

The first is described by 6 countries and refers mainly to the statutory role of parliaments, i.e., adopting government budgets for SDG implementation and overseeing the related legislative process. This may include reporting on SDG progress to parliaments.

The second approach is to involve parliamentarians in SDG consultations. 19 countries describe this approach, of which 16 mention parliamentary representation in specific SDG-related events or working groups. In the 3 other cases, parliaments have established special committees (sometimes referred to as 'forum' or 'front') on sustainable development, which serve as regular counterparts for consultations in the 2030 Agenda process.

In the third approach, described by 6 countries, parliaments are directly represented in the national council or commission that leads the SDG process. A particular case in this regard is **Belarus**, where the Vice Speaker of the Upper House of the parliament has been appointed to be national coordinator for the achievement of the SDGs.

Involvement of sub-national levels

As compared to 2016, the VNRs of 2017 indicate an increasing recognition of sub-national level actors and institutions as a key for successful SDG implementation. Almost all countries (except city states) refer to mechanisms or processes for their involvement. There are two main dimensions of sub-national level involvement: one may be considered 'political', the other more 'operational'.

Involvement of sub-national levels

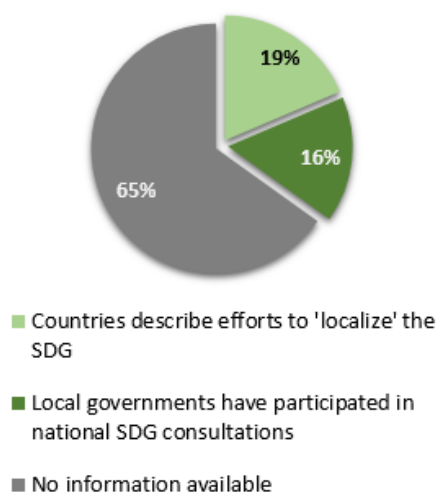


Figure 3: Involvement of sub-national levels in the 2030 Agenda process

Roles assigned to national parliaments

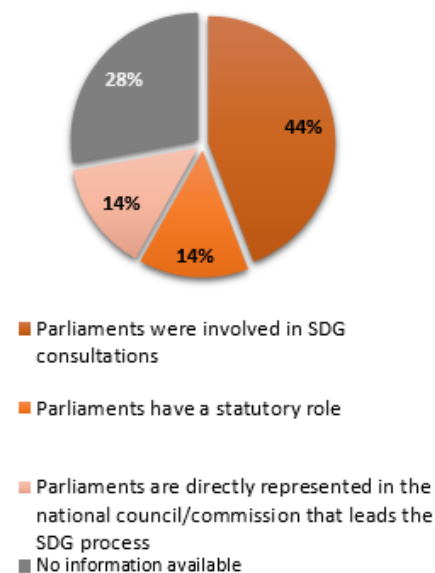


Figure 2: Roles assigned to national parliaments in the 2030 Agenda process

In 7 cases regional and/or local governments have participated in national SDG consultations. Beyond that, 8 countries describe efforts to 'localize' the SDG.

In **Honduras** and **Czech Republic**, for example, municipal governments are directly represented in the national SDG council or commission.

As a result of advocacy and mobilization efforts in **Brazil**, several mayors committed to implement the national multiannual plan of targets and include the SDGs in their government programs.

With the increasing recognition of the significance of local actors, capacity building also seems to gain more attention.

For example, the VNRs of **Honduras**, **Kenya**, **Togo** and **Zimbabwe** explicitly mention capacity-building needs and action at sub-national levels.

Regarding the way in which sub-national level involvement is described in the VNRs, countries take again different approaches.

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Accounts range from mere mention of the importance, to descriptions of mechanisms for involvement, to extensive accounts of specific action.

Nigeria, for example, lists sub-national policies and programs for each SDG against which it reports. The VNR of the **Netherlands**, based on the constituent principle of 'One kingdom, four countries', has specific accounts about each aspect for Aruba, Curaçao, St. Maarten and the European part of the kingdom.

