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Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific: voluntary national reviews

Voluntary national reviews and development planning, evidence-based policies and actions to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The aim of the present document is to highlight the impact of voluntary national reviews on national development planning, policymaking and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Voluntary national reviews are the cornerstone of the national follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Ensuring that the reviews are integrated into policymaking and are a central part of the national policy cycle is pivotal in accelerating the implementation of the Goals. The present document will therefore serve to explore the critical enablers that have aided the mainstreaming of voluntary national reviews into national policy and planning processes and supported the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the Asia-Pacific region. To facilitate peer learning at the Ninth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, the document also includes an outline of the changes that the reviews have brought about and practical examples of the steps that member States have taken to integrate the reviews into their national strategies. It also contains highlighted follow-up actions taken by member States after the presentation of their reviews at the high-level political forum on sustainable development to promote evidence-based policymaking. Lastly, the document serves to outline key areas that could be strengthened to support the integration of voluntary national reviews into national policy and planning processes.

The Forum may wish to provide guidance on ways to further strengthen the use of voluntary national reviews in development planning.
I. Introduction

1. Integrating voluntary national reviews into national policy and planning processes is critical to the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Ensuring that voluntary national reviews are mainstreamed into policymaking and are a central part of the national policy cycle is pivotal in accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. In the seventh year of the 2030 Agenda, implementation is increasingly at the forefront of national efforts. Voluntary national reviews create a unique and regular space for taking stock, analysing evidence, promoting public dialogue and taking concrete action to align the national policies and plans with the Goals. It is vital to understand the impact of the reviews on national policies and planning in order to ensure that all efforts are geared towards fast-tracking the achievement of the Goals.

2. The present document serves to explore the enablers that have aided the mainstreaming of voluntary national reviews into development policy and planning processes in the region. It includes an outline of the impacts the reviews are having on national planning and evidence-based policymaking and examples of the steps that member States have taken to integrate the reviews into policy and planning cycles. The findings contained in the present document are based upon a series of interviews with government officials and United Nations offices in the Asia-Pacific region, existing voluntary national review reports and additional material.1

3. Voluntary national reviews can be a tool for national integration processes and serve to encourage a coordinated cross-sectoral approach to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the extent to which the voluntary national review report, and the accompanying process, leads to increased utilization of evidence in policymaking and impacts the policy environment in which the Goals are pursued depends upon several factors, including how member States have aligned their national planning with the Goals and the nature of the review process and institutional structures. The factors that have contributed to the integration of the reviews into policymaking are explored in the present document, which also contains recommendations on how member States can strengthen the impact of their reviews.

II. Review of progress and impacts of integrating voluntary national reviews into national development and planning processes in the region

4. The 2030 Agenda has increased the legitimacy of integrated approaches to sustainable development. Member States in Asia and the Pacific have adopted a variety of activities to mainstream their voluntary national reviews into national and local development and planning processes. While member States are reflecting the Sustainable Development Goals in their national priorities, the extent to which the reviews are used to strengthen policy coherence, improve implementation and increase the utilization of evidence in

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1 Lauchlan T. Munro, draft report and findings on the integration of Sustainable Development Goals into national development plans and strategies, as presented to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, 2021; and Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), “Putting the voluntary national review into action: developing practical next steps and planning the post-VNR period”, Policy Brief (Bangkok, 2021).
policymaking varies. With each additional reporting cycle, the integration of voluntary national reviews and the localization of the Goals in national policy cycles increase. The present section contains practical examples of steps that member States have taken to integrate reviews into policymaking processes and localize the Goals. Follow-up actions taken by member States to promote evidence-based policymaking after their voluntary national review presentations are also outlined, with a view to helping other member States to identify practical next steps to include in their forthcoming reviews to strengthen the usefulness and impact of the voluntary national review process.

5. Voluntary national reviews have varied impacts on national planning and evidence-based policymaking. While it can be hard to assess and attribute policy impacts directly to the voluntary national review process, some of the changes that have been observed can be organized into the following categories: integration of the Sustainable Development Goals into national and local development plans; more robust and participatory institutional mechanisms for the monitoring process of the Goals; and the utilization of evidence in policymaking. Voluntary national reviews are emerging as a tool for national integration processes that promote a coordinated and coherent approach to the implementation of the Goals.

A. Integration of the Sustainable Development Goals into national and local development plans

6. Member States are continuing to mainstream the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goal targets and indicators into their national development plans. As more member States submit their second, third and subsequent voluntary national reviews, greater progress is achieved in adopting and revising national strategies that reflect the integrated approach to the Goals. According to the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, reference is made to the Goals in 81 per cent of national development plans, but reference is made to the targets in only 69 per cent of plans and to the indicators in only 60 per cent of plans. Further integration of the Goals into national development plans is therefore needed, in particular at the indicator level. However, it is also clear that member States are trying to harness the benefits of sustainable development approaches for more coherent and effective policymaking.

