Partners for Review

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

Virtual Networking Days
12-16 October 2020

Brief report[1]

Partners for Review (P4R) is an international network for representatives of government, civil society, academia, the private sector and other stakeholder groups who take part in monitoring action around the world to achieve the SDGs. P4R was initiated in 2016 by Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU). 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 – gather practical, inclusive solutions for delivering on the global commitment to review progress on the 2030 Agenda at the national level. More than 650 members from 96 countries are part of the P4R community.

Seven in-person P4R meetings have taken place to date: 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 light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the P4R Secretariat organized Virtual Networking Days over four days in May 2020.

With in-person meetings still restricted at the end of 2020, GIZ on behalf of BMU and BMZ convened the second Virtual Networking Days, from 12-16 October 2020. A total of 182 participants joined the web-based discussions, representing 48 countries, UN entities and other international organizations. Of all participants, 48% said their country plans to conduct a voluntary national review (VNR) in 2021.

This report summarizes the key outcomes and insights of each session during the second P4R Virtual Networking Days (VND 2), highlighting participants' reflections on the P4R thematic pillars of whole-of-government, whole-of-society and the data challenge.

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[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 12-16 October 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.*

Core Messages of Virtual Networking Days

- Countries are establishing new models for voluntary national reporting, including a civil society assessment of SDG progress as part of one government's VNR report, among other emerging best practices.
- The VNRs should be used to: understand the longer-term pathways we need to find and adopt; identify areas where we are backsliding and backtracking; identify difficult tradeoffs and exchange good practices on navigating them; and lead governments towards a focus on a small set of targets with transformational potential, in addition to enhancing accountability.
- Some data will be missing from SDG monitoring due to the postponement of national surveys amid COVID-19.
- When accounting for vulnerable groups, it is not just data that matters, but also the process of engagement.
- National multi-stakeholder sustainable development councils need official legitimacy, other legal protection, and/or financial backing in order to provide independent, innovative ideas to government.
- Policy makers around the world are issuing guidance on how private companies should report their sustainable development impacts. Taking sustainability action makes businesses more resilient, and reporting on these topics builds trust.
- Countries are developing guidance for municipal leaders to strengthen SDG monitoring, including a self-assessment tool that translates the 2030 Agenda into questions for a municipality to identify priorities for action.
- Academic institutions are playing a variety of roles in supporting national SDG reporting, such as gathering stakeholder case studies for the VNR, evaluating a country's data availability and quality, adapting the 2030 Agenda to local regions and reporting on progress, and reviewing the government's legislation for alignment with the SDGs.
- Follow-up and review mechanisms should "be like bamboo" – firmly rooted but flexible. This characteristic was demonstrated at 2020 HLPF, which made COVID-19 a deliberate part of the discussions and the UN establishing a "positive narrative around SDG-sensitive recovery" with its call to build back better.
- The upcoming intergovernmental review of the HLPF is an opportunity to make the reporting process stronger, and to incorporate lessons on the use of digital platforms.

Opening: Managing VNR processes in times of COVID-19: What can we learn for the future?

The organizers and UN representatives welcomed participants and set the stage for the five-day meeting. Speakers noted strong participation in the July 2020 session of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and that 47 countries presented VNRs despite the difficult pandemic environment. This energy shows the importance of SDG implementation and follow-up and review for COVID-19 recovery.

On the evolution of the VNRs, the following trends were identified:
- More countries are following the UN Secretary-General's voluntary guidelines, making the reports more comparable;
- Implementation is increasing at the sub-national level;
- Most VNR reports include a section on leaving no one behind;
- More countries review all 17 SDGs in their VNRs, not just the SDGs under in-depth review at the HLPF that year;
- More VNRs provide data to illustrate progress and impacts on development; and
- More governments engage stakeholders in the VNR process and include civil society evaluations in their reports.

Representatives discussed the experience of preparing VNRs for the 2020 HLPF. A first-time VNR country representative said it prioritized the process of conducting the review, by including relevant stakeholders and creating collaborative structures, which helped to create a sense of ownership. Governments preparing second VNRs noted their ability to engage with pre-existing SDG collaborative structures, which made it easier to switch to virtual consultations during the pandemic. Challenges related to consultations during the pandemic were highlighted, including finding alternative ways to reach rural and other marginalized populations.

