

# Voluntary National Reviews: what have we learned?

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Madame chair, excellencies, honourable parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here at the *Parliamentarians Evaluation Forum EvalColombo2018*, gathering parliamentarians from over 70 countries, which seeks to share success stories of how evaluation has triggered change within national systems. The opportunity of sharing my views in this magnificent forum truly honours me.

Today I will present what we have learnt from Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). I will start by illustrating the main lessons in relation to the content of the VNRs carried out so far. Subsequently, I shall move on to presenting approaches to VNRs as evaluation tools, highlighting the vital role that parliaments play in their function of scrutiny over governments.

To begin with, it is imperative to mention the arrangements for the **implementation of 2030 Agenda**.

Due to the complexity of SDGs, implementation relies on a number of institutional arrangements, established to ensure coherence and coordination across sectors. Among these arrangements are inter-ministerial committees, commissions and offices, which reflect a "whole-of-government" approach. To this end, dedicated committees have been established in parliaments, recognizing their critical role in SDG implementation through their oversight and legislative function. At the same time, VNRs highlighted the importance of the adoption of the Agenda at the sub-national level, particularly in regional and municipal institutional arrangements.

Taking a step forward from a "whole-of-government" to a "whole-of-nation" approach, most VNRs referred to the aim to involve a broad range of stakeholders as key to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. To support this

process, in fact, many countries included coordination mechanisms into their institutional structures. These range from consultations for decision-making processes to the establishment of **multi-stakeholder partnerships** to move on to certain goals and targets. No one has the solutions alone. Partnerships are essential for SDGs, as they build on synergies among members of the civil society, academia and the private sector. They require, however, well-defined mechanisms and appropriate planning and financing. For this reason, the preparation of VNRs is increasingly adopting a **participatory approach**.

It is also important to mention how the involvement of different stakeholders in a robust institutional framework plays an important role in **integrating the 2030 Agenda into national development plans**. The SDGs will not be reached unless they are nationally owned. The principle of national ownership is paramount for the achievement of the SDGs. This harmonization process entails both mapping existing policies against each SDG-target and aligning state programmes with them. While the inclusion of SDGs in national strategies has been widely reported on, the integration of the Agenda into sectoral policies still has room for improvement. And, similarly, there is still room for further integrating the SDGs at sub-national level within regional and local development strategies.

Yet the implementation process of the 2030 Agenda requires the availability of adequate resources. VNRs report on different **means of implementation**. The availability of financial resources is a key element for implementation, for which concrete cost analyses are required. Countries reported on broadening their tax base and improving the investment environment as part of a resource mobilization strategy. At the same time, implementation does not only depend on funding, but rather, it relies on different forms of cooperation, partnerships, trade, technology and innovation. We all agree that international cooperation plays an important role in this context. Global economic integration under an open, rule-based multilateral trade system has raised living standards, helped lift productivity, and spread innovation throughout the world. International cooperation can continue doing this by bringing the best international expertise and by supporting South-South and triangular cooperation. Finally, given the connections between thematic areas and the potential of impact on a global scale, the reviews remarked a strong need for **policy coherence**.

We observe that countries have built the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on their existing development strategies, and therefore, the SDGs have been adapted to a certain degree to national needs in accordance with the priorities identified. In this regard, it is interesting to note how SDGs were reported in VNRs.

In 2017, two years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, VNRs started to report implementation efforts related to specific **goals**. SDG-coverage within the reviews varies: it may include all 17 goals, a combination chosen by a specific country or the goals under review at the 2018 High-Level Political Forum that took place in New York , namely, 6 (clean water and sanitation), 7 (affordable and clean energy), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), 12 (responsible consumption and production), 15 (life on land) and 17 (partnerships to achieve the goals).

In particular, peace, quality education, justice, strong institutions, and gender equality were regarded as critical for the achievement of the other goals. And, in addition, VNRs reported on the potential of innovative solutions and smart energy as the basis of modern economies.