7. In Malaysia, the voluntary national review has been utilized as a tool for promoting a coordinated local and national approach to the Sustainable Development Goals. The Government of Malaysia created a national Sustainable Development Goals council to serve as the governance structure for monitoring, evaluation and reporting, before the production of the review. The council was crucial in coordinating and supporting the implementation of the country’s first voluntary national review. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the Government has integrated the Goals into its five-year national development plans and the national planning framework. It has aimed to ensure that each subsequent national development plan and its strategies, action plans and targeted outcomes are aligned with the indicators of the Goals. In each review reporting period, the Government has made a commitment to utilizing the review as a framework for monitoring progress towards the Goals. Since

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2 Lauchlan T. Munro, draft report and findings.
3 Ibid.
the country’s first voluntary national review, in 2017, significant strides have been made in implementing the national road map for the Goals and mainstreaming the Goals into national plans. The 2017 voluntary national review was an important impetus to align strategies and actions with the Goals. The Twelfth Malaysia Plan builds on the analysis from the first review. The time period of the second review, conducted in 2021, was aligned with the Twelfth Plan and its Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, and the review included reporting on the implementation of the action plan for the Goals.

8. The voluntary national review has also been a catalyst for the local and national integration of the Sustainable Development Goals in Malaysia. In order to support the localization and implementation of the Goals, the Government initiated several activities, including mainstreaming the Goals into local plans and conducting a voluntary local review. Institutional structures were established to facilitate, coordinate and monitor localization. Furthermore, the efforts of national mechanisms were replicated at the local level through the creation of a subnational team to coordinate and support the local implementation of the Goals. To ensure that the localization agenda was tracked and supported at the national level, a specific chapter in the 2021 voluntary national review was dedicated to the matter.

9. In Indonesia, since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the medium-term national development plans, Sustainable Development Goals road map and action plan included targets aligned with the Goals. With each voluntary national review, the Government has made greater progress in localizing targets and indicators and enhancing integration with national planning processes. The production of a third review, in 2021, led to strengthened government-wide coordination to monitor and support the implementation of the national and local development plans and the Goals. For example, a subnational team was created to facilitate, coordinate and monitor local implementation and to guide the formulation of local development plans and the localization of sustainable development. This institutional dimension is key to facilitating the linkage (i.e. integration) between the voluntary national review reports and national planning processes.

10. The Government also instituted close monitoring of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals through its national and subnational action plans (rencana aksi nasional and rencana aksi daerah), which demonstrate local ownership of the Goals and a commitment to monitoring implementation. As a result of the third voluntary national review, more national action plans were expected to be developed with the involvement of officials from district/city governments and non-government actors. Thus, the review is leading to more engagement in subnational action plans and local planning process. Soon all provinces will have their own action plans to guide the subnational implementation of the Goals.

11. In Bhutan, the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals and the voluntary national review priorities into the national development framework and five-year plans has been relatively smooth since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, owing to the close alignment of the Goals with the country’s pursuit of gross national happiness. A separate institution to drive the implementation of the Goals was not necessary; Bhutan has its own gross national happiness index which aligns closely with the Goals. In addition, a dashboard to enhance well-being for all supports the integration of the voluntary national review into planning processes, enabling real-time access to data on gross national happiness and on progress towards the Goals, which can feed into five-year plans. The translation of the five-year plans at the national and subnational levels into annual development plans and budgets provides a
good opportunity to integrate the Goals and voluntary national review recommendations. Nevertheless, according to the 2021 voluntary national review report, a detailed understanding and capacity to align sector and government plans and programmes to the targets and indicators of the Goals remains limited. The limitation is particularly significant at the subnational level. Recognizing the challenges at the local level, the Government of Bhutan is working to enhance local frameworks for monitoring and evaluation, which will help to develop clearer targets to improve implementation. The example of Bhutan highlights that even when national policies and planning are closely aligned with the Goals, sector plans – especially at the local level – must be monitored to ensure implementation.

12. The extent to which the voluntary national review process has led to changes in the policy and planning process is also determined by whether the country is in its first, second, third or even fourth review cycle. Many member States take time to develop the institutional structure, coordination processes and stakeholder engagement mechanisms that underpin the reviews and influence their role. However, even the first review can play a central role in shaping the policy environment, strengthening institutions and laying the groundwork for the mainstreaming of the Sustainable Development Goals into policies and plans.