The P4R Secretariat presented recent developments with the P4R Design Thinking Group. One participant said that the "Ideas4Review" project had helped her focus on a more practical approach to dealing with ministries in her country, in order to make the VNR process more inclusive.

Incorporating LNOB in planning and decision making

This session explored how governments are integrating the leaving no one behind commitment into their development programme design, practices, data collection and analysis, and VNRs. Participants first considered a project by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to monitor and analyze trends in leaving no one behind among 159 countries. The index has a forward-looking metric – preparedness to implement the LNOB principle – and backward-looking metrics – outcomes in health, finance, and infrastructure.
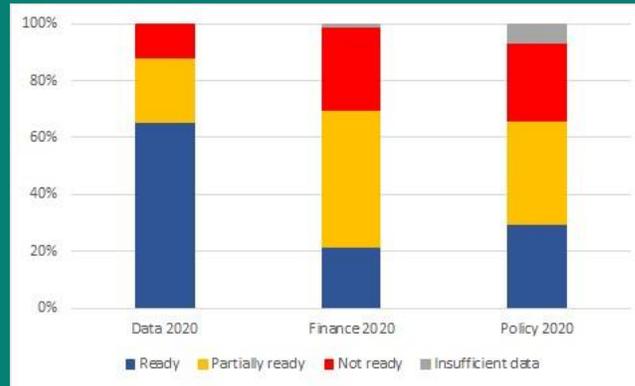
Image: LNOB preparedness – to data, finance, and policy, Source: ODI.

The 2020 results indicate that, while only 16% are not ready or lack data, according to the metrics, only 45% are on track. The findings also show:

- High-Income Countries (HICs) and Low-Income Countries (LICs) vary greatly on preparedness; 70% of HICs are ready while 20% of LICs are not ready, highlighting that fiscal capacity is a determinant of preparedness to deliver on LNOB.
- On the dimension of outcomes, a similar disparity emerged between LICs and HICs. No HIC is "off track" whereas not a single LICs is "on track."

With regard to the preparation of specific VNRs, one country representative reported engaging in a forward-looking process to identify gaps. Recommendations included an action plan for the rights of persons with disabilities; an initiative on "Education until 18 for all"; and a strategy to enhance quality of life for older persons.

A civil society representative from India noted that her country was founded on principles of social exclusion (the caste system), and therefore the process of engagement matters a great deal, particularly when it comes to vulnerable groups. In response to gaps on data related to vulnerable groups, the 100 Hotspots initiative in the country collects disaggregated SDG data from excluded communities, engages them in the process of data collection and analysis, and works with them to influence policy. The speaker noted that the country's second VNR showed improvement in engaging civil society and including voices from marginalized groups and included a new chapter on leaving no one behind and civil society.

A speaker from the National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) in Kenya discussed their work with the National Statistical Office to collaborate on data collection, disaggregation, and analysis. This led to the

identification of 29 groups at risk of being left behind and the incorporation of census questions to measure their progress. It was noted that "creating the space" is not enough when it comes to marginalized communities. Trust building and advocacy was required to bring communities on board.

Success factors for sustainable development councils and similar multi- stakeholder advisory bodies

Sustainable development councils and similar multi-stakeholder advisory bodies in four countries highlighted success factors. Participants stressed "official legitimacy" as valuable for protecting such bodies long-term. The need is pressing, as many countries have eliminated their sustainable development councils in recent years, one speaker reported.

A legal framework can prevent multi-stakeholder councils from being dismantled when governments change, as well as protect them when they issue opinions that may not be favorable to the government. An expert from Belgium said "It's useful to have a law that allows you to work. It is not our job to say everything the government does is wonderful, but to give advice from our stakeholders. So a legal framework is very useful." The discussion revealed that financial security can also allow for creative and political freedom, with a representative of another country's council explaining that it is not protected by law but has „financial back-up" that allows for innovative ideas.

An NGO representative from Kenya who was appointed to a multi-stakeholder forum by a government minister reported that the relationship provides a greater ability to help set the agenda and the forum's independent report is annexed to the government's VNR report. By contrast, NGO representatives from Brazil reported that their country's multi-stakeholder commission had been established by the decree of a previous presidential administration and was terminated when the administration changed. A national body in Georgia is part of the government's SDG secretariat and composed of high-level officials, but includes multi-stakeholder bodies organized by theme.

