

Partners for Review (P4R)

A transnational multi-stakeholder network for a robust review process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Fourth network meeting, 11-12 April 2018, Tbilisi, Georgia

Brief report

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List of abbreviations

BMU	German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety
BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NDCs	Nationally Determined Contributions
NHRIs	National Human Right Institutions
NSO	National Statistics Office
P4R	Partners for Review
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TAP Network	Transparency, Accountability and Participation Network
UN	United Nations
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VNR	Voluntary National Review



1) Summary and key messages

The fourth P4R network meeting was marked by lively debate on a large number of questions regarding the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Building on four key thematic pillars, participants engaged in dialogue on experiences, proven approaches and challenges, and discussed solutions to common problems.

Despite the wide range of topics discussed in plenary and in the breakout groups, a series of points were mentioned repeatedly, which are summarised below as the **key messages of the network meeting**:

1. Government policy coherence (whole of government)

- Institutionalised mechanisms for promoting effective implementation of national reviews of SDGs are of great importance. Many countries have already made progress in this respect.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of such mechanisms and their potential improvement remains a major challenge.
- The coordination and harmonisation of various international processes that are integral thematically to the SDGs, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change or the New Urban Agenda, need to be improved further.
- Linking national processes for reviewing and implementing the 2030 Agenda to review processes of local authorities and municipalities is essential in order to localise, implement and review SDGs. Although this aspect poses a challenge in many member states there are few insights and analyses in this regard at present.

2. Socially inclusive approaches (whole of society)

- The positive effects of involving civil society, the scientific community and the private sector in national review processes were underscored.
- Designing institutionalised and transparent mechanisms for high-value participation beyond the scope of mere consultation still poses a challenge for many countries.
- The involvement of the private sector, the scientific community and the media in review processes needs to be improved further, along with general public relations work and efforts to sensitise the public.

3. The data challenge

- National statistics offices (NSOs) have a key role to play in coordinating the data ecosystems and reviewing the SDGs.
- Of decisive importance for this purpose is building capacities in NSOs and among other stakeholders, as well as mobilising more resources.
- A clear legal framework, together with greater trust between governmental and non-governmental data providers, is important in order to harness the potential of alternative data sources.
- The frequently limited compatibility of data from different sources and the lack of qualitative data pose challenges that still have to be addressed.

2) Context

Partners for Review (P4R) is a transnational multi-stakeholder network for government representatives and stakeholders from civil society, academia and the private sector who are involved in national processes to review and monitor action taken to achieve the SDGs. P4R was initiated by Germany's Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) and Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH has been commissioned to implement it. The network aims to gather constructive, effective and workable solutions for delivering on the joint commitment to review



progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda at national level. P4R enables dialogue on the review of SDGs and coordinates the demand for and supply of policy advice among practitioners.

Jointly convened by BMU, BMZ and the Administration of the Government of Georgia, the event in Tbilisi, Georgia, held on 11 and 12 April 2018, was the fourth in a series of P4R network meetings, following the inception meeting in November 2016 in Bonn, Germany, the second meeting in March 2017 in Bogotá, Colombia and the third meeting in October 2017 in Kampala, Uganda. A total of 85 participants attended the event, representing 26 countries and a range of UN and other regional and international organisations. The objective was to promote robust national-level SDG review processes by enabling peer-to-peer dialogue on common challenges and facilitating the identification of good practices and determinants of success.

3) Outcomes of the thematic discussions

The discussions addressed a total of five topics, the outcomes of which are presented below. Selection of outcomes:

- i. Reviewing the 2030 Agenda at national and global level
- ii. Establishing institutional mechanisms and integrating relevant stakeholders in order to cope with the complexity of the 2030 Agenda
- iii. Challenges for vertical coherence of SDG review from a sub-national perspective
- iv. Dealing with the data challenge: the political economy of data ecosystems
- v. Aligning various regional and sectoral agendas

i) Reviewing the 2030 Agenda at national and global level

The discussion on this topic focused on two aspects: experience with preparing and following-up reviews at national level and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at international level.

