

Partners for Review Virtual Networking Days 5-8 May 2020

Brief report¹

Partners for Review (P4R) is a network for government representatives and stakeholders from civil society, academia, the private sector and other non-state actors who are involved in processes to review and monitor action by countries around the world to achieve the SDGs. P4R was initiated in 2016 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's semi-annual meetings – as well as communications between the in-person meetings – serve to gather practical, inclusive solutions for delivering on the global commitment to review progress on the 2030 Agenda at the national level. In effect, P4R coordinates the demand for and supply of policy advice among practitioners. Since the first meeting, a total of 425 delegates from 80 countries have taken part in at least one of the seven previous meetings. Over 250 members participate as part of the P4R online community.

In-person meetings have taken place in: Bonn, Germany (November 2016); Bogotá, Colombia (March 2017); Kampala, Uganda (October 2017); Tbilisi, Georgia (April 2018); Berlin, Germany (November 2018); Oaxaca, Mexico (May 2019); and Hanoi, Viet Nam (November 2019).

In early 2020, in light of restrictions on travel and gatherings amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the P4R Secretariat canceled the in-person event planning for the eighth meeting, which had been scheduled to convene in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Instead, four “networking days,” from 5-8 May 2020, were organized.

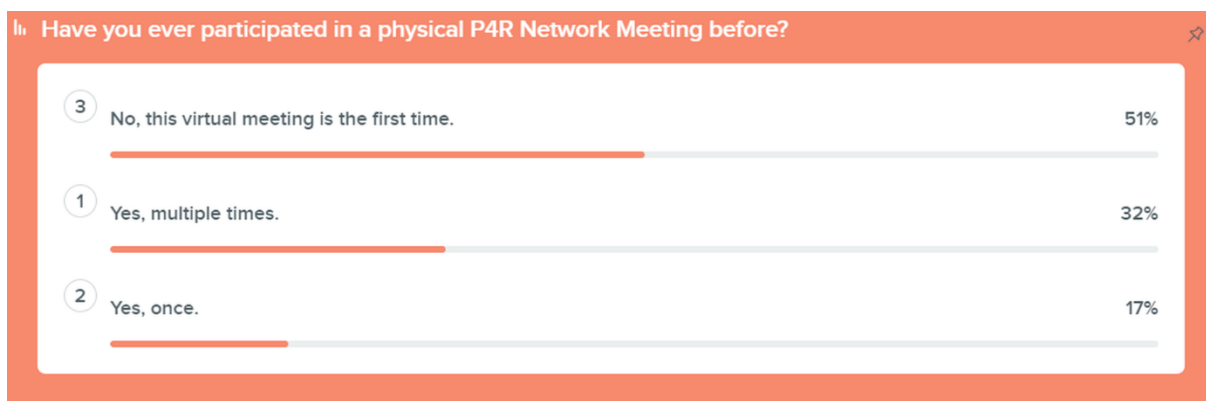
As one participant remarked during the opening session of the networking days, “Crazy times need crazy ideas,” like converting the in-person P4R gatherings to an online format. The Virtual Networking Days were convened by GIZ on behalf of BMU and BMZ. On the final day, the organizers observed that the 230 participants had brought the same level of energy and engagement to the virtual sessions as to the previous physical meetings, with a positive effect that nobody was required to travel.

¹ **Disclaimer:** This report was prepared for the use and benefit of the P4R network members and is provided for information purposes only. It contains a compilation of the participants' contributions and discussions held during the P4R virtual networking days from 5-8 May 2020. The statements in this report do not represent the views or opinions of either GIZ, the commissioning parties or the cooperation partners. The P4R Secretariat does not assume any liability for the accuracy or completeness of the contributions presented.

This report provides a short overview of the Virtual Networking Days. The summary of each section presents the key outcomes and insights of the discussion, in particular participants' reflections on the P4R themes of whole-of-government, whole-of-society, and the data challenge.

I. Opening: SDG reporting under COVID-19

This poll among the audience of the opening webinar shows that there is an even distribution between participants who have already participated in previous network meetings and those who have joined for the first time.



During the opening session, on 5 May, speakers addressed how COVID-19 has affected the achievement of the SDGs and the review process for the 2030 Agenda. They expressed concern that the pandemic “throws us years back” from achieving the SDGs, but emphasized that keeping the Goals at the forefront of governments’ strategies can increase resilience to future shocks. One participant said the climate crisis, for example, “will be a far bigger shock than this pandemic,” and others described the 2030 Agenda as the best way to insure against global risks.