B. Improved institutional mechanisms for the coordination, monitoring and evaluation of the Sustainable Development Goals

13. Monitoring and evaluation systems and coordination mechanisms for the Sustainable Development Goals are the foundation for the success and coherence of their implementation. The voluntary national review process can highlight the importance of these systems and mechanisms and identify areas for improvement. The review of data and evidence as part of the overall process plays an important role in ensuring that monitoring and evaluation systems feed back into policy adjustment. Voluntary national reviews are a critical part of the overarching follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. They can be used to identify problems, prioritize actions and allocate resources. The absence of strong monitoring and evaluation can lead to fragmented implementation of national plans and thereby reduce the uptake of the voluntary national review results in the policymaking process. In that regard, many member States are now working to align the monitoring and evaluation process with the Goal targets and indicators and reviews of national plans. In addition, monitoring and evaluation systems that are integrated with robust coordination mechanisms for the Goals are vital in underpinning the voluntary national review process.

14. In Georgia, the involvement of the state audit office in the voluntary national review played a central role in improving institutional mechanisms for the coordination and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals. The office produced a report on national preparedness for the implementation of the Goals, in advance of the country’s review, in which it made several recommendations to implement a whole-of-society approach to the coordination and monitoring of the Goals. It recommended greater involvement of stakeholders in the national Sustainable Development Goals council, improved clarification of responsibilities of the council’s thematic working groups, and enhanced cross-sectoral participation in the council. As a result of the recommendations, the voluntary national review process triggered changes in the monitoring and evaluation role of the council and designated civil society organizations as co-chairs of the thematic working groups. The institutional engagement of civil society organizations and other key
stakeholders in monitoring the implementation of the voluntary national review and progress towards the Goals was thus cemented. In recognition of the fact that the Goals were the responsibility of all stakeholders, the review process included capacity-building for civil servants and non-governmental organizations to design and participate in the planning processes, creating a strong institutional foundation for the future.

15. In Timor-Leste, the voluntary national review motivated the Government to accelerate the alignment of its programmes with its strategic development plan and the Sustainable Development Goals and to begin the process of nationalizing the indicators for the Goals. The review process provided important benefits, including helping to clarify the country’s reform programme priorities and encouraging the Government to achieve greater focus in its priorities for annual planning and budgeting. These benefits highlight the important role of voluntary national review reporting as a catalyst for change in national planning processes. The review emphasized the importance of strengthening process monitoring, improving evaluation processes and moving to medium-term planning, budgeting, costing and financing of national development goals. The national plan and the Goals are now presented and reviewed together as part of the country’s annual budget planning, which determines budget priorities and ceilings for the year with the participation of key stakeholders. This approach plays a vital role in integrating the planning and budgeting process. The next step will be for the Government to integrate the Goals into its monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress with regard to their achievement and the national plan. One key enabler that facilitated the integration of the voluntary national review into national planning was a dedicated unit for planning, monitoring and evaluation within the office of the Prime Minister. The unit helped to implement recommendations from the review and subsequent programme evaluations and to ensure that data are used in policymaking for the country’s key priorities.

C. Utilization of evidence in policymaking

16. Voluntary national reviews can create a unique opportunity to examine evidence and take stock of progress on sustainable development. It is important to understand the factors that promote the incorporation of the evidence into policymaking. Research on the utilization of evidence in policymaking has illustrated that the more numerous the parts and levels of government involved in analysing data, contributing to the report and discussing future priorities, the more likely it is that policy recommendations will be in line with government thinking and mindful of the realities of policymaking, and the greater the uptake, therefore, of the review evidence in the policy and planning processes. The institutional structure for the voluntary national reviews and the participatory process that facilitates buy-in from various parts and levels of government and a wider set of stakeholders is therefore important in enhancing the use of the evidence and promoting the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals into policymaking priorities.

17. In Mongolia, the first voluntary national review built on the strong institutional framework created by the country’s early adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. While the Government had already created a strong legislative and institutional framework for the Goals prior to the review, the creation of a dedicated interministerial working group gave the review the impetus to accelerate Goal localization. One tangible example of how the

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review influenced the use of evidence relates to the issue of pollution: the inclusion of a specific chapter on air pollution in the report put a spotlight on pollution as an issue that is relevant to multiple Goals. After the presentation of the voluntary national review at the high-level political forum on sustainable development, the issue of air pollution became a key policy issue. The Prime Minister subsequently banned raw coal for heating and promoted the use of household bricks instead. This led to a 50 per cent reduction in air pollution and the creation of new targets for pollution reduction. The review process identified the key bottlenecks resulting from weak policy coordination and thus led to a change in how evidence on the Goals and pollution was utilized to strengthen policy coherence and influence the decision-making process. The example of Mongolia also demonstrates how the review process can be utilized to conduct in-depth analysis of the challenges affecting the implementation of the Goals.