Speakers described the process of providing feedback to governments and soliciting responses. One European council provides opinions, including "common opinions" prepared jointly by multiple advisory bodies within the council. Then it publishes the responses it receives from officials. Another expert said that having stakeholder input reviewed by the country's auditor-general can create internal pressure for the government to listen. Speakers from Latin America and Eastern Europe reported that, if the government does not incorporate the Council's input, it must provide an explanation. A speaker from Europe said the council's role is to engage actors and inform the government of topics of interest to stakeholders.

Speakers said councils should be updated to ensure coherence with the SDGs, and that linking monitoring with indicators would strengthen councils' position to influence official policies.

In November 2020, the British Columbia Council for International Cooperation (BCCIC) will launch the results of an in-depth study on designing and strengthening national sustainable development councils to amplify their policy impact.

Image: Participants' impressions of sustainable development councils after the discussion.

Follow-up to VNRs and subsequent reporting

This session provided first-hand experiences and lessons learned from countries that recently completed VNRs, from Europe, Asia, Oceania, and Africa.

Changes and lessons on preparing a second VNR were reported to include: incorporating a civil society shadow report directly into the VNR, in addition to a multi-stakeholder approach to drafting the assessment of each SDG; and incorporating a peer review with two countries and an independent, external review.

One country representative from Finland said its governmental SDG engagement involves: an annual overall review cycle with open data and indicators; a "Citizen Panel" composed of 500 citizens that assess the state of sustainable development in the country, including on each individual SDG; and a mini pre-HLPF to gather information on the open indicators and to incorporate citizens' views. A four-year Government cycle includes an annual report on the state of sustainable development, which is reviewed by the National Audit Office and transmitted to Parliament for feedback and recommendation to the Government to develop a plan of action based on this information. An external review is held in year three of the four-year cycle and then feeds into its VNR.
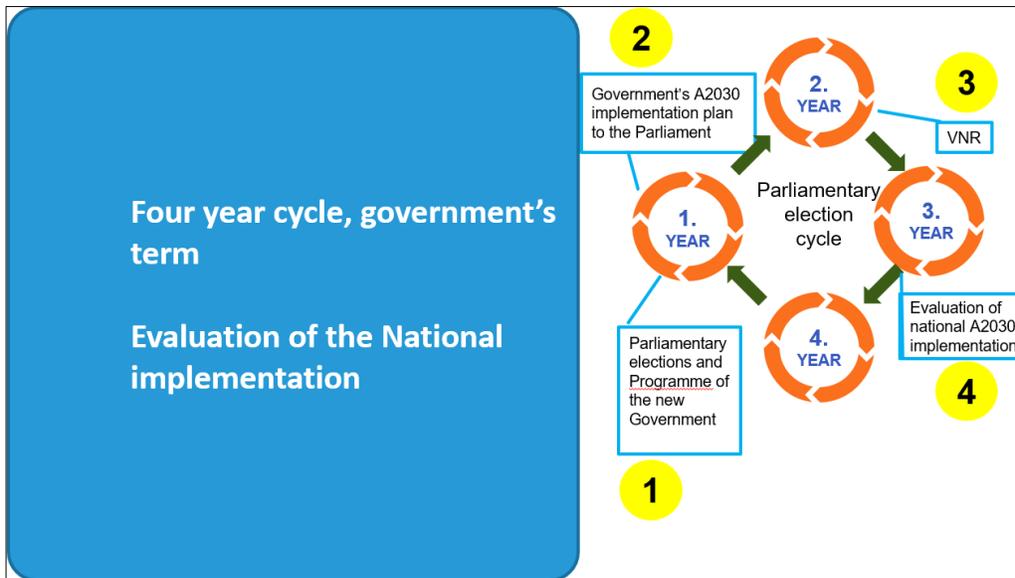
Image: Finland's quadrennial cycle of SDGs implementation.[2]

Other examples of actions and best practices related to VNRs included:

