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Accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through voluntary national reviews

Strengthening the impact of voluntary national reviews on accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals through South-South cooperation and improved data for evidence-based policymaking

Note by the secretariat

Summary
The present document is aimed at exploring how voluntary national reviews have influenced development planning through South-South cooperation and improved data for evidence-based policymaking. It includes an examination of the role that South-South cooperation, within the context of the voluntary national review process, plays in promoting leadership and strengthening evidence-based policymaking regarding the Sustainable Development Goals. At the midpoint in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is imperative to support member States in mobilizing the resources, know-how and partnerships necessary to resume progress on the Goals. It is critical to understand how States acquire the knowledge, drive and political will to implement the course corrections and evidence-based reforms needed to accelerate progress. The twinning programme of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific facilitates South-South cooperation in the voluntary national review process, and it plays a fundamental role in bringing about this much-needed leadership on the Goals. Aimed at encouraging peer learning at the Tenth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, the present document contains an exploration of how voluntary national reviews can enhance the use of evidence in policymaking, particularly in relation to targeting inequalities and those left behind. Evidence emerging from the Asia-Pacific region demonstrates that the twinning programme amplifies the impact of voluntary national reviews on evidence-based policymaking. The enablers that aided the successful facilitation of South-South cooperation initiatives in the review process and the utilization of evidence regarding those left furthest behind are also examined. In addition, the present document contains an outline of the key areas that could be strengthened to enhance the impact that twinning, within the context of the voluntary national review process, has on the Goals.

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I. Introduction

1. At the midpoint in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is imperative to support member States in mobilizing the resources, know-how and partnerships to rescue progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Eight years along, implementation is increasingly at the forefront of member States’ efforts, and attention is focusing on the critical role of voluntary national reviews in mobilizing States to utilize evidence and take concrete action on the Goals. In order to accelerate implementation of the Goals, it is vital to understand how States acquire the knowledge, drive and political will to implement course corrections and reforms. The twinning programme of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), which facilitates South-South cooperation in the voluntary national review process, plays a fundamental role in bringing about this much-needed leadership on sustainable development. As Governments present their second, third or fourth reviews, the evidence on those left behind and on the value of South-South cooperation is even more important.

2. The present document contains information that will help member States to increase their understanding of the positive impact of South-South cooperation and the utilization of data on their voluntary national reviews. Strengthening the use of evidence in these reviews, particularly by helping to identify inequalities and those being left behind, can enhance evidence-based policymaking on sustainable development. The critical role of the facilitation of twinning and South-South cooperation is also examined, including the impacts of the reviews on the Goals. These impacts include influencing social and economic reforms; strengthening data analysis and institutions as regards the monitoring of progress on sustainable development; enhancing leadership on the Goals; and building dialogue with, and the engagement of, stakeholders at the regional level. Using these examples, an examination is carried out into the role played by South-South cooperation in accelerating evidence-based policymaking on the Goals.

II. Review of progress made in voluntary national review processes in the Asia-Pacific region

3. It is increasingly evident that progress on the 2030 Agenda requires new levels of leadership, partnership and knowledge to bring about change. Supporting South-South cooperation in the voluntary national review process can help accomplish that objective. The present section contains a brief overview of the key elements of the ESCAP voluntary national review twinning programme and a review of how ESCAP has facilitated the exchange of good practices on data analysis, particularly in relation to those being left behind. The role of South-South cooperation and its underlying principles in strengthening the political will, knowledge and motivation needed to accelerate progress, adopt new evidence-based reforms and promote leadership on sustainable development are also outlined. The changes brought about by the twinning programme will be explored further in section III.

4. It is vital for the voluntary national review process to be underpinned by strong data analysis of progress on the Goals. However, it is essential to ensure that data on inequalities and those left furthest behind comprise a central

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1 South-South cooperation should continue to be guided by the principles of respect for national sovereignty, national ownership and independence, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference in domestic affairs and mutual benefit.
component of data collection and drive evidence-based policymaking on sustainable development. ESCAP has supported several States participating in the voluntary national review process to utilize platforms and tools to assess inequalities; identify the groups that have fallen furthest behind; and utilize that information to inform the reviews. To ensure that inclusive evidence-based policies are driven by such data, ESCAP has facilitated subregional peer-learning clinics and is incorporating exchanges on leaving no one behind into its twinning initiatives and study tours. This exchange of good practices and experiences on data analysis and evidence-based policymaking between ministries and national statistical offices, in particular in relation to those being left behind, builds tacit knowledge, know-how and political will. Such an approach is crucial to ensure that Governments have the momentum and knowledge to implement the course corrections needed to tackle exclusion and increase opportunities in the region.