National plans and strategies

Nearly all countries refer to an overarching national vision, strategy or plan as their main framework for implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Most of them (25 countries) have used existing overall national (sustainable) development visions, strategies or plans, making efforts to integrate the SDGs and align them with the 2030 Agenda.

For example, **Indonesia**'s implementation of the SDGs is based on the existing national development vision 'Nawacita'. The vision is operationalized in the National Medium Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2015-2019, which covers most SDG targets that are relevant for the country. Any other relevant targets will be developed in a national action plan.

In **Ethiopia**, the pre-existing 'Growth and Transformation Plan II' (GTP II) is the main national carrier of SDGs.

Nepal is in the process of mainstreaming the SDGs into its planning and budgeting systems, such as the national Fourteenth Plan (2016/17–2018/19) and related annual programmes and budgets at national and sub-national level.

A second group of countries (14) have developed new overall strategies or visions, adopted after 2015 and inspired by the 2030 Agenda. Examples are the '**Kenya** Vision 2030', the '**Belize** Horizon 2030', the '**Botswana** Vision 2036', or the '**Vision** Slovenia 2050'.

A particular case in this second group are 2 countries that, while not referring explicitly to a vision or strategy, work with comprehensive action plans to implement the SDGs at national level. Presumably, such newly adopted frameworks also integrate elements of earlier sustainable-development related efforts, although the links are not made as explicit as in the first group.

Denmark works with an SDG action plan. Besides, it is the only country that reports about preparations for launching a special SDG Fund, which will combine public and private funds and aims at mobilising further private capital.

Beyond that, most countries use chapters on individual SDGs to provide accounts of how sub-sets of targets are reflected in sector-specific policies and measures. These are typically presented in tables, lists, graphs, boxes etc. and often come with extensive explanations. While it is difficult to identify overall trends in the abundance of measures that countries are taking, sector policies seem to be a key means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda at national level.

National follow-up and review beyond VNR preparation

References to national follow-up and review (FuR) in the VNRs of 2017 come in many different shapes and sizes. Most reports mention these terms in one or the other way. However, countries seem to interpret them in different ways, and many reports provide few if any details.

In some VNRs, the term 'follow-up' is used to describe implementation, while others use it as heading to explain their next steps. 'Review' in turn often seems to be interpreted as 'reporting'. Both terms often seem to be used interchangeably, with an emphasis on monitoring of progress.

Some countries speak of planned or existing routine review or reporting processes, in a few cases stating the aim of developing recommendations, corrective action, or to other possible implications of FuR.

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India plans to conduct bi-annual reviews in cooperation with State governments, to identify good practices and challenges, which are to enable appropriate course corrections.

In **Afghanistan**, the Ministry of Economy (MoEc) has instructed all budget entities to report on their SDG efforts. The SDGs Secretariat (in the MoEc) analyzes these data and uses them to prepare annual and semi-annual progress reports to the High Council of Ministers, the Cabinet and the UN.

Belgium is planning to issue national 2030 Agenda implementation reports to all parliaments twice per government term. The aim is to identify progress and gaps in achieving the SDGs, and to recommend corrective action or reprioritization.

Some countries have assigned responsibility for follow-up to the national SDG council or committee. Others have created specialized councils or committees for this purpose.

Uruguay has a legally defined institutional framework for follow-up, which involves the National Planning and Budgeting Office, the Uruguayan Agency of International Cooperation, and the National Institute of Statistics.

In **Panama**, the responsibility for follow-up has been formally delegated to the "Interinstitutional Commission and Civil Society for the Support and Follow-up of the SDGs".

Links to other international processes

The vast majority of VNRs make some kind of reference to one or several other international processes. The two most prominent frameworks mentioned are the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (29 countries) and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (15 countries).

Regarding the Paris Agreement, 14 countries provide information about how its objectives are reflected in national SDG policies. Only those VNRs that cover all 17 SDGs, or that define SDG 13 (Climate Action) as a national priority, speak about projects that relate to both SDG 13 and the Paris Agreement. However, the VNRs do not usually make any specific or more extensive reference to Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) as defined in the Paris Agreement.