18. The manner in which data are collected, analysed and used, and the role of the national statistical offices in monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals and the voluntary national review process, are important for generating relevant and timely evidence for policymaking. To integrate the Goals into national development plans down to the indicator level, more data need to be collected at that level, and improvements in data availability and quality are required. The voluntary national review process is leading countries to strengthen national statistical systems to fill indicator gaps and build the capacity of national statistical offices. For example, after assessing its national statistical capacity as part of the voluntary national review, the national statistical office of Mongolia developed a road map to implement a monitoring and evaluation system for the Goals. Globally, many national statistical offices are now playing an important role in the coordination and compilation of data for the review across ministries. Furthermore, in 2021, more than half the voluntary national review reports included statistical annexes. Many member States have modified the global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to increase its relevance to their national context and to facilitate greater ease in monitoring progress, which has led to greater utilization of data in the policy cycle.

19. In Azerbaijan, a new data portal has been created to support the collection and analysis of data on the Sustainable Development Goals and promote the utilization of evidence in policymaking. The portal includes an interactive dashboard which aggregates data on the Goals from several government institutions. The platform also provides data visualization and analysis of progress towards the targets and indicators of the Goals.

III. Enabling the mainstreaming of voluntary national reviews into development planning and national policy processes

20. As more member States present their second, third and fourth voluntary national reviews, the types of results or changes that reviews bring about are becoming clearer. As indicated above, member States have mainstreamed the Sustainable Development Goals and integrated their voluntary national review results into policy processes in a variety of ways, many of which have been shaped by the number of reviews a given country has participated in. The enabling factors that have aided these changes have also become more apparent. The factors that appear to have facilitated the mainstreaming of reviews into

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development planning and national policy processes are outlined in the present section. There are important lessons to be learned about what member States can do, whether between reporting periods or leading up to a review, to increase the impact of the review process. The extent to which the Goals have been integrated into national policy and planning processes is also shaped by the factors outlined below.

A. Pre-existing localization or ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals

21. The impacts of voluntary national reviews on national and local planning processes seem to have increased where there was an existing commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and alignment of national plans and indicators with the Goals prior to the review. The extent to which the Goals were already part of the national development plan shaped the scope of the review and its impact on policy and planning processes. Ownership of the Goals and political consensus on the actions required to improve sustainable development create an enabling environment for the voluntary national review process. Several member States, such as Mongolia and Sri Lanka, took the opportunity presented by the 2030 Agenda to develop new legislation or institutional structures to monitor progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. In those cases, the first voluntary national review was conducted based on an institutional commitment to the Goals. This existing infrastructure for the Goals created a unique foundation upon which the review could build. Following its first review, the Government of Mongolia further strengthened its policy frameworks, localized the Goals and created a new institutional environment (i.e. a new ministry of development policy and economic development). National stakeholders were then able to build upon the review, engaging in substantive discussions on policy issues and making evidence-based decisions which perhaps would not have been possible without the voluntary national review process.

22. For other countries in the region, the first voluntary national review created a platform for integrating the Sustainable Development Goals into national planning prior to the second review. For example, in Samoa, the first review process provided a space to open a dialogue on how the Goals could be mainstreamed into the national plan. The second review then served as a springboard to deepen the dialogue, and the review results subsequently had a better chance of being integrated into policies and plans. As the policy environment was also more receptive to the Goals, and the work to align policies, plans and indicators with the Goals had already begun, there was greater scope to act upon the review. The path that the review had to navigate was more straightforward when inroads had already been made on the localization of the Goals.

23. The second voluntary national reviews generally appear to catalyse the accelerated mainstreaming of the Sustainable Development Goals into national planning. While pre-existing commitments and the mainstreaming of the Goals into policy processes have helped to increase the impact of the reviews, they are not the only integral factors. For countries with no substantial integration of the Goals prior to the review, other important factors have come into play to affect the impact of the review on policymaking. They are addressed in the following subsection.
B. Addressing interlinkages and trade-offs between the Sustainable Development Goals

24. While most Member States reflect the Sustainable Development Goals in their national priorities, only some consider synergies and trade-offs between them.\(^7\) Many are recognizing interlinkages in their voluntary national reviews and national plans, but few analyse them in detail to promote policy coherence and support implementation. However, understanding and identifying interlinkages between the Goals is a prerequisite for coherent implementation.\(^8\) Furthermore, institutional structures for the monitoring of the Goals, which are designed to address interlinkages through coordination and collaboration, also play an important role. Developing such structures can help to ensure that analysis of trade-offs is part of the national planning process.