- preparing a handbook on the preparation of the VNR process and identifying good practices;
- including non-state actors in technical working groups to draft the VNR;
- collecting proposals from civil society for how to more formally involve them in the process;
- development of an SDG local governance index to boost accountability and transparency in regions;
- conducting cost analyses of local action plans;
- establishing a permanent mechanism to monitor and review SDG implementation that ensures continuation of multi-stakeholder dialogue and coordination on the implementation;
- creation of a digital platform for follow-up and review that facilitates collection of disaggregated data;
- spatially prioritizing SDG targets according to sub-national jurisdictions;
- aligning VNR reporting with other national processes, strategies and reporting obligations; and
- translating the VNR into Braille and local languages.

Private sector (data) contributions for SDG review and VNRs

SDG target 12.6 calls on governments to encourage companies to adopt sustainability practices and integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle. Participants heard that companies' financial performance positively correlates to incorporating ESG factors in decision-making, and ESG actions make companies more resilient and better prepared to face market disruptions. In addition, reporting on non-financial matters builds trust and demonstrates companies' contributions to broader societal goals.

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[2] A more complete version of this infographic appears in Finland's VNR (page 98): https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26265VNR_Report_Finland_2020.pdf

Business reporting on the SDGs has increased: in 2019, three quarters of companies surveyed by PricewaterhouseCoopers referred to the SDGs in their reports.

On the government side, most of the 47 VNRs presented in 2020 refer to the private sector, and 13 of these engaged local networks to incorporate business contributions in their reports.
The VNR reports presented in 2020 mentioned the role of the private sector most often in relation to SDGs 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), and 7 (affordable and clean energy).

The lack of standardization among corporate reports makes it hard to compare performance between companies and over time. Participants learned that the UN Global Compact and partners have promoted specific SDG indicators that businesses can use, and the UN Global Compact will update its Communication on Progress for member companies to better facilitate SDG reporting. In addition, the EU is pursuing regulation that could spark more corporate sustainability reporting. Europe has traditionally been a leader in corporate disclosure, but policy makers around the world are increasingly issuing guidance on how companies should report their sustainable development impacts.

Two case studies were presented. One focused on the experience of the Polish 17 Goals Campaign, in which Statistics Poland in cooperation with a private consulting agency has developed a tool to measure the impact of businesses according to 30 indicators. This monitoring framework focuses on six SDGs that businesses in Poland have the best chance to make a difference on: SDGs 3, 4, 5, 8, 9 and 12. An outstanding challenge reported for this campaign is to create a single indicator to measure a company's circularity.

The second case study involves the work of a telecommunications company, which is developing an SDG corporate tracker. The representative of the company said 180 companies are already participating in the corporate tracking.

The private sector's role in the VNRs
Key figures 2016-2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Nr. Countries presenting their VNR	22	43	47	47	47
Consulted the private sector for the VNR	85% - 19	93% - 40	94% - 44	82% - 39	87% - 41
Recognize the need for private sector investment	90% - 20	68% - 29	67% - 31	68% - 32	42% - 20
Refer to CSR and sustainability report	50% - 11	59% - 25	58% - 27	38% -18	45% - 21
Refer to public-private partnerships for the SDGs	/	/	/	/	54% - 23
Refer to the private sector contribution to the SDGs	/	/	/	/	79% - 37

Image: How countries include the private sector in their VNR reports, Source: GRI.

SDG monitoring at different levels: Local and national approaches

When it comes to SDG monitoring, one of the most common challenges is data availability. This session showcased examples of local level efforts to strengthen SDG monitoring at the municipal and district level and how international institutions can support such initiatives.

UNDP Articulation of Territorial Networks for Sustainable Human Development (ART) is using innovative tools and platforms to translate the 2030 Agenda to the local level in order to engage citizens in the decision-making process, ensuring that the real needs of the population are at the basis of these interventions. In this context, UNDP-ART and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) launched the "Inter-institutional Working Group for Local SDG Monitoring", which brings together a variety of actors to identify knowledge gaps that can influence the design of better-informed policies and reinforce the capacities of local and subnational governments on SDG monitoring. UNDP-ART also collaborated with the European Commission to produce the European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR), which provides examples of official and experimental indicators for local monitoring systems along with guidelines for producing VLRs.