One speaker highlighted how countries have been using SDG implementation to advance a strong recovery, such as by establishing car-free zones to improve air quality and safety, avoiding stimulus support for companies that use tax havens, and tying emissions reduction conditions to financial support to airlines.

The UN Secretariat briefed participants on the planning for the July 2020 session of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The session is likely to convene virtually and possibly include a small in-person meeting for delegates already based in New York.

Of the 51 countries that had planned to present Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) during the 2020 session, the Secretariat said 49 have confirmed their intention to finish preparations and present their report, despite COVID-19. It is planned that the VNRs can be presented in a video format that allows for interactive discussion.

Participants shared how COVID-19 has affected the preparation of VNRs in their countries. A major challenge has been to continue holding meaningful consultations with non-state stakeholders and engage national statistical offices. One country representative said their government has been holding electronic consultations with its thematic working groups to prepare the VNR and will share the report electronically with national stakeholders. Some VNR reports are expected to include the government's responses to COVID-19.

Participants also exchanged insights on making VNRs more effective. One national government is developing a tool to monitor the SDGs collaboratively with the private sector and other non-state stakeholders. The government conducted an online survey to engage all stakeholders. The speaker expressed hope that this will become a permanent tool for monitoring the SDGs: "We want to turn the survey from a photograph for the VNR into a permanent SDG monitoring process."

The approach being taken by another country is to establish thematic working groups for VNR preparation under a national council accountable to the Prime Minister, and each working group is co-chaired with civil society organizations. A civil society representative from this country observed, however, that the working groups had become "more like a large conference" than a functioning multi-stakeholder body.

II. Accountability in action

The second session, on 6 May, explored accountability for the SDGs given that the 2030 Agenda does not have a "hard" accountability mechanism. Stakeholders and institutions can strengthen accountability for the 2030 Agenda, leading to greater inclusion, trust-building, and data-driven policies.

The discussion stressed that accountability can be enhanced by engaging a range of stakeholder groups and institutions in the process, such as national human rights institutions (NHRIs), Supreme Audit Institutions, civil society, and parliamentary caucuses. For example, NHRIs can effectively build bridges between a government and stakeholder groups as well as assist in monitoring.

In the absence of strong formal mechanisms, accountability can be improved through consistent awareness-raising and advocacy with parliamentarians and other stakeholders. Accountability must be present at all levels of the systems – globally, regionally, nationally, sub-nationally, locally and at a community level.

SDG practitioners can learn from and leverage the practices and mechanisms of other global processes, treaties, conventions, and frameworks (for example, human rights conventions, ILO conventions, Multilateral Environmental Agreements, etc.) to hold governments accountable for delivering the SDGs. There are some interactive, digital tools available that allow individuals to explore the interlinkages between the SDGs and other global conventions, such as the Danish Institute for Human Rights' [SDG-human rights data explorer](#).

Also, there are tools that can be employed for the national level, parliament, and public services to enhance accountability. One such tool is “citizen-led development” where citizens can directly rate the delivery of government-sponsored projects.

Participants also heard that in Lithuania, budgetary audits are used to enhance accountability. Audits ensure that the state budget is used in efficient and effective ways and include recommendations for improvements. These recommendations are non-compulsory but by providing open, transparent data to the public and parliamentarians, audits have fostered a culture of accountability for the government. Additionally, Supreme Audit Institutions can actively involve civil society and other non-state actors in discussions around government’s performance in SDG implementation to raise awareness.

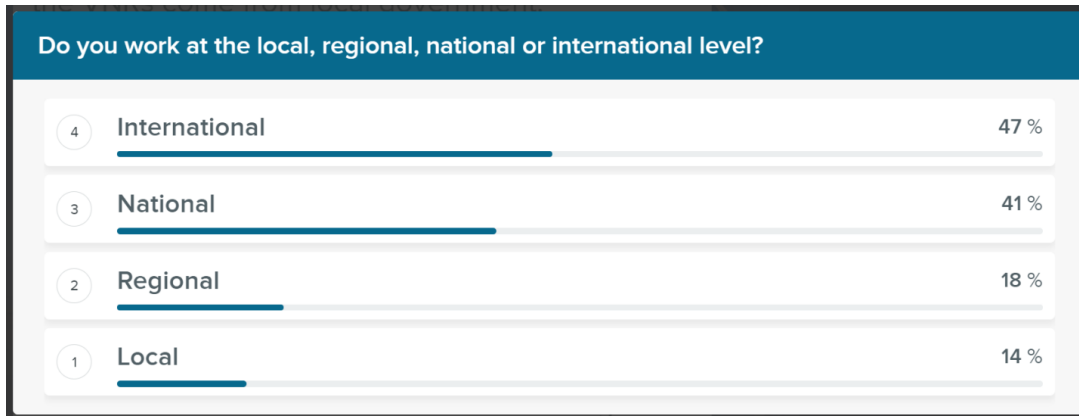
One speaker outlined the importance of SDG target 16.10 on public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms. The expert underscored transparency as a “base-level condition” for accountability, noting that the 2030 Agenda calls for governments to be transparent about how decisions are made and how resources are allocated. This enables individuals to hold governments accountable to their commitments.