25. If voluntary national reviews are to play an important role in policymaking, it is crucial that they analyse and respond to potential trade-offs and synergies between the Sustainable Development Goals to ensure that policy reforms are coherent, workable and evidence-based. Such analysis can include identifying complex cross-sectoral issues (such as migration, economic empowerment of young mothers, stunting and child well-being) as consultation topics, feedback priorities or the focus of technical working groups. It is also necessary that attempts be made to overcome sectoral boundaries within technical working groups utilized as part of the consultation process for reviews. Developing a storyline for the review and then including cross-sectoral thematic chapters that address issues covering more than one Goal is a practical way to ensure that synergies and trade-offs are analysed in the review. It also can involve ensuring that the policy conclusions and next steps included in the report address the trade-offs and outline the cross-sectoral policy adjustments and budget allocations required to promote policy coherence across the Goals.

26. In Fiji, as the Sustainable Development Goals were integrated into sectoral strategic plans and indicators were mainstreamed into national development targets, one of the most important aspects to aid the implementation of the voluntary national review was the focus on intersectoral linkages. Addressing interlinkages and trade-offs between the Goals is integral to supporting the coherent implementation of policies and ensuring that the review has the greatest possible impact. Economic development, climate change adaptation and mitigation, disaster risk reduction and environmental protection were identified as interwoven issues in the review, emphasizing that the relationships and dependencies between the issues must be recognized and addressed in a holistic way to manage any existing trade-offs. In the post-review period, institutional structures related to the Goals must be tweaked and strengthened so that they address interlinkages through their coordination efforts. Continual iterations of national development plans and strategic sectoral plans must also continue to address the interlinkages.

27. To ensure that after the voluntary national review, the institutional structures related to the Sustainable Development Goals promote policy integration and address trade-offs, the structures used for the review process must be adjusted to include ministries/entities and organizations that span multiple sectors. Attempts must also be made to overcome sectoral boundaries

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\(^8\) Ibid.
within technical working groups that may have been utilized as part of the consultation process for the review, ensuring that they address the implementation of the Goals across sectors and tackle cross-cutting issues. The establishment of cross-sectoral institutional mechanisms can help to boost interest within government to ensure that the post-review period continues to address the integrated nature of the Goals and mobilize all parts of government to that end.

28. The national development targets and key performance indicators of Fiji were also clearly aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and targets that were localized in the national development plan. This alignment has ensured that Goal implementation is carried out through national plans and budgetary mechanisms. The 2019 voluntary national review, conducted after the 5-year and 20-year National Development Plan was formulated in 2017, created space to review progress on the development plan. The Ministry of Economy, which is responsible for national development planning, was the lead agency in charge of the review and a task force on the Goals. Making the same ministry responsible for the implementation of the Goals and national planning is vital to ensure coherent coordination and monitoring.

C. Effective institutional mechanisms and government coordination

29. An effective institutional structure for planning is vital to the coordination and implementation of the voluntary national review recommendations and their integration into national plans. A robust institutional set-up is now considered a primary enabler and determinant of sustainable development outcomes.9 While the features of strong institutional arrangements can differ between countries, it is important that the institution leading the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals and the review process have a strong mandate with clearly defined responsibilities for implementation, monitoring and reporting. Effective structures for the monitoring and implementation of the Goals actively involve and coordinate among all parts of government with responsibilities for budgeting, planning and policymaking, including cross-sectoral entities and oversight bodies, and feature strong participation and coordination from the finance ministry. Structures that establish multiple institutional entry points for stakeholders to get involved in the follow-up to the review process can act as a catalyst for the implementation of the Goals, because institutional mechanisms that engage across government and include multi-stakeholder consultative structures can create a platform for the reviews to generate dialogue with the whole of society and government on how to solve policy problems and develop workable and evidence-based strategies that can sustain implementation.10

30. An institutional arrangement that promotes coherence and coordinates key parts of government is essential if the linkages between the voluntary national reviews and national planning and budgetary processes are to be improved. Such an arrangement is important in ensuring that the ministries coordinating the review and the ministries that prepare and monitor the national development plans (if different) are communicating, coordinating and reviewing evidence together. The integration of review evidence and recommendations into policy processes requires collaboration among sector ministries and finance ministries and analysis of trade-offs and synergies. The

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10 ESCAP, “Putting the voluntary national review into action”.

coordination and active participation of various government ministries and structures at the national and subnational levels in the planning and budgeting process is therefore integral to a stronger implementation capacity and ability to deliver recommendations.