With respect to **experience with preparation and follow-up of reviews at national level**, it was emphasised that an increasing number of countries had established over the course of the last year institutional mechanisms designed to coordinate and review the national implementation of SDGs. Participants described the experience gained in several countries, including Armenia, Costa Rica, Georgia, Germany, Mexico and Nigeria. Although the specific rules differ from country to country, participants identified the following common determinants of success:

Leadership and coordination

- Ensuring high-level political leadership e.g. by anchoring the national 2030 Agenda process in the office of the president or prime minister.
- Establishing an SDG advisory committee tasked with using the institutional coordination mechanism to support the implementation and review of SDGs as well as involving all ministries and relevant stakeholders from the scientific community, the private sector and the general public. Another option discussed was the introduction of an SDG council comprising governmental and non-governmental actors.
- Effectively supporting mechanisms through robust and independent technical secretariats.

Harmonisation / alignment with other national processes

- By localising SDGs in national strategies (translating SDGs into national objectives and indicators), the alignment of national policies with the Agenda can be ensured, while strengthening accountability. This is also important for defining reference points for progress reviews.



- Aligning the national budget with national development goals can serve as an important mechanism for mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda across political parties and administrations, thus ensuring continuous implementation of these goals.
- The role of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and the VNRs promotes accountability at national level.

Participation and awareness-raising

- A broad inclusion and involvement of relevant actors in the implementation and review process, such as through dialogue forums or online citizen consultations, increases the quality and legitimacy of reviews. Based on lessons learned from VNR preparations already performed, several countries plan to strengthen the participatory nature of their next reviews.
- The increasing use of online tools and platforms raises both public awareness and participation by relevant stakeholders, and leads to greater transparency regarding localised SDG strategies and the ability to review them.

Peer reviews

- Peer reviews offer valuable outside-in perspectives on the process and the results of national SDG implementation. They can also help review the effects of national policies on other countries.
- Peer reviews should comprise the development of substantive recommendations for improving the issues under review, together with an institutionalised follow-up. Through the regular review and updating of national strategies, these become 'living documents', thus maintaining the momentum of implementation.
- Individuals or organisations involved in peer reviews must be independent, in order to enable an unencumbered and frank evaluation (e.g. without having to fear losing access to funding).

With respect to the **international level**, participants discussed experiences with the VNRs in 2017 and dealt with the existing guidelines for their preparation.

An analysis of the VNRs conducted by the P4R secretariat, which were submitted for, and presented at, the 2017 HLPF, confirmed the wide variety of content and formats involved. The analysis identified existing uncertainties regarding the scope of review (should VNRs cover all SDGs or only a selection of them?). The complex nature of the 2030 Agenda and the interlinkages between individual SDGs constitute challenges for reporting, as does the availability and compilation of robust data. Participation by non-governmental stakeholders in delegations to the HLPF increased between 2016 and 2017. Indeed, roughly one-quarter of VNR countries involved non-governmental actors as speakers in their official presentations.

The UN and civil society organisations have since prepared a series of preparatory and guideline materials that provide guidance for conducting VNRs. Worth mentioning in this context is the 2018 VNR Handbook developed by UN DESA, which contains updated voluntary reporting guidelines and a detailed overview of the official preparatory processes at international level. It also outlines important elements of VNRs, offers ideas for structuring national improvement processes for the VNRs and provides illustrative country examples.

The key points arising in the discussions on the aforementioned topics were:

Improvements in VNRs

- There is a need to critically address, as well as reflect and dialogue on, VNRs.
- VNRs should be supported by suitable dialogue and learning platforms.
- The provision of national and international funds should be more sharply focused on the 2030 Agenda.
- The analysis and follow-up of reports should be strengthened, and the recommendations resulting from the VNRs should be integrated into the national review processes.



- It is important to address human rights issues in the VNRs, although the availability of relevant data continues to pose a challenge.
- The involvement of relevant stakeholders in government reporting should be extended and reinforced, by formalising such involvement both in the review process prior to a VNR report as well as in the VNR presentations.
- While VNR presentations prioritise the key topics from a national perspective, VNR reports should remain responsive to the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda and analyse all SDGs of relevance for national implementation.