The "GemeindeNavi Agenda 2030" project in Austria supports municipalities in linking their future planning with the SDGs. This self-assessment tool translated the 2030 Agenda into 69 questions that help municipalities to understand key priorities and to identify fields of action.

In Ghana, a "District Development Data Platform" was developed to address challenges related to the lack of timely disaggregated and harmonized data, with the risk of leaving people behind, a lack of human capacity of key stakeholders, especially at the district level, and ensuring internet connectivity. The Platform allows various departments to upload, standardize, and exchange data and information, which can in turn be used to make better informed policy and budgeting decisions. It is an open source platform with the potential of becoming a central hub for districts. This tool also enhances transparency and the data collected feeds into national processes.

How can universities contribute to SDG monitoring and VNRs?

Representatives from four universities discussed their SDG initiatives and offered lessons for other academic institutions.

In New Zealand, a network of eight universities has established an expert working group on the SDGs. Working closely with the government's ministry responsible for the VNRs since 2018, the expert group has contributed content to the VNR reports, reviewed content, and leveraged its networks of various stakeholders. It mobilized these networks to submit over 60 case studies from civil society, NGOs, and businesses. This expert group has also organized national, multi-stakeholder SDG summits. The summits are the primary way in which civil society and the private sector engage with the SDGs at the national level in this country. The biggest challenge is to keep people working between summits to ensure the gatherings produce action, not just talk.

A university in Iceland was asked by the government to evaluate the availability and quality of data in the country. This study revealed that the country currently lacks data on indicators that are not considered relevant for the country, but these data should be collected. This project revealed that the SDGs need to be

evaluated within each national context, and each country should determine what its own sustainable future looks like before implementing the SDGs nationally.

A technology institute in Mexico has aligned its teaching and research with the SDGs and created a high-level position of Vice President for Inclusion, Social Impact, and Sustainability. In a partnership with government, the institute is reviewing the government's national legislation and proposing ways to align it with the SDGs, and advising the country's senate commissions on how to align their work with the SDGs. The university has also evaluated its own sustainability impacts and conducted a baseline report on its social impact, finding that it is engaged in over 700 social impact initiatives.

In Brazil, a university initiative has adapted the national version of the 2030 Agenda to the local region, localizing the targets for all 62 municipalities of one state. For each target, the project produces a regular newsletter on progress, with analysis from experts and commenters. The state government and some of the municipalities provide support for the project.
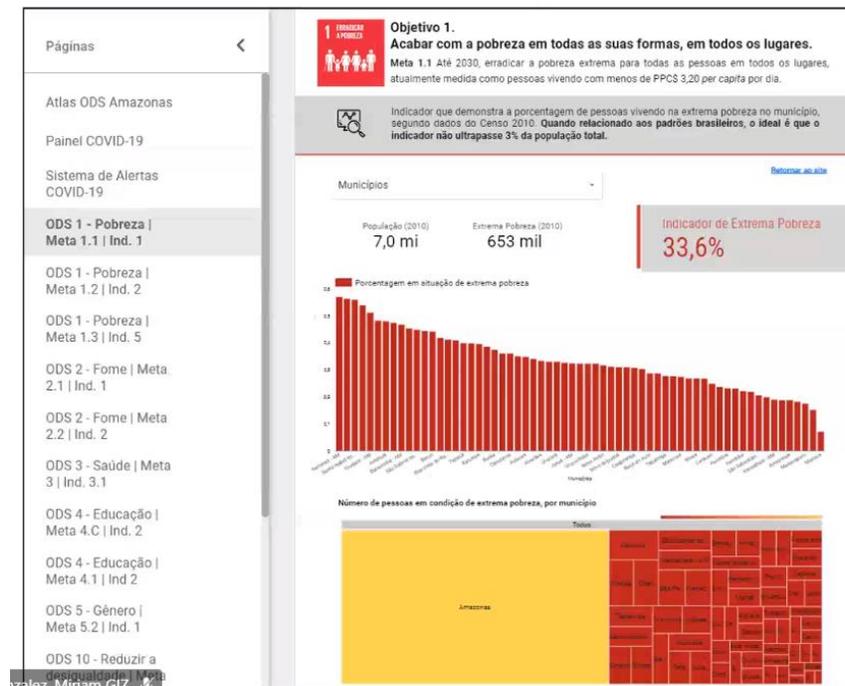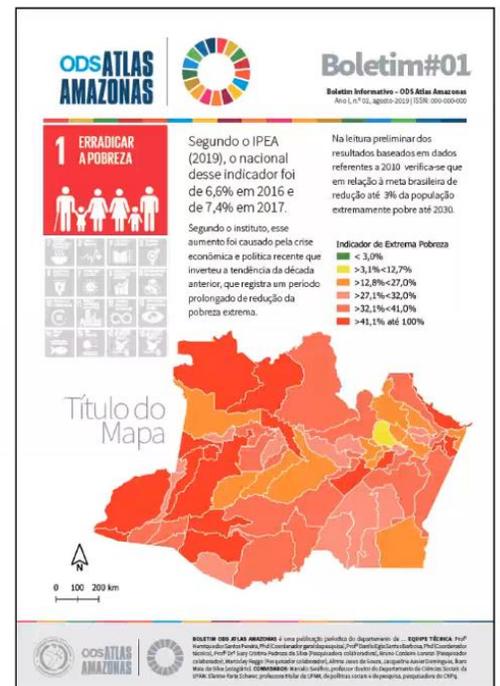