31. While some member States have used pre-existing mechanisms and others have created new structures, mechanisms that are explicitly designed for the coordination of multiple institutions and cross-sectoral work have a better chance of promoting coherence and effective policymaking for the Sustainable Development Goals. Continuing to strengthen institutional arrangements that foster policy and institutional integration and promote coordinated responses to the Goals is an effective way for member States to increase the impact of the voluntary national review on policymaking.

32. Horizontal accountability and oversight bodies, such as parliaments and supreme audit institutions, are also a key part of the institutional framework that can assess preparedness for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and monitor progress and budgets. These institutions can play an important oversight role in the voluntary national review process by evaluating progress and recommending corrective actions, thereby strengthening accountability for the implementation of the Goals. Oversight institutions should therefore be encouraged to be part of the review process and the broader national institutional framework for monitoring the implementation of the Goals. As highlighted in a previous section, the recommendations of the state audit office of Georgia led to notable improvements in their Sustainable Development Goals council and had a practical impact on the institutional framework for the Goals and on the follow-up to the review process. In Indonesia, the review process was assessed by the national audit board and presented to the parliament. The audit board assessed whether the Government had conducted the 2021 review in line with its earlier reviews and the country’s progress towards the Goals. It played an integral role not only in enhancing the accountability of the Government with regard to the third voluntary national review but also in strengthening the institutional architecture for the Goals in the longer term.

33. In Malaysia, an all-party parliamentary group on the Sustainable Development Goals has been an integral part of the voluntary national review institutional framework and promoting accountability for the Goals. Its secretariat is a member of the steering and technical committees of the voluntary national review. It works on the review process with other stakeholders and the economic planning unit of the Government. It also plays a key oversight role in monitoring policy formulation and budget allocations for the Goals by asking parliamentary questions to cabinet members in relation to the achievement of the Goals. The all-parliamentary group has also played an increasingly significant role in helping to localize the Goals.

D. Highly participatory voluntary national review processes and public participation processes

34. The extent to which the voluntary national review process is highly participatory can affect its relevance and quality, which in turn affects its usefulness and impact on policymaking. The broad-based and meaningful involvement of stakeholders in the process can yield several benefits, including a greater sense of ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals and new perspectives and evidence on their implementation, as well as better adaptation of the review recommendations to the national context. However, participatory planning processes do not automatically lead to greater consensus on the
direction development should take; the organization and framing of participation matters for the integration of the Goals and voluntary national review evidence into policymaking. If participation is based on the deep involvement of various parts of government and society, is framed as an integral part of the evidence-gathering on the implementation of the Goals and is a component of the process of developing policy recommendations, it is more likely to lead to greater ownership of the Goals and their greater integration into policymaking. Furthermore, if stakeholders can engage through an institutional mechanism, Sustainable Development Goals council or advisory body, the results of the review tend to be stronger. Indeed, as a result of stakeholder engagement in the process, sustainable development problems can be defined more broadly, thereby creating more policy space for the development of workable solutions.

35. India underwent a paradigm shift in its second voluntary national review, resulting in the adoption of a whole-of-society approach and generating institutional ownership at the national and subnational levels through the country’s model for the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals. The process involved capacity-building, technical outreach and consultations at the State level to discuss progress on the Goals and develop action plans for key reforms. Civil society, communities, private sector organizations and subnational and local governments were involved in the implementation and evaluation of the Goals, recognizing that they play a major role in ensuring the success of the 2030 Agenda. The framing of stakeholder and subnational participation in the review process highlights the country’s strong ownership of the Goals and better positions the review for integration into the policy process. Recognizing that the north-eastern region of India has historically lagged in development terms, a three-day conclave involving central and subnational governments and many stakeholders was held to examine subregional district performance on the Goals. This step demonstrates that a more locally relevant and participatory voluntary national review process can provide greater opportunities for consensus and for the integration of review evidence into national and local planning processes. For the next voluntary national review, the Government envisages building on its whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach by inviting civil society organizations and community organizations to help to prepare and draft parts of the review report.

36. The impact of a participatory voluntary national review process on policymaking will also be shaped by the level of existing public participation in national planning processes and the institutional mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. If there are only isolated consultation events for the review process, and such events are not linked to or followed up by ongoing policy dialogues or feedback mechanisms on Goal implementation, it is harder to track and ensure consensus on the recommendations and follow-up actions of the review. The more numerous the parts of government and non-government stakeholders involved in the voluntary national review process, institutional mechanisms for the Goals and discussions on the policy adjustments needed to accelerate implementation, the greater the chance of consensus on which solutions to pursue.