Preparatory material for the VNRs

- The fragmentation of the UN system and local development cooperation can present a challenge for the relevant stakeholders regarding the provision of guidelines, support and data compilation.
- Often, the stakeholders involved do not know whether or how their contributions will be included in the final VNR reports prepared by the government. It might therefore be useful for civil society to produce their own reports (shadow reporting). Another option would be to enable such stakeholders to comment specifically on draft reports.
- The participants emphasised that they would like to keep the reporting guidelines as specific as possible, in the interest of coherence and comparability between VNRs in different countries.

ii) Establishing institutional mechanisms and integrating perspectives of various stakeholders in order to cope with the complexity of the 2030 Agenda

Owing to their integrated and universal nature, the need to involve all interest groups and the multi-level approach, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs set therein are almost as complex as the challenges they address. Participants discussed a series of key elements for coping with this complexity, such as institutional coordination mechanisms, smart approaches to dealing with changing priorities after elections, the involvement of the scientific community in national review processes, the role of national human rights institutions and the inclusion of marginalised groups.

National institutional coordination mechanisms play a central role in the design of national SDG strategies, associated policies, their implementation, and the monitoring and review of implementation progress. The broad spectrum of SDGs requires from institutions good cooperation platforms, innovation and incentives systems that enable cross-sectoral measures and accountability. Such mechanisms are crucial for promoting both horizontal and vertical coherence and for ensuring the integrated nature of SDG review and implementation.

In this context, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) presented with its Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) approach the advisory offering with which the UN Development System lends support. This approach focuses on mainstreaming the SDGs in national strategies, adjusting existing or creating new institutional coordination mechanisms, identifying leverage for synergies and adjusting priority policy fields. The following points were mentioned in the subsequent discussion:

- There is no blueprint, as arrangements for governance, political systems and institutions as well as the national context vary from country to country.
- Irrespective of the design of coordination mechanisms, strong political backing and institutional responsibility are a precondition for the effectiveness of the mechanisms concerned.
- A clear mandate and a transparent assignment of roles and responsibilities endorsed at the highest political level guarantee effective accountability.
- Careful consideration of the existing institutional landscape and in-depth consultation and participation of relevant interest groups in the various phases of the process are important for creating a suitable coordination mechanism.



- Accountability, broad participation and the use of partnerships are central principles of the 2030 Agenda. Close cooperation with parliaments and civil society is crucially important in this context.
- The VNRs prepared for the HLPF must build on regular and comprehensive national reviews based on national institutional mechanisms.

Implementation continuity of the 2030 Agenda despite changes in priorities after elections poses a major challenge. Some of the measures identified by participants for securing the continuation of measures despite changes of government included:

- Promoting a performance-based and value-oriented public service capable of offering advice and support independently of government.
- Translating the SDGs into the respective government priorities.
- Ensuring the availability of independent data based on a nonpartisan analysis by national statistics offices.
- Providing advisory services.

Involving the scientific community in national reviews can help governments deal effectively with the interplay of various economic, social and environmental challenges. Active involvement of the scientific community in reviews will enable a better analysis of the challenges faced by policy-makers, promote the development of appropriate solutions and ultimately strengthen the interface between academia and policy-making. To summarise, participants' discussions culminated in the following key points:

- Active orientation of research priorities toward the SDGs is a fundamental precondition for the effective deployment of academia in efforts to solve development challenges.
- It is essential to break down closed or defensive mindsets within academic communities, and between them and policy-makers.
- It is important to strengthen interfaces between the scientific community and policy-makers in order to promote evidence-based policy design – both in national reviews and throughout the national policy cycle.
- Involving the scientific community in national reviews and in the preparation of the VNRs will help increase the analytical quality of VNRs.
- Scientific institutions can support governments through organised dialogue with the scientific community.

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) are independent government agencies with a constitutional and/or legislative mandate to protect human rights and monitor the effective implementation of international human rights standards at national level. There are considerable links between human rights requirements and the SDGs.