With COVID-19 being used as grounds for many governments to enact emergency measures and extend their control, the discussion stressed that it is even more important that citizens hold them accountable, and that the SDGs are the basis for local recovery.



III. Linking local SDG reviews with the national level

In this session, on 6 May, participants stressed the benefits of localizing the SDGs and engaging local governments in the national-level VNR process.



Participants heard that only 33% of the 142 countries that have delivered VNRs have a mechanism to coordinate the involvement of local governments. In addition, only 42% of the 142 countries engaged local governments when preparing the VNR. A few countries have created a formal place for local governments in their VNRs, such as Spain, which devoted a full chapter to local government. Other countries, such as Benin, Iceland, Serbia, Turkey, and Uruguay, have integrated the role of local governments broadly throughout their reports.

An expert said that engaging local cities, citizens, and governments in the nation-wide review process can be a “motor” for developing the VNR. Others highlighted that the collection of information to assess local SDG implementation is a valuable process itself. While the information may all be publicly available, organizing it for the VLR “makes it useful.”

Participants listed conditions that create an enabling environment to localize the SDGs, including: adequate financing flows, as required in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development; improved coordination between local and national strategies; plans, programmes, and budgets for localization; and a whole-of-society approach, with all three tiers of society involved in the creation of a VLR and linking VLRs to the VNR.

Among other lessons learned, cities that have prepared a VLR noted the importance of aligning budgets with the SDGs. In Durban, South Africa, the VLR process has included comparing budgets over multiple years to see where priorities have shifted and to understand the spending on each SDG. Durban also concluded that the process is more important than the outcome; it is worth ensuring that the VLR is supported by adequate budgeting, communication, and dedicated individuals.

Related to the theme of “data challenge,” participants said a big question for many localities is how to develop local indicators, especially amid resource challenges. It was noted that disaggregation poses a problem for developing indicators. In Europe, the European Commission

has supported the development of local indicators, but elsewhere it is very difficult to collect data and collection is limited, in particular for SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities).

IV. Communicating and visualising SDG data

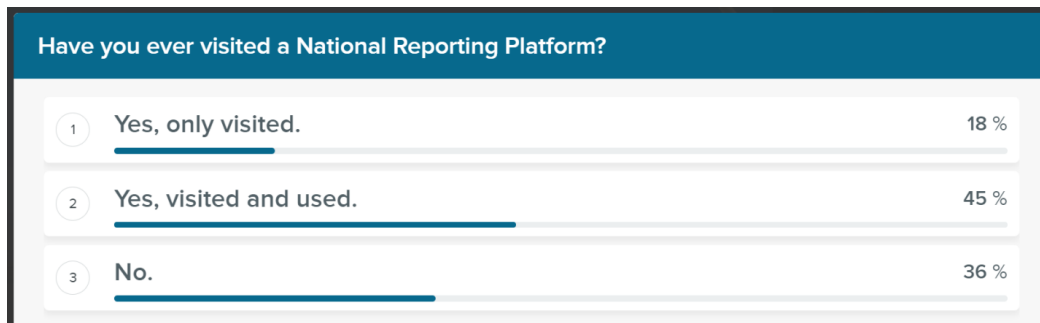
This session, on 7 May, provided insights on how data visualization and availability can enable decision-making, enhance transparency, and help assess the delivery of the SDGs. Speakers stressed that data is only useful if it generates benefit for reporting, learning, and decision-making.

The discussion highlighted that data literacy is top-of-mind right now, as COVID-19 has led to average citizens constantly monitoring data, something that was previously not commonplace. Speakers stressed that if data producers want their data to be used, they must make it accessible, visually friendly, and usable for different stakeholder groups.