37. In Sri Lanka, a participatory approach to the voluntary national review process was adopted starting with the first review, in 2018. This approach stemmed from a strong legislative and institutional framework in the form of the 2017 Sustainable Development Act. The review process and the post-

Lauchlan T. Munro, draft report and findings.
review period were designed to be collaborative and inclusive, as creating multi-stakeholder ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals was viewed as an essential condition for their achievement. Through the development of a detailed stakeholder engagement plan, thematic and multi-stakeholder consultation, review and validation workshops were held at the national and subnational levels. The workshops also involved Parliament and identified institutional mechanisms at the subnational level to monitor the implementation of the Goals in the post-review period. The 2018 review gave rise to clear commitments related to the institutional architecture for monitoring the Goals and the creation of a sustainable development council as the national coordinating body for the Goals. The council is now a robust and empowered institution that is leading Goal-related policymaking, planning, financing and partnerships. The Government is building on this strong institutional framework and on good practice from the review in preparing its second review, to be presented in 2022.

38. As member States conduct second, third and subsequent reviews, and their institutions for the coordination of the Sustainable Development Goals mature, the participation of civil society and other actors (such as supreme audit institutions, the private sector and academia) in the review process is increasing. Participatory engagement at all stages of the process is therefore favourable to improving ownership of review findings and recommendations. However, the impact of the review on the policymaking environment will ultimately depend on the nature of a country’s institutional structure and how it relates to ongoing planning processes. The focus for member States could be on strengthening participation in the review process and institutional mechanisms to improve the quality and relevance of national development plans. Participatory review processes have the potential to effect change in how the public is consulted in national planning and the nature of decision-making processes in the post-review period. They can also affect the centrality of the Goals in national planning processes.

E. Inclusion of targeted recommendations and concrete actions in the voluntary national review

39. One of the most practical ways to increase the impact of the voluntary national review on the policy process is for member States to include in the report practical next steps and clear follow-up actions that can be implemented after the high-level political forum on sustainable development. The final chapter of the review report, on next steps and conclusions, can be an important tool in helping to sustain the momentum gained during the review process and ensure follow-up to the commitments outlined in the report. Although many reporting Member States outlined next steps or recommendations in their first voluntary national reviews, few defined specific follow-up actions, making it harder in the subsequent reviews to clearly track which steps had been implemented and reducing the accountability function that oversight institutions and non-government actors could play. However, second, third and subsequent reviews appear to be increasingly forward-looking and are outlining concrete next steps and priority reforms for the post-review period. It is vital to secure buy-in from senior government officials and other stakeholders to ensure ownership and some level of consensus on next steps, which improves the chances of effective follow-up measures being taken between reporting periods. This buy-in can also help to ensure that the
Sustainable Development Goals and lessons from the review are integrated into successive iterations of national development plans and strategies.

40. Member States that highlight required policy adjustments and link them to existing implementation challenges have more scope for developing useful next steps and recommendations that can have a tangible impact on policymaking. Member States could consider outlining activities in the report for the six months immediately following the high-level political forum and defining key next steps for specific Sustainable Development Goals for the three to four years preceding the next reporting period. For example, they could outline key tasks for sector ministries related to specific policy problems identified in the review, develop a road map that defines follow-up activities between reporting and include a chapter in the report on lessons learned and next steps from one review process to the next.

41. In Thailand, the 2017 and 2021 voluntary national review reports included concrete sections on conclusions, challenges and ways forward. Outlining the key reforms and policy adjustments necessary to tackle the implementation challenges related to the Sustainable Development Goals has made it much easier for the Government, oversight bodies and non-government actors alike to track the impact of the reports. Furthermore, the inclusion of specific follow-up actions allows the Government to maintain momentum after the review and enable its results to feed into policymaking. Recommendations to the Government from the National Assembly, civil society organizations, volunteers and youth organizations were also included in the main body of the report. The recommendations from non-government stakeholders provide the Government with a useful follow-up checklist, and their inclusion increases accountability for delivering on next steps and integrating the review results into policymaking. This approach highlights the sense of ownership and commitment to sustainable development among civil society, government and oversight institutions in Thailand, which is important to sustain progress on implementing the 2030 Agenda.