Consequently, participants discussed how NHRIs can support review of the 2030 Agenda:

- NHRIs advise governments, conduct research, support mediation and arbitration, raise awareness of human rights issues, build bridges between international commitments and national implementation of human rights standards, and provide access to relevant data.
- In view of the importance of the 'leave no one behind' approach as a core principle of the 2030 Agenda, NHRIs could collaborate with NSOs in order to provide disaggregated data and convert human rights data into data of relevance for SDGs.
- NHRIs could help reach and involve stakeholders, especially marginalised and vulnerable groups.

The **inclusion of marginalised groups in national reviews** is key to 'leaving no one behind'. There are many barriers, often of a social and cultural nature, that lead to marginalisation and that need to be removed. To summarise, the key points discussed were:

- Disaggregated data are essential in order to identify marginalisation, although consideration must be given to the risks associated with such data in 'non-free' political and social contexts.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

- Marginalised groups and communities must be empowered in order to enable their meaningful involvement. Their mere presence in processes does not constitute involvement.
- The involvement of marginalised groups will help increase awareness of SDGs and supports the design of suitable policies that address needs.

iii) Challenges for vertical coherence of SDG review from a sub-national perspective

Participants discussed the central role of local and regional authorities for achieving the SDGs, and the added value of reviews at sub-national level, for greater vertical coherence. The key points were:

- SDG implementation and review spans several administration levels, including the sub-national and local.
- It is crucially important to involve the local level in planning, implementing and reviewing strategies. It is in the interest of local authorities to work towards harnessing synergies in order to successfully tackle the large number of social, economic and environmental challenges, despite limited local resources.
- SDGs are implemented at local level for the most part. Accordingly, reviews also have to be conducted at this level.
- A big challenge remains regarding the definition of what is meant by 'localising' SDGs and what form this can take.

Participants noted the following points in this regard:

- The formal mechanism for the national review of SDGs should involve local and regional authorities.
- Switching from a sectoral to cross-sectoral reporting system could support a more coherent planning and implementation of activities by different institutions.
- Supporting SDG implementation at local level promotes both the achievement of SDG targets as well as the review of the effectiveness of measures.
- It is crucially important to develop local implementation and review capacities.
- Taking into account the local context in the design of international partnerships will make these more effective.
- Documenting challenges and specific examples at local level in the VNRs will support mutual learning.
- Data compiled by citizens at local level should be used in order to support national statistics systems in more frequently updating data, providing disaggregated data and identifying data gaps.
- Local data should be used in order to support local decision-makers and interest groups in raising public awareness of the SDGs and obtaining support for reshaping policies.
- Based on the SDGs 11.3 and 16.7, local data and participatory planning should be used in order to identify actual local needs and develop suitable strategies and programmes.

iv) Dealing with the data challenge: the political economy of data ecosystems

The topic of '**data challenges**' in the context of reviewing the SDGs was introduced in a presentation by PARIS21 focusing on three thematic priorities:

Duality between global reporting and national data

Robust data are essential for measuring progress in the implementation of SDGs. Due to capacity limitations, measuring the 2030 Agenda indicators poses a major challenge for national statistics offices. In addition, not all stakeholders are clear as to the primary reason for data collection: the question arises as to whether data are primarily collected for the purpose of annual, global review reports or whether the focus is on collecting data that can be used in a national context. Hopes of the statistical community



that the SDGs would attract a greater influx of resources, especially from national governments or international organisations, have not been borne out so far.

'Data ecosystems'

A robust review and follow-up mechanism as envisaged in the 2030 Agenda requires the involvement of the entire data ecosystem. The focus should lie on the official statistics of NSOs. Moreover, the question arises as to how to effectively integrate the data compiled by other stakeholders. In this context, it is important to weigh up the interests of the stakeholders involved and the risks, including those related to data protection.