It was stressed that quality data, which entails a certain level of disaggregation, is essential for informing decision-makers and other stakeholders about progress on SDG implementation. By drilling down to different levels and population groups, disaggregated data can provide a more accurate picture of trends, gaps, and progress on SDG implementation, the basis for targeted policies to leave no one behind.

To show how SDG visualization tools are being adapted for different countries’ contexts, the national statistical offices of two countries provided case studies on their open-source tools – the National Reporting Platforms of Germany and the UK. Participants also highlighted other tools including the [Data Act Lab’s Goal Tracker](#) and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network’s ([SDSN](#)) [SDG Index](#).

Among the lessons shared about these tools, speakers said National Reporting Platforms and other visualization tools can help to make data more accessible and usable by various stakeholder groups (also indicated by the results of the inquiry among participants about them having ever visited a National Reporting Platform, see below.) While the technical process of setting up such a platform is straightforward – especially thanks to open source tools like “Open SDG” – a greater challenge is ensuring that it meets the needs of different user groups and that the data within the platform are sound and comprehensive. As one speaker said, “setting up a platform is easy; getting up the data (having quality data) is more difficult.”



To mitigate these challenges, clarifying the target users of the platform and their objectives is helpful. This can be done by constructing user archetypes/ profiles through detailed user research and web analytics in order to appropriately tailor the visualization tools accordingly.

For nationally focused tools, it is important that a platform aligns to the various frameworks and requirements that a country must report on. This can include the national development plan and other regional commitments (e.g. Africa 2063).

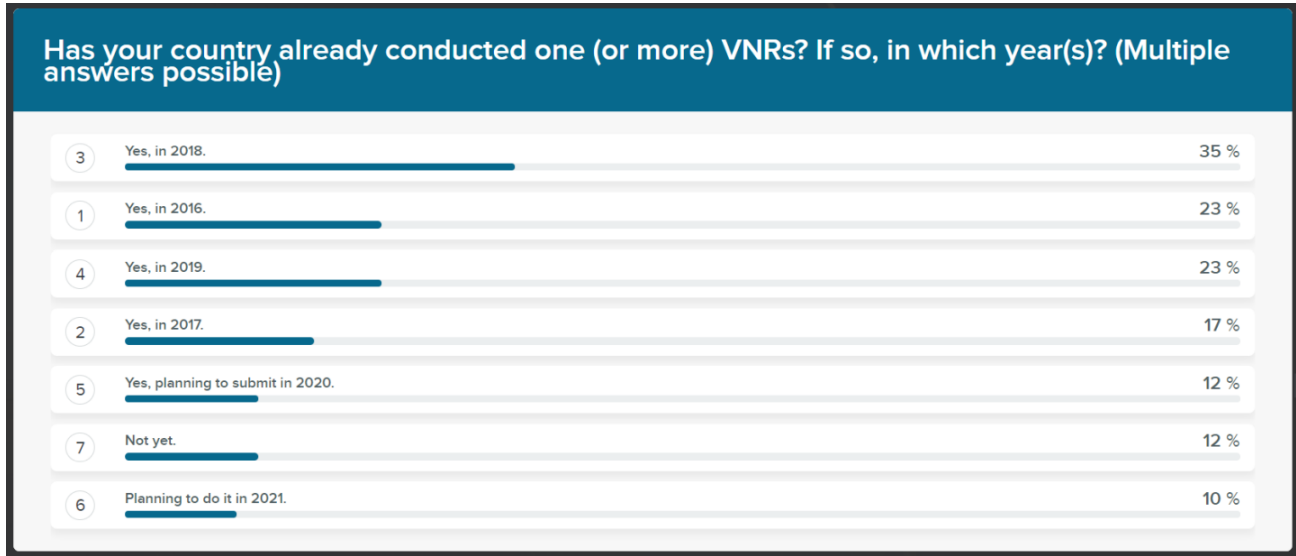
For data collection, collaboration across multiple sectors can help filling the gaps, but there is a need for detailed guidance to organizations to ensure statistical rigor.

When displaying the data, it is essential to be concise and summarize the key insights to quickly allow users to understand the main take-aways so users do not lose the overview. Contextualization of data is also extremely important; people need to see numbers in relation to the goal/target or in relation to familiar scales. Equally important is to visualize the progress made to date and to complement this information with stories and narratives to help users understand the information provided. It was noted that “one set of data can tell many different stories.”

Other elements such as ensuring open access and customization of these tools, language translations, and automated reports increase the accessibility and usability of these tools by different groups.