References to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda tend to focus on re-emphasizing the need for resource mobilization to implement the 2030 Agenda.

Reflections

Generally, the 43 VNRs 2017 display great diversity regarding national planning and review mechanisms, both in terms of content (how countries do it) and of presentation (how they describe it).

Regarding the national coordination mechanisms, some broad tendencies could be identified. The details, however, seem to depend much on the context of each country, and it is difficult to make more specific cross-country comparisons. This may be a field where exchange and mutual learning may best be facilitated by looking at the more detailed accounts of individual countries' approaches – perhaps within a region or among countries with similar social, economic or political contexts – with the intention to generate mutual inspiration rather than with the idea to achieve simple 'copying' of good practice.

Similarly, the abundance of countries' translation of the SDGs into sector policies and programmes makes it difficult to derive overall tendencies. In this case, it may be interesting for specialists of particular sectors from different countries to share their approaches and experiences for mutual inspiration.

Regarding the presentation of these two aspects (national coordination and sector policies), an interesting observation is the diversity in the level of detail that countries provide. For the purpose of exchange and joint learning, it may be interesting to discuss which level of detail is most suitable to be able to share and compare experiences.

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From the cross analysis of 43 VNRs, three fields seem to be 'work in progress' for many countries: (i) the involvement of sub-national levels, (ii) follow-up and review, and (iii) links to other international agreements. Given the complexity of the 2030 Agenda process, it seems natural that many countries are still busy establishing the core implementation and review mechanisms at national level. All the more, even first experiences made may be interesting to exchange and discuss. And, in the case of follow-up and review, a dialogue about the meaning of different terms and approaches, and the potential benefits that they offer, may help countries to define their own processes and feed their experiences back into the global process.

4. Participation of non-state actors

All 43 countries emphasize the importance of stakeholder participation and use the VNR to outline their approaches. Some VNRs devote entire chapters or annexes to individual stakeholder groups, describing their roles, the mechanisms of their involvement and/or their contributions to the implementation of specific SDGs.

Regarding the VNR elaboration process, 8 countries report of having shared drafts of their VNR (or parts thereof) with stakeholders for feedback. In 3 countries, specific stakeholder groups have contributed their own VNR chapters, which entered the reports without being edited by the government. During the VNR presentations at the HLPF 2017, 10 countries involved non-governmental stakeholders as speakers. Others had stakeholder representatives among their delegations, albeit with no active role in the presentations.

Civil society

Without exception, all 43 countries' VNRs refer to civil society as important stakeholder group. However, there seems to be some variation in the interpretation of the term 'civil society'. Some countries use the term to refer to organized groups, such as NGOs, faith-based organizations or social associations. Other countries use it referring to the general public, while yet others put a special emphasis on marginalized groups.

The nature and intensity of specific mechanisms of civil-society involvement is also very diverse. However, the VNRs show two main approaches:

In 16 countries, civil-society groups are represented either in the national SDG council or in (permanent) technical working groups that are directly or indirectly related to the national council.

In 23 countries, civil-society groups were or are involved through surveys, consultations, workshops or other (singular) events. In some countries, these opportunities for participation were targeted at organized groups or associations. In others they included the broader public and/or specific, marginalized or disadvantaged groups.

These two approaches are not mutually exclusive: some countries do both. Also, it is important to note that the choice of either one or a combination of both approaches is no indication of the intensity of involvement. Representation in the national council, or in bodies that are related to it, may reach from 1-2 seats for representatives of major umbrella organizations, to multi-stakeholder councils that are composed of a broad range of different civil-society and other stakeholder representatives (e.g., **Thailand, Indonesia, Brazil, Honduras, Guatemala**, and others). Similarly, surveys or consultations may involve a few individuals to represent selected civil-society organizations at singular workshops, or consist of a series of events that involve a variety of civil-society groups.

Peru describes efforts to include and prioritize the voices of people traditionally excluded from decision-making processes in its national consultations, such as indigenous Amazonian and high-Andean women, people with disabilities, and people living with HIV/AIDS.

Chile designed focal groups in an effort to prioritise the voices of groups who might otherwise be marginalised from consultations, such as street people, persons with disabilities, immigrants, and indigenous peoples.

