

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

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

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

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

exercises into political action that is conducive to the achievement of sustainable development worldwide.

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

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

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

At the time of the event, the governments of Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala were

¹ A/RES/70/1 §79

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

Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Togo, Turkey and Uruguay

³ <https://foroalc2030.cepal.org/2019/en>

⁴ <http://www.partners-for-review.de/>



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

Stakeholder dialogue is key

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

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

implementation process was achieved, which in turn allowed for the visualisation of stakeholder contributions to the Agenda, and consequently for a better collective reporting process for the second VNR. In this light, the countries perceive the VNR process not as a reporting burden but as an opportunity for an internal stocktaking and to spur implementation efforts.

From government strategy to national strategy

Similarly, **El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico** departed from a centrally orchestrated review process in 2016. In El Salvador it was led by the Technical and Planning Secretariat of the Office of the President, in Guatemala by the Planning Secretary (SEGEPLAN) and in Mexico by the Office of the Presidency. The three countries adopted broader consultation processes in 2018 and emphasised that their VNRs have evolved from government strategies to national strategies.

In the case of Mexico, this has resulted in the foundation of a consultative council which divides work among six technical committees. Furthermore, stakeholder dialogue is perceived as a guarantor of policy consistency, be it in the wake of political change after recent elections, as in **El Salvador and Mexico**, or over time as in **Colombia**, where the national SDG Commission was created by presidential decree back in February 2015 and has since acted to bring about the political compromise necessary to advance implementation efforts. In this vein, the stance of **Colombia** is to work within existing institutional mechanisms and

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



concentrate efforts on more intensive multi-stakeholder dialogue.

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

Mexico equally highlights the importance of localising existing efforts, as sub-national levels carry the majority of implementation responsibilities and efforts. **Chile**, in comparison, will be seeing a three-fold trickledown effect of decentralisation, regionalisation and localisation with regard to strategy formulation.

Essence of follow-up is increased involvement and communication

Examples of concrete measures to follow up on lessons learned and recommendations identified during the first VNR may be summed up under the topic of broader involvement and improving communication. For example, **El Salvador** introduced an online platform that provides

official statistics and infographics to make information available on the progress being made towards SDG indicator achievement. **Guatemala** launched an online platform to register and visualise activities by the government and stakeholders that contribute to the implementation of the Agenda in the country, which has been received as a welcome incentive to make efforts by diverse parties visible. **Chile** has engaged in an initiative led by the Finnish government to evaluate implementation progress in different countries. It focuses on the extent to which i) government policies, ii) implementation systems such as budgetary processes or activities by Ministries, and iii) plans and programmes including those of civil society align with the 2030 Agenda. The aim of this initiative is to identify suitable evaluation mechanisms for each area, as challenges associated with each are diverse.

Colombia aims to demonstrate the value of multi-stakeholder partnerships by mapping initiatives that are sustainable, as well as innovative and multi-stakeholder contributions to 2030 Agenda implementation. It has issued a nationwide call for good practices to be provided with micro-grants to support implementation. Also, the country has launched the 'SDG corporate tracker' to visualise contributions by the private sector.

With a view to broader inclusion, **Guatemala** and **El Salvador** have specified the need to develop adequate mechanisms and formats for the different forms of engagement, such as information, consultation, collaboration and participation. In the same vein, **Guatemala** has voiced the need to overcome the tension between broad participation and legitimate representation in consultation



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mechanisms by combining face-to-face and digital participation opportunities.

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

Next steps after HLPF 2019

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

Guatemala is planning to host a series of workshops to identify recommendations evolving from the VNR process and thus create a feedback loop to ensuing evaluation. The country has also announced a process to communicate recommendations from the review exercise to sector ministries – as the product of a consultative process, not governmental authority. In this regard, an obligatory national-level consultation will be conducted with the Office of the Presidency, the congress and the judiciary.

Conclusion

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

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

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