Image: Example of a visual update on SDG 1 as translated to a municipality and analyzed by the local university in Brazil.[3]

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[3] Source: Atlas ODS Amazonas › ODS 1 - Pobreza | Meta 1.1 | Ind. 1 (google.com)

Federal Ministry
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and Nuclear Safety

Federal Ministry
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Outlook: 2021 VNR processes – From robust to resilient review mechanisms?

The final session considered how the COVID-19 crisis could affect future follow-up and review processes, and ways countries can adapt.

Two speakers discussed the meaning of the concepts of "robustness" (strength) and "resilience" (flexibility and recovery). In the written chat for the meeting, one participant said that the 2030 Agenda uses the word "robust" to describe voluntary national reviews in order to ensure that the VNR process is systematic, thorough, and challenging, even if it is not mandatory.

One speaker said follow-up and review mechanisms should be like bamboo – firmly rooted but flexible so as not to snap in a storm. This characteristic was demonstrated at the 2020 HLPF, which made COVID-19 a deliberate part of the discussions and the UN establishing a "positive narrative around SDG-sensitive recovery" with its call to build back better. However, a threat remains: VNRs may suffer as governments prioritize recovery at all costs, leading to "cherry picking" of Goals 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), and 3 (good health and wellbeing) over the others and instead of an integrated approach to implementation.

Another expert asked if we are measuring transformation or business as usual. She said there should be a focus on identifying how pathways are being incentivized and cautioned against treating targets as sectoral responsibilities without asking how we are meeting them. She asked how the VNRs are used to understand the longer-term pathways that we need to find and adopt. Also, she proposed that longer term perspectives, such as through the 2050 strategies some countries are developing, could spark real transformation. In her view, policy coherence needs to be about making the policies relevant; called for a focus on areas where we are backsliding and backtracking, particularly with regard to human capacity, which can result in irreversible damage; and reminded participants no matter how bad the COVID-19 pandemic is, climate change is even worse. She recommended the SDGs and climate should be addressed as one agenda, with VNRs and the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for climate action treated as one and the same process.

Another participant observed transformations underway in several areas, including awareness of the "irreversibility of climate change" as well as biodiversity and deforestation, and awareness of the SDGs in the private sector. Additional suggestions for action included: use VNR processes to identify difficult tradeoffs and exchange good practices on navigating them and have governments focus on a small set of targets with transformational potential.

Closing statements highlighted the need to not lose sight of the long-term vision we have set, and to recognize and work to address the fact that some data will be missing due to the postponement of some national surveys.

Another speaker summarized the value of the VNRs, which have proven to be robust and resilient, as explained in the slide below:

Image: Key aspects of "resilience" and "robustness" of VNR process.

Participants looked to the upcoming intergovernmental review of the HLPF as an opportunity to make the reporting process even stronger, and to incorporate lessons learned from the use of digital platforms.

Image: VND2 participants shared their state of mind after participating in the final session.