Jordan reports of special attention to, and active participation of, groups such as women, youth, children, and people with disabilities, and explicitly mentions involvement of Syrian and other refugee communities in the consultations.

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Private sector

All 43 VNRs refer to the private sector, and all countries underline the importance of its involvement.

The VNRs describe three main approaches to involve the private sector, which are again not mutually exclusive. The first and second correspond to the mechanisms of civil-society participation:

15 countries have assigned one or more seats in the national SDG council and/or in (permanent) technical working groups to the private sector. A special form of this mechanism exists in some countries which have created special private-sector working groups to support the national SDG council.

For example, **Nigeria** has inaugurated a Private Sector Advisory Group (PSAG), and its VNR provides examples of private-sector roles and related projects.

Also in 15 countries, private-sector representatives have participated in SDG-related surveys, consultations, workshops or other (singular) events.

A third approach, taken by 9 countries, is for governments to engage in PPPs with the private sector (for example, **Jordan, Belarus, or Zimbabwe**) and/or seek cooperation with the private sector to support financing of SDG-related measures (e.g.: **Bangladesh, Belize, or Indonesia**).

India puts an emphasis on PPP initiatives, stressing its experience in this regard and underlining the significance of PPPs to secure SDG financing and address challenges in SDG rollout. In this context, India also underlines the importance for the private sector to have access to global finance.

Academia

Most VNRs refer to academia in the SDG process. The two basic mechanisms of involvement are the same as for civil society and the private sector. However, the role of academia tends to be different, with a stronger emphasis on technical / advisory contributions.

12 countries have representatives of academia in the national SDG council or in (permanent) technical or advisory groups, while 24 countries have included members of academia in survey, consultations, workshops or other (singular) events. Again, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive.

Typically, few individual representatives of academia participate directly in the process, often coming from umbrella organisations such as the association of national universities. However, some countries have established (or are establishing) special scientific councils.

Sweden recently established a 'Scientific Council for Sustainable Development', which includes a multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral panel of researchers. The council promotes dialogue between the government and the scientific community, with the aim to provide sustainable development policy with a solid scientific basis.

Zimbabwe provides a different example altogether, having launched an 'SDGs Lecture Series in Universities' to promote participation of tertiary students in the SDGs process.

Multi-stakeholder approaches and partnerships

Most countries refer in one way or another to multi-stakeholder approaches. However, specific interpretations of the term vary considerably. The VNRs show four broad tendencies, which again are not mutually exclusive:

(i) For some countries, the multi-stakeholder nature of their 2030 Agenda process is manifest in the composition of the national SDG council or committee. (ii) Other countries refer to their multi-stakeholder approach with an emphasis on SDG consultations. (iii) Yet others consider their VNR as a multi-stakeholder project to which a variety of

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groups contribute. (iv) Finally, some countries use the term in the context of sectoral projects and partnerships to implement specific SDG targets, or to describe PPPs.

For example, in **Indonesia** the multi-stakeholder partnership to achieve the SDGs at the national level is reflected in the representation of government, philanthropy and business actors, academics, and community organizations as members of the SDGs National Coordination Team.

In turn, **Costa Rica** is the first country to have signed a 'National Pact for the Compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals, in which the three powers of the Republic, the Organizations of the Civil Society (CSO), Faith Based Organizations (FBOs), public universities, local governments and the business sector committed themselves to comply with the 2030 Agenda.

Public communication strategies

Almost all 43 countries speak about the importance of communication to, and awareness of, the broader public regarding the SDGs. Around 20 countries refer directly to communication strategies or campaigns that are targeted at the general public. In terms of measures taken or planned, there are two main clusters.

The first approach is for countries to organize physical events in the form of workshops, road shows, contests or other activities that involve physical interaction with (parts of) the broader public. Twelve countries describe activities of this kind, some of which especially underline the relevance of reaching out to rural areas. Several countries also underline the importance of civil-society organizations to help implementing this type of events.