The need for a 'revolution' of statistical capacities

The fragmentation of the UN system, and the lack of coordination between international organisations when delivering capacity-building measures and gathering data, present countries with a challenge. It is crucially important to focus on building cross-cutting capacity that benefits all sectors equally. This includes relevant capacity for the increase in coordination work entailed by more cooperation with a wide variety of stakeholders.

As regards the **involvement of non-official data providers** in the review of SDGs, participants underscored the following points:

- Legitimate mechanisms are needed for the inclusion of non-official data providers.
- It is important for NSOs to build trust with other stakeholders as soon as such mechanisms are in place.
- The SDGs require NSOs to become more open and to develop the capacities needed.
- It is also important for non-official data providers to build capacities.
- Close cooperation between NSOs and international organisations appears appropriate.

With respect to the **policy design requirements for a national review**, the key points made by the participants can be summarised as follows:

- National SDG plans and the allocation of appropriate funding in national budgets are essential. Mobilising resources for the compilation of data from multiple sources is an important determinant of success in this context.
- It is important that the government-led review and reporting processes incorporate an integral mechanism for the inclusion of interest groups, and that the latter are allowed to contribute.
- It is important to include marginalised and vulnerable communities in the compilation and verification of data.

Regarding the **involvement of civil society in efforts to close data gaps**, the following points were discussed:

- Civil society wants to get involved in both the implementation of SDGs as well as the VNR process.
- Governments have a key role to play in coordinating data collection and harmonising data from multiple sources. In addition, they can support the efforts of unofficial stakeholders to build statistical capacities.
- It is important to align SDG indicators with the national context so that they can be tracked as a national process, thereby increasing ownership of implementation.
- In order to strengthen local communities and combine data compilation with SDG implementation, it was suggested that partnerships could be established to integrate official data and local data.
- There is a need for (further) guidelines, instructions, tools and capacity development in order to collect (more) qualitative data.

Regarding the **role of the private sector in dealing with the 'data challenge'**, a positive trend is evident. There has been an increase in companies' awareness of SDGs and in their willingness to support the implementation and review process. Participants discussed the contributions that the private sector can make towards dealing with the data challenge. The discussion can be summarised as follows:

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

- Developing and using reliable standards for corporate sustainability reporting is essential in order to ensure that data are appropriate and comparable in terms of both content and technical features.
- A suitable methodology should be developed to aggregate the data available in corporate sustainability reports and to link them with the SDGs.
- Companies should be incentivised to also include in their corporate sustainability reports negative examples and challenging situations, as an opportunity to highlight lessons learned and progress made.
- Companies should not only report on activities (output indicators), but also on results. Analyses of published sustainability reports conducted by non-governmental actors provide important plausibility checks in this context.

Big data and open data play an important role in the review of SDGs. Regarding big data, there is a multiplicity of data providers and potential applications (e.g. in agriculture, tourism, health and wellbeing, natural disasters and urban planning). However, a large portion of the data that could potentially be used for reporting on SDGs is generated by large private data providers. The key limitations to the use of big data in the review of SDGs pertain to the quality of data, the transfer of data to NSOs and the lack of corresponding enabling legal frameworks. In this context, the participants made the following points:

- It is essential to establish clear legal parameters and trust between government, the private sector and civil society.
- Transparency should be improved regarding access to, as well as sharing and use of, data.
- Capacities of NSOs and other institutions (including non-official data providers) should be strengthened in order to supply, appropriately analyse and interpret the data.

Overall, discussions in the breakout groups indicated that the main challenges concern data quality, the transfer of data to NSOs and the lack of a legal framework governing access, sharing and use of data. Other central concerns mentioned included the development of capacities, especially at NSOs, but also among other actors, together with the mobilisation of resources for data collection.

v) Aligning various regional and sectoral agendas

Participants discussed the links between the 2030 Agenda and other international agendas, taking as an example the Paris Agreement on climate change, the New Urban Agenda and the African Agenda 2063. In the discussions, participants emphasised the need to better coordinate the implementation of the various international agendas. Intensified efforts to raise awareness and sensitise the relevant authorities and stakeholders were deemed preconditions to this end.