V. Evolution of multi-stakeholder engagement in SDG progress reporting

In this session, on 8 May, participants reflected on how multi-stakeholder engagement in SDG reporting has evolved since the beginning of the VNRs. They identified for instance several benefits for governments in using civil society spotlight reports, and discussed lessons learned for institutionalizing such engagement.



One presenter reported that nearly 80% of the VNRs presented from 2016-2019 reported on multi-stakeholder efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. However, she said the reports did not provide detail on which stakeholders were engaged, the approaches to engagement, or governments’ motivations for engaging stakeholders. She said this makes it challenging to dig into the quality of the engagement or to identify challenges and experiences. In the 2019 VNRs, countries reported a greater focus on involving stakeholders at technical working group level than high policy level, which signals that stakeholders may not be able to influence higher level policy.

Speakers observed positive trends in the VNRs regarding multi-stakeholder engagement, particularly around attention to youth. They said Serbia’s report, for example, had a strong focus on youth and included chapters on youth activities. This trend is expected to rise as countries showcase the creation of youth ambassador roles and other ways to engage youth as partners in sustainable development. Another trend is the formalization of stakeholder engagement mechanisms: 60% of VNR countries reported a formal mechanism in 2019, compared with 39% in 2018.

Participants heard that the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the Oslo Governance Centre are working on a framework for stakeholder engagement processes. One expert suggested that governments periodically conduct a “stakeholder mapping” to identify groups that have not yet been heard in consultation processes. And, with each successive national consultation, such as for second and third VNRs, a robust effort should be made to “go beyond the usual suspects” and bring in stakeholders that did not participate previously. The session also highlighted good practices for multi-stakeholder forums, including holding annual consultation events, setting up youth councils, ensuring bodies are co-chaired by stakeholder representatives, and establishing high-level 2030 Agenda mechanisms.

While it is rare for a government to acknowledge the existence of a coordinated civil society report in a VNR report, and even rarer to integrate civil society’s findings into the VNR, one

speaker illuminated how governments can benefit from doing so. He said spotlight reports (also known as shadow reports or parallel reports) are based on active consultation processes, and they contain concrete recommendations for strengthening SDG implementation. Therefore, these reports can provide an efficient way for countries to include civil society's recommendations in their VNRs and complement their official statistics with qualitative data. He said the government's VNR should include an action plan to address the civil society recommendations.

This session also served as the launch of a [new publication](#) from GIZ and the Transparency, Accountability and Partnership (TAP) Network, containing an analysis that compares how nine countries' VNRs addressed SDG 16 with how civil society reports have done so. The analysis shows that especially by providing concrete recommendations on what needs to happen to achieve the SDGs, civil society reports can be useful for the VNR process itself as well as for following up on it.

Stakeholder Engagement through Spotlight Reporting

SPOTLIGHT REPORTING

- Complementary to VNR Reports to provide critical assessments, data and feedback and recommendations for further action
- Can take different forms with varying methodologies and approaches
- Often compiled by coalitions of civil society, and can provide an efficient mechanism for governments to engage with stakeholders

ANALYZING SPOTLIGHT REPORTS AND VNRs

- Launch of "SDG16 in VNRs and Spotlight Reports" Analysis
 - Report provides an analysis of VNRs and Spotlight Reports on SDG16 from 2018 and 2019, and provides recommendations for governments, civil society and international organizations
- Approaches and methodologies between VNRs and Spotlight Reports, and among Spotlight Reports differ significantly
 - Data use and reporting methods did not overlap in most cases, and data gaps were ever-present for both sets of Reports
 - Non-official data sources and qualitative data from Spotlight Reports can complement official statistics used by VNRs
- Generally, Spotlight Reports provided more details on assessing progress towards specific targets, and provide concrete recommendations for governments
 - More focus should be placed by governments on outlining specific commitments to addressing gaps identified in VNR report
- Very rare for a government to acknowledge the existence of a coordinated Spotlight Report in a VNR Report, and even fewer that integrate Spotlight Report findings into VNR
 - Better coordination and inclusive processes needed for integration of Spotlight Reports and VNRs remain a challenge for systematic follow-up








Summary: SDG 16 in VNRs and Spotlight Reports

Participants also heard about several tangible results of Kenya's stakeholder engagement during the first four years of VNRs. For example, a multi-stakeholder engagement framework was finalized in March 2020; new stakeholders were consulted for the country's second VNR, such as multiple universities and UN agencies (UN Women, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Resident Coordinator's office, and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)), the parliamentary SDG caucus, and the national commission on human rights; the government has agreed to prepare a biannual SDG status report in the years when the government does not deliver a VNR; stakeholder reports will be included as an appendix in the VNRs; and an interagency technical working committee chaired by the State Department of Planning is co-chaired by civil society and private sector representatives. The speaker credited the VNR process is driving the institutionalization of stakeholder engagement.