In **Kenya**, the government has sensitized key staff in regional development authorities on the SDGs, with the expectation for them to take the SDGs messages to the local level. The government is also cooperating with the 'Coalition of Civil Society on SDGs' to conduct outreach programmes at community level.

Malaysia is planning to organize 'road shows' in all 13 states to raise awareness, increase knowledge and create a sense of ownership of the 2030 Agenda. In this context, the government is making efforts to translate communication materials on the SDGs into the national language.

The second main cluster are countries that describe web-based approaches or campaigns to reach out to the general public. A total of 9 countries describe efforts in this regard, of which some refer to SDG-related websites or portals (for example, **Bangladesh, Costa Rica**) and others explicitly mention social media formats (such as **Argentina, Guatemala, Luxembourg**).

Very few countries (for example, **Zimbabwe**) mention 'classical' mass media (newspapers, radio, TV) as means to reach out to the general public.

Reflections

The VNRs show that all 43 countries consider participation and involvement of non-state stakeholders a key aspect in implementing the 2030 Agenda. The specific stakeholder landscapes obviously differ greatly among countries, depending on a variety of factors including geography, social, political and economic context, historical background, etc.

Despite these differences, most countries take either or both of the following two main approaches: a) to involve stakeholders in SDG governance bodies or permanent technical working groups, and b) to run special (series of) workshops, events, surveys etc. for stakeholder consultation. Some countries also engage in direct partnerships, especially with the private sector.

However, the degree and intensity of stakeholder involvement varies considerably among countries. This may be partly due to the abovementioned differences in national context, but countries may also have varying degrees of experience and/or pursue different objectives with stakeholder involvement.

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In terms of exchange and learning, any specific participation mechanisms may be difficult to 'transfer' from one country to another. Instead, it may be interesting to more generally discuss the advantages and drawbacks of different approaches. This may include an exchange about the extent of institutionalization or intensity of consultation that is necessary, and under which circumstances, to make participation 'meaningful'.

Another observation from the VNRs of 2017 is the variety of ideas that countries seem to have about *multi-stakeholder* approaches and partnerships, which may also be an interesting subject of discussion among partners in an international network such as P4R.

Similarly, regarding overall communication strategies, many countries are taking measures to raise public awareness and/or sensitize certain groups. Beyond an exchange about effective measures (e.g., physical, web-based, traditional media), it may also be interesting to more fundamentally discuss the purpose of public awareness campaigns, e.g., regarding the actual (behavioral) changes that countries aim to achieve by sensitizing the public about the SDGs.

5. Statistics and data

Priority setting

Countries take a variety of approaches to setting priorities in SDG implementation and review. Again, there are three main tendencies.

Twenty countries refer explicitly to national priority SDGs or SDG targets, and/or organize the VNR along their own national plans and priorities.

Another group, 14 countries, report exclusively about the seven thematic focus SDGs of the HLPF 2017, without drawing specific links between individual SDGs and national priorities. In these cases, it is not possible to assess to what extent the seven SDGs reflect the countries' own priorities or were selected for the VNRs in view of the thematic focus of the HLPF.

Finally, a small group (6) of those countries that report on all 17 SDGs, explicitly abstain from specifying national priority SDGs, referring to the holistic and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda.

Regarding the process, 6 VNRs mention stakeholder consultations to prioritize certain SDGs. However, considering that far more countries generally describe consultation processes, e.g., to develop national visions or plans, one may assume that such consultations also feed into SDG prioritization – even if the VNRs are not explicit about it.

A few countries briefly explain the process or provide rationales for selecting national priority SDGs.

Zimbabwe, for example, while underlining its commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda as a whole, has prioritized ten SDGs. This selection is based on the country's vision, the need to focus on enabling Goals, resource availability and 'unfinished business' in the MDGs.

The **Maldives** identifies national priorities for the SDGs targets through consultations with implementing agencies, with input from civil society and the private sector, and considering the results of a Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA).

Gap analyses

More than half (24) of the VNRs of 2017 mention gap analyses or mapping exercises. At the time of VNR submission, 19 of these were either completed or work in progress, while 5 were still planned.