The discussion in the breakout group on **linking climate measures (NDCs) with the 17 SDGs** led to the following conclusions:

- Climate change and sustainable development are closely intertwined. In order to successfully implement both agendas, synergies in the design and implementation of SDGs and NDCs need to be identified and captured.
- SDGs offer an opportunity to strengthen coordination of the two agendas, and their implementing institutions.
- Effective coordination of the implementation of NDCs and SDGs requires greater sensitisation of the broader public as well as the administration.
- Funding the implementation of both agendas poses a challenge for many countries. Separate funding streams that have grown over time can hinder coordination and efforts to secure coherence.
- Some of the NDC measures, which total 8,000 across all countries, are not quantifiable, making them difficult to review.



The breakout group on the **link between the New Urban Agenda and the SDGs** made the following key points:

- There are powerful synergies between the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda, which can be viewed as an urban focus of the 2030 Agenda that goes beyond SDG 11.
- The New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda do not compete with each other, as they relate to different levels. Rather, it is possible to capture numerous synergies at local level by integrating the agendas vertically and horizontally.
- Many human rights issues can be addressed in connection with urban development, especially as regards access to public services.
- Urban development extends beyond administrative borders.

The breakout group on **aligning the 2030 Agenda and the 2063 Agenda of the African Union** concluded:

- Convergence between the 2030 Agenda and the African 2063 Agenda is high at the level of objectives, but less so at the level of indicators.
- African countries should work towards reaching the SDGs by 2030, in order to avoid loss of ambition as a result of focusing on the target year 2063.
- The language of the political agendas has to be demystified in order to make it more accessible to people and enable them to relate these agendas to their daily lives.
- To this end, it is also necessary to strengthen media capacities in order to promote efforts to raise awareness with broad impact.

vi) Further topics discussed

At the request of participants, the following three additional topics were discussed in greater detail in the breakout groups during the network meeting: the role of the UN Regional Commissions, strengthening the involvement of the private sector in implementing the SDGs and drafting the SDG Accountability Handbook of the TAP Network.

Regarding the **role of the UN Regional Commissions**, participants emphasised their importance for review of the 2030 Agenda, the handling of cross-border issues and the strengthening of peer learning between countries. The group came to the following conclusions:

- Through their function as a platform for countries facing similar contexts and challenges, regional commissions can support preparation for the HLPF through peer learning.
- Reporting at regional level is important in order to resolve cross-border and common problems, share good practices and lessons learned, and draw up joint strategies and positions. Regional forums for sustainable development have a critical role to play in this regard.
- It is important for the UN Regional Commissions and other regional organisations to play an active role in raising broad public awareness of the SDGs and harmonising implementation of international and regional agendas.

In the breakout group for **strengthening the involvement of the private sector in the implementation of SDGs**, participants underscored the opportunities that SDGs afford the business community. At the same time they drew attention to the challenges at a micro level, such as structural difficulties in cooperation between governments and businesses, and the protection of human rights. The key points made were:

- It is necessary to improve cooperation and interaction between governments and businesses.
- The private sector should be made more aware of the opportunities afforded by implementation of the SDGs.
- It is important to create a fair and enabling environment for business based on good governance and the rule of law.
- Governments and multilateral institutions have an important role to play in generating strong interest in the 2030 Agenda within the business community.
- Businesses can support government agencies in developing bankable projects.



The final breakout group dealt with the topic of **drafting the SDG Accountability Handbook** of the TAP Network. The handbook is intended to help civil society organisations strengthen accountability with respect to SDGs at national level. Drawing on available sources of information, the handbook is intended to be a 'living document' that is continually updated. Case studies will illustrate good practices in the implementation of various SDGs and the inclusion of marginalised groups in different regions. Participants were invited to contribute case studies or other reference materials for the handbook. The group discussed the following points:

- The importance of broad participation by civil society actors in the review of SDGs and national accountability mechanisms.
- The importance of civil society organisations for the 'leave no one behind' principle in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and as a cross-cutting topic.
- The use of reliable data to ensure the accountability of the stakeholders involved.