F. Budget alignment and linking planning to financing for the Sustainable Development Goals

42. As member States progressively integrate the Sustainable Development Goals into national planning, linking the planning process to budgets is emerging as the crucial factor in enabling voluntary national reviews to produce practical changes on the ground. It has frequently been challenging for planning systems to integrate recommendations and make policy adjustments, as planning ministries often operate separately from budgetary processes led by ministries of finance/treasury. Increasingly, member States are strengthening the mechanisms of coordination between planning and budgeting and are trying to link financing for the Goals to national development plans and budgets. To accelerate implementation, more-comprehensive budgeting on the Goals, aligned with national plans, is required. This approach can support fiscal priority-setting and the adjustment of budget processes to ensure that they reflect the interlinkages between the Goals, and it requires the active participation of finance ministries in the review process. It also highlights the importance of having the right institutional structure for the review and the planning process, with strong links to finance ministries and budgetary committees, as well as parliaments. Encouraging closer collaboration between planning and finance ministries and involving both ministries in the review process is a practical way for member States to support implementation of the review recommendations and the direct use of evidence in planning and budgetary processes.
43. Many member States are moving in the direction of calculating costs and budgeting for the Sustainable Development Goals, and voluntary national review reports increasingly include a strong section on financing for the Goals. Integrated national financing frameworks can be an important tool for aligning financing efforts with the achievement of the Goals. The frameworks outline the plans for financing and implementing national development strategies. They can be particularly important, as a lack of concrete financing plans can often hinder the implementation of broader national plans. Integrated national financing frameworks are increasingly being developed to help to link financing for development strategies to planning processes and to mobilize financing for national development plans. For example, according to the 2021 voluntary national review report of Bhutan, the Government is working to develop an integrated national financing framework with the aim of increasing and aligning development financing with the Goals. It is envisaged that the resulting framework will help to attract private investment for sustainable development priorities and promote coherence by aligning financing with long-term development priorities.

44. In Nepal, Sustainable Development Goal budget tagging was introduced in 2016, before the voluntary national review, to show how projects and programmes contribute to the Goals. Medium-term expenditure frameworks and annual budgets were also aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. It was therefore more straightforward in the 2017 and 2020 reviews to assess financing for the Goals and to identify gaps. Budget tagging also made it easier for parliamentarians to ensure budget scrutiny with regard to the Goals and for the legislature and supreme audit office to provide oversight of Goal implementation. A sustainable development and good governance committee was established in the National Assembly, providing national budget scrutiny with regard to the Goals. The committee developed a checklist to orient national budgets towards the achievement of the Goals. The next step in Nepal is to strengthen the capacity of provincial and local governments to incorporate the Goals into budgetary processes.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

45. To impact policymaking and strengthen the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, voluntary national reviews need to reflect the national implementation processes and act as a mechanism for accountability and a venue for evaluation and assessment. The reviews can play an important part in national integration processes and encourage a coordinated cross-sectoral approach to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

46. As member States prepare their second, third and fourth voluntary national reviews, they may want to consider strengthening participation in the review process and the institutional mechanisms for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals, with a view to improving the quality of the reviews and their relevance to national development plans. A robust and participatory institutional set-up for monitoring the implementation of the Goals can underpin a participatory review process. By enhancing engagement in the process and increasing its relevance and quality, member States can also increase its usefulness to and impact on policymaking.

47. Member States could consider strengthening the mechanisms for coordination between planning and budgetary processes and encouraging closer collaboration between planning and finance ministries in the voluntary national reviews. Linking the financing for the Sustainable Development Goals to national development plans and budgets will support the implementation of
the review recommendations and increase the direct use of evidence in planning and budgetary processes. Establishing such links can also be beneficial to member States in planning their voluntary national review presentations until 2030 and connecting the reviews to their own national processes and other reporting obligations.

48. Member States may wish to consider strengthening continuity and follow-up between successive iterations of voluntary national reviews. Member States could consider developing practical next steps and clear follow-up actions in their forthcoming reviews that could be implemented after the high-level political forum. Second and subsequent voluntary national review reports are not intended to stand alone; they are expected to directly follow up the analysis and next steps from the preceding review. Outlining clear follow-up actions to be carried out between reporting periods makes it easier to track the commitments outlined in the review reports. In addition, this clarity helps to ensure that lessons from the reviews are clearly integrated into revisions of national development plans and strategies and promote the integration of reviews into policymaking processes, thereby strengthening the usefulness and impact of the reviews.

49. It is vital to secure buy-in from senior government officials and other stakeholders to ensure ownership and some level of consensus with regard to next steps. This buy-in increases the likelihood of effective follow-up between voluntary national review reporting periods and can help to ensure that the Sustainable Development Goals and lessons from the reviews are integrated in successive iterations of national development plans and strategies.