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The actual subject of gap analyses or mapping exercises, however, differs among countries. In most cases, they relate to indicators, in other cases to an alignment of policies with the SDGs, yet other countries refer to stakeholder mappings, and some countries do several or all of these. It is not possible to derive any more general trends at this point.

On the other hand, almost all countries, including those who do not make any reference to gap analyses, do speak of data gaps and room for improvement in their statistical systems. However, hardly any country points to specific types or sets of data that are missing (except for few general references to difficulties with SDG 14).

Data availability

Rather than speaking of gaps, a range of countries (22) provide assessments of data availability. Of these, 17 VNRs provide numerical indications of how many SDG indicators are covered with the available data, while 5 countries provide percentage assessments. Not in all cases, however, do countries specify to which indicators this coverage applies. Also, references to data availability for certain indicators do not necessarily imply that summaries of these data are provided in the VNR or a statistical annex.

In turn, not all countries actually aim at covering the full set of SDG indicators.

For example, **Malaysia** underlines the need to improve its M&E tools and mechanisms, but also stresses the necessity to balance the costs and benefits of all-encompassing monitoring. Instead, Malaysia proposes to frame and measure those indicators that are particularly relevant for the specific national context.

Those countries that provide quantitative assessments of data availability come up with a variety of results. Only two general tendencies can be observed: First, hardly any country is currently able to cover more than 50% of all indicators. Second, there are no specific groups of countries that indicate stronger or weaker data availability. In particular, there is no discernible difference between countries of the global North and South.

For example, **Belgium, Japan, Peru, Kenya** and **Sweden** all report of data availability for 40% to 50% of all indicators.

However, it is mostly not clear how countries have arrived at their assessments, i.e., which standards, criteria or proxies they have been using. It is therefore difficult to make any more specific cross-country comparisons.

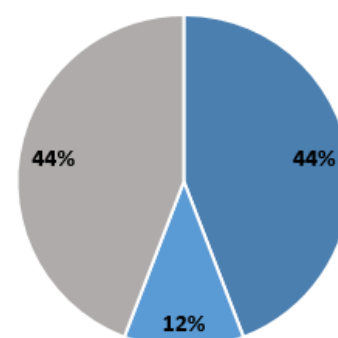
Data quality

Many countries speak directly (28) or indirectly about data quality – and all of them refer to this as a challenge. Seventeen countries refer specifically to data disaggregation as a great challenge, of which some (e.g., **El Salvador, Peru, Costa Rica, or Indonesia**) underline the need for disaggregate data to monitor implementation of Agenda principles such as Leaving No One Behind.

Several countries refer to capacity building efforts and/or the need for support in this area.

In **Kenya**, for example, the National Bureau of Statistics is implementing capacity building programs in all 47 counties, to promote the Bureau's ability to generate comprehensive, reliable, timely and disaggregated statistics from the national to the sub-national level.

Data gap analysis



- Gap analysis/mapping exercises completed or in progress at the time of the VNR
- Gap analysis/mapping exercises planned
- No information available

Figure 4: Data gap analysis in 2017 VNRs

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Bangladesh underlines the need for collaboration and exchange at bilateral, regional and global levels, to build the required capacities and be able to meet the enormous challenges in collecting, analyzing, disaggregating, and disseminating data.

Thailand refers to expertise and continued support required for collecting and analyzing data, as well as to extensive funding needs for, e.g., 'material foot print' or 'food loss' indicators.

As with data availability, it is very difficult if not impossible to derive any general trends regarding the nature, levels of disaggregation or quality of data. Only 15 of the 43 VNRs actually come with a statistical annex, and only 4-5 countries provide statistics for all 17 SDGs. The reports are just too diverse to allow cross-country comparisons.

Non-official data sources

There are few references to the use of non-official data in the 2017 VNRs. Fourteen countries mention big or other alternative data in one or the other way. In many cases, references are rather abstract or describing future intentions.

A total of 6 VNRs speak explicitly of data that had been contributed by civil-society or other stakeholders or that came from scientific or external reports. Sometimes, the sources are generally listed but not linked to individual statistics or statements.