Closing the session, the moderator remarked that after a few years of “gearing up” and learning how to conduct VNRs, it is time to take a step forward. The VNRs can be used to develop roadmaps to achieving the ambitious 2030 Agenda.

VI. Outlook: COVID-19 – Opportunities for SDG sensitive recovery or business as usual?

In the final session of the virtual networking days, on 8 May, participants discussed possible effects of COVID-19 on the SDG follow-up and review process. One said that although it is difficult to conduct intergovernmental decision-making under the current circumstances, it is possible. One speaker remarked on the historical nature of the 2020 HLPF ministerial declaration, being negotiated entirely remotely, which shows the resilience of multilateral processes.

At least two countries that were preparing VNRs for the 2020 session were unable to complete their consultations due to COVID-19 and inadequate technologies to substitute for in-person gatherings and have had to withdraw. However, said a speaker, this is a long-term agenda, an entire decade of action: “today and tomorrow are challenging, but we are doing something for the next ten years and beyond.”

One speaker said COVID-19 has revealed things that we took for granted and exposed systems that were weak, such as data collection in parts of Africa. He said we cannot collect household level data if we cannot visit homes and markets are closed. We need to think differently and work with new partners. He said the Data for Now initiative of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD) is working to find solutions to such data challenges.

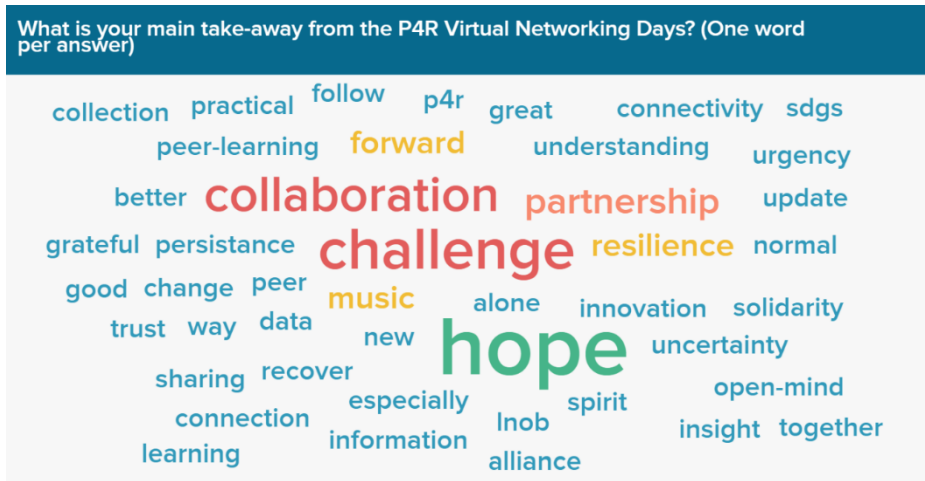
Participants said the pandemic has made clear the linkages among the SDGs, as the health crisis triggered a domino effect on almost all areas of sustainable development, not only worsening the economic situation, but also exacerbating human rights and inequalities. It has also shown the interconnections and interdependence between us, underscoring the “psychology behind the SDGs.” Moreover, the SDGs are the only global agenda that remains uncontested despite the current challenges to multilateralism.

Finally, it was suggested that while progress is likely to slow down for the next few years, it may be even more important that good habits of policy-making take root. These habits include mutual support among governments and peer review, which are being facilitated through the HLPF mechanism and the VNRs.

The final session also featured two crowd-sourcing questions for participants: First, what is the biggest challenge that you are facing in your daily work right now? Motivation, stress, change, and priorities were highlighted most often.



When the meeting closed, participants were asked to express their current feeling by a single word. “Hope” was the most frequent answer. Many others indicated that the words “collaboration” and “challenge” summed up how they felt.



The moderator reflected that in the midst of all of these challenges, “We are here because we are stubborn.” Overall, the final discussion emphasized that, despite existing challenges with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SDGs and 2030 Agenda in general is the way to overcome this global crisis and to achieve a long-term systemic shift for clean recovery.