As we are aware of, along with the set of 17 SDGs, the 2030 Agenda presents specific core principles. **The principle of leaving no one behind** appears to be more frequently addressed by VNRs. Several countries, in fact, included it under the description of their development strategies or specific goals, focusing both on the identification of the most vulnerable and the relative policy measures to leave no one behind. The main measures adopted include specific interventions targeting the most vulnerable groups, which mostly include women, followed by persons with disabilities, children and youth. VNRs made specific reference to gender equality and social inclusion as key elements of resilient societies. While indigenous groups and ethnic minorities are often considered particularly vulnerable, we note that they have not received particular attention in VNRs. This reminds us, and is corroborated by IFAD's experience, that reaching the furthest behind still represents a big challenge.

Transforming the rural sector is essential to achieve the SDGs. The report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, released last week, presented a disturbing message— after several years of decline, hunger is now

on the rise. **None should go to bed hungry.** The reasons for this rise are largely due to the proliferation of violent conflict, inequality, and climate-change related shocks. In all regions, rates of extreme poverty and food insecurity are higher in rural areas.

Another central aspect to the 2030 Agenda is the **principle of sustainable consumption and production.** We only have one planet, and we need to protect it from degradation, through sustainable consumption and production, by managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations. This principle is key to an effective transformation of development pathways that puts sustainability at the centre of the development agenda. Unfortunately it received only a few mentions, mainly from developed countries. This is sad, as it shows how challenging it is to move towards a more responsible development pattern, one that requires a **change** in mind-sets and in hearts and implies a moral obligation to future generations.

So, after an analysis of lessons learned, let us now take a look at **Voluntary National Reviews as evaluation tools.**

You will agree that VNRs are required to be rigorous, credible and based on evidence. At the same time, as countries are advancing in the implementation of the SDGs, VNRs are expected to progressively move from a descriptive to a more analytical approach producing deeper and more informed policy lessons. To this end, and to unleash their full potential as means to accelerate implementation, VNRs should shift from a mere monitoring perspective to an evaluation perspective.

This would imply analysing the underlying factors behind countries' performance in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Beyond a more rigorous approach to data collection and analysis, **strengthening the role of Voluntary National Reviews as evaluation tools** would require the integration of well-consolidated evaluation norms into VNR guidelines. For instance, VNRs could refer to the UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation, such as impartiality, credibility and transparency. In particular, parliaments, as a third party, play a crucial role in ensuring that VNRs, as government-led reviews, are conducted rigorously and with impartiality.

VNRs should dedicate more space to an analysis of technical, political and financial **trade-offs** among SDGs, focusing on how countries practically respond to these challenges. It would be useful if countries addressed more in detail the challenge of balancing a holistic approach, which includes the interconnected dimensions of Sustainable Development, namely the economic, social, political and environmental dimensions with the necessary prioritization of SDGs due to financial constraints.

In an international context characterized by moderate economic growth, escalating trade tensions and political uncertainty, a more robust analysis of trade-offs and prioritization in VNRs would enhance their learning function and their capacity to accelerate implementation.

Let me conclude by pointing out that while VNRs are not a direct accountability mechanism among countries and require a high degree of flexibility to adapt to specific situations, they need to increase their **comparability**. This would facilitate sharing lessons learnt and good practices. The development of more robust methodologies for analysis and reporting can therefore serve to enhance the quality of future VNRs. I would like to highlight that comparability and accountability go hand-in-hand, and that, in this context, parliaments play an essential role in keeping governments accountable for the benefit of the people they represent.

To sum up, I would like to acknowledge yet again the importance of parliamentarians with their workforce of democratically elected representatives and their unique role in overseeing the work of governments, ensuring that VNRs are impartial, credible and useful as they inform decision-making towards achieving their development goals.

This is the right moment to recommit to the transformative vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and truly evaluate where we stand, address the shortcomings and move wholeheartedly to achieve the goals for a peaceful, prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future for all.

I thank you for your attention.