Denmark, for example, included independent stakeholder contributions in the VNR, who were allowed to use their own figures and data.

Togo conducted a survey among stakeholders, collecting questionnaires, compiling, analyzing and synthesizing the information gathered, and creating a database for drafting the VNR.

Beyond that, 5 VNRs (for example, **Kenya**) mention 'big data'. In all cases, these are considerations, intentions or first attempts (sometimes with a reference to capacity building). No country speaks of a functioning system of big data use to be in place.

Reflections

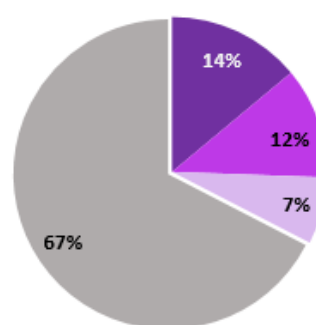
A first observation regarding statistics and data relates to prioritization. As mentioned further above, the VNRs of 2017 are quite diverse in terms of coverage. Some speak about all 17 SDGs, others focus on the thematic focus SDGs of the HLPF of that year, and yet others are structured along national policy priorities. Similarly, the statistics provided, in the main text or in annexes, may or may not relate directly to the stated SDG or policy priorities of a given country.

An interesting discussion in this regard may be to what extent focusing on specific SDGs (in policies and/or in the VNR) may be necessary or useful for countries to fruitfully manage national implementation of the 2030 Agenda – or to what extent any prioritization bears the risk for countries to lose sight of the indivisible nature of the Agenda.

Generally, the great diversity in coverage of data and statistics in the 2017 VNRs, and the few references to data quality, make it difficult and sometimes impossible to draw cross-country comparisons. Since countries are explicitly free to decide about both the content and the form of their VNR, an open question is whether, or to what extent, aiming at a somewhat higher degree of similarity among reports may be useful to enable comparison and exchange.

Related to that is the question which aspects regarding statistics and data are most suitable for international exchange and learning in fora such as the P4R network. The actual 'numbers' may not be comparable among countries, regardless of the extent of detail provided. However, the similarities in challenges that countries seem to be facing in

Non-official data sources



- Data contributions from civil-society and/or other stakeholders
- First attempts/intentions for using 'big data'
- Future intentions to use alternative data
- No information available

Figure 5: Use of non-official data sources in 2017 VNRs

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the collection of adequate, meaningful and/or disaggregate data may provide room for fruitful exchange, especially with regards to experiences countries make in trying to resolve these challenges. This may also help to further specify the capacity building needs that several countries have highlighted in their VNRs.

Finally, one field where all countries still seem to be in the learning process is the use of alternative, and especially of big data. An exchange even of early experiences in this field may be inspiring for all.

6. Further observations

Most countries used the VNR 2017 to document experiences made with their national 2030 Agenda processes, and to outline their plans for taking the process forward. The following sections describe how countries chose to present good/best practices, challenges encountered, and next steps they are planning to take.

Presentation of experiences and good practice

Countries use different headings to describe their experiences, such as 'Lessons learned'; 'Good practices'; 'Best practices'; 'Success stories'; 'Case studies'; 'Examples'; etc.

About one third of the countries (13) devote a separate chapter or section to list these experiences, for example **Honduras, Nigeria, Qatar** or **Zimbabwe**.

Other countries (16) chose to integrate specific practices in VNR chapters about individual SDGs.

For example, **Slovenia** shares select measures, activities and good-practice examples for each SDG in the corresponding chapters. **Thailand's** VNR showcases case studies in the chapters addressing individual SDGs.

A range of countries present such examples in boxes, so that they are highlighted within the text. For example, **Argentina** uses text boxes to showcase 'Successful implementation initiatives'. **India's** VNR features 'Progress towards specific goals' in small info boxes that describe successful programs, initiatives, campaigns etc., while **Uruguay's** VNR presents best practices in recurrent boxes with the heading 'Uruguay experience'.

A smaller number of countries chose to use VNR annexes to present examples. For example, **Chile** has a separate Annex on activities related to diffusion and participation, showcasing examples and describing target groups. **El Salvador** uses two annexes, one on national priorities, structured by SDGs, that describes relevant initiatives and institutions in charge, and a second on social programmes that features local-level initiatives.

Challenges

Most countries use a separate VNR chapter or section to discuss challenges encountered in the SDG process. In many cases, these are summarized for the overall / national process.

Presentations range from a few sentences, via simple listings, to extensive verbal descriptions (the latter, for example, **Chile, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nigeria**).

A few countries (5-6) chose to integrate specific challenges in the chapters on individual SDGs, rather than summarizing them for the process as a whole. Another 5-6 countries present sections or lists that combine challenges and next steps.

Regarding substance, there are three main clusters of issues that countries describe as challenges.

The first, which 28 countries highlight, refers to statistics and data, including monitoring, evaluation and (statistical) capacity building. Among the main challenges mentioned in this regard are general data availability / data gaps, and the specific difficulty to gather and work with disaggregated and alternative data.

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The second main cluster of challenges, mentioned by 25 countries, relates to the alignment of national strategies and plans and their implementation. A frequent emphasis here is on financing and resource mobilization requirements. Several developing countries underline the need for external support in this regard, some describing partner commitment as an essential condition for their ability to achieve the SDGs.

The third cluster, which 21 countries describe, are institutional challenges, including alignment of institutions, institutional capacity building, efficient governance, decentralization, ensuring policy coherence, etc.

Other challenges mentioned, though with less frequency, include social or geographic heterogeneity within the country, climate change, meaningful stakeholder involvement (especially of minorities and vulnerable groups), and violence and armed conflict.

Next steps

Similar to the descriptions of challenges, most countries devote a separate VNR chapter or section to their plans for taking the process forward. These come under headings such as 'Next steps', 'Follow-up', or 'To-dos'.

Again, the amount of detail ranges from very few sentences, via presentations in lists (e.g., **Afghanistan, Belize, Kenya**), to extensive descriptions (for example, **Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan**).

A handful of countries integrate specific next steps or to-dos in the chapters on individual SDGs, instead of describing them for the overall process.

Regarding substance, the next steps or to-dos described are typically targeted at specific challenges. Again, there are three main clusters of issues that countries intend to tackle 'next'.

First, 28 countries plan to take steps to strengthen their data bases and statistics, monitoring and evaluation systems, promote statistical capacity building etc.

Second, 24 countries intend to work on strengthening and/or aligning their institutions, engage in institutional capacity building, and ensuring policy coherence. These issues sometimes come under headings such as improvement of public management, governance, decentralization, or similar.

Third, 19 countries plan to align or finalize national strategies, plans, and budgets.

Other next steps or to-dos mentioned include issues such as engaging in further partnerships, awareness raising, increasing ownership, or ensuring further meaningful participation.

Reflections

Nearly all VNRs describe experiences in the form of good/best practices or case examples, as well as challenges and next steps. An interesting observation is that, despite all the diversity among countries, there are clear clusters of challenges that countries identified in the SDG process. This provides a broad basis for mutual exchange and joint learning.

However, while the descriptions of challenges and next steps in the VNRs appear to be closely related (the thematic clusters in those two sections are very similar, and some countries even describe both under a same heading), the link to experiences and good or best practices becomes less apparent. In other words, experiences tend to be described as success stories or cases in a variety of SDG-related fields but are not necessarily related to what many countries describe as challenges. For the purpose of exchange and joint learning, it may be useful to discuss how interesting experiences or good practices may be identified and discussed that relate more directly to the challenges that countries identify.

Regarding form of exchange, the VNR reports themselves and their presentations at the HLPF provide the informational foundation. However, actual learning with and from each other requires more extensive dialogue

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among partners. This may occur in regional and international fora, such as the P4R network and others, and it may be enabled by organizing physical meetings, facilitating online platforms, or other formats to be defined by partners.

A final interesting issue for discussion may, therefore, be which specific ways and forms of exchange those involved in national SDG processes deem most useful for mutual learning and, ultimately, for a joint advancement of the global 2030 Agenda process.