5. ESCAP initiated its first twinning initiative in 2019, in Georgia and Uzbekistan. It proved to be an excellent demonstration of South-South cooperation. Through one study tour to each country, representatives explored each other’s institutional structures and reform agendas. Since the Government of Georgia was conducting its review for the second time, it was able to share with Uzbekistan its experience of utilizing the voluntary national review to advance social policy reforms. By including civil society, the media and oversight institutions, such as its parliament, in the review and twinning process, Georgia was able to demonstrate to Uzbekistan the important role that these stakeholders played in monitoring the Goals. The “learning by doing” element of South-South cooperation was evidenced by the fact that Uzbekistan, as part of its study tour delegation to Georgia, included diverse stakeholders with whom it had not previously worked on the Goals, such as representatives of think tanks, as well as parliamentarians and bloggers. Participants became part of the review process in Uzbekistan. In addition, as outlined below, Uzbekistan is scheduled to host a second study tour as part of the 2023 twinning programme. Uzbekistan plans to share with Mongolia and Tajikistan the social reforms it has implemented since its last review and twinning initiative, thereby highlighting the continuous and long-term impact of the twinning programme and the social reforms that it can bring about in support of the acceleration of progress towards the Goals.

6. In both Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the twinning programme carried out in 2022 involved connecting stakeholders – i.e. representatives of civil society, national statistical offices and the private sector and parliamentarians – with government officials of both States in a study tour and peer review of draft reports. Both Governments were preparing for their second review and were enthusiastic to share good practices and lessons learned with their regional peers. Through online engagement and joint workshops, the States were able to share information on institutional arrangements, policy directions and strategic multi-stakeholder partnerships to strengthen the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and accelerate their progress. The preparatory online engagement was crucial in laying the foundations for the successful study tour carried out by Sri Lankan representatives to Pakistan. The study tour brought together representatives of the Government, including local government and national statistical offices, as well as civil society and private sector counterparts. The tour was aimed at building relationships, asking questions and discussing the review process and the role of different actors in the implementation of the Goals. During a study tour, connections are made, trust

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2 At the time of writing, Uzbekistan was scheduled to host the twinning study tour from Mongolia and Tajikistan in January 2023.
is established and participants learn from one another, all of which can act as a platform and catalyst for further learning and exchanges. Tacit knowledge, such as personal insights, can be more difficult to express and share with others in a written format or online, which highlights the value of face-to-face interaction.

7. As the cornerstone of the twinning programme, a peer review of each State’s draft report was conducted. The success of the peer review process was underpinned by the connections that had been established and the trust that had been developed among the regional partners through in-person contact. The representatives provided honest and constructive feedback on the first drafts and engaged in a useful dialogue on the increasing use of evidence in their reviews. They completed the twinning process by presenting their reviews side-by-side at the high-level political forum on sustainable development and by organizing a joint side event.

8. In 2022, the Philippines and Tuvalu participated in the voluntary national review for the third and first times, respectively. For the review, ESCAP piloted small-scale twinning, the aim of which was to explore how twinning could support more traditional South-South cooperation and mentoring. As part of that initiative, the representative of the Philippines shared with the representative of Tuvalu the expertise of the Philippines on the voluntary national review process, including the State’s approach to data collection and analysis. A technical online workshop was conducted with the national statistical offices and voluntary national review teams of both partner States. During the workshop, the issues of data collection, indicator selection and data gap analysis were explored, and the representative of Tuvalu was able to pose questions directly to the representative of the statistical institute of the Philippines. While this was only a short intervention, the mentoring approach to twinning, coupled with a deliberate thematic focus on data and statistics, highlighted the potential role that South-South cooperation could play in facilitating knowledge exchange and adoption of evidence-based approaches. In this example, the data twinning led to a greater awareness of the importance of data and an improved understanding of the different approaches to collecting, analysing and communicating data in the review process. The Government of Tuvalu indicated in the report on its first voluntary national review that it planned to strengthen data collection through the creation of a new unit that would focus on tracking progress on the indicators of the Goals.

9. In 2022, ESCAP began its first South-South cooperation initiative with three States – Mongolia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – in relation to voluntary national reviews. Building on lessons from previous twinning initiatives, ESCAP proactively sought to focus the initiative on key reforms and good practices, which the States had identified as areas of interest. Government officials and key stakeholders from the three States were able to exchange good practices in relation to social policy reforms, data analysis on those left behind, the tracking of progress on the Goals and stakeholder engagement. In addition, they were able to share lessons learned from the review process. Stakeholders included representatives of civil society, national statistical offices and the private sector as well as parliamentarians. The 2023 study tour to Uzbekistan will culminate in the three Governments exchanging knowledge, leadership models and experiences in accelerating reforms to enhance sustainable development. The exchanges will inform their voluntary national reviews and feed into the peer review process of the first drafts of the reports later in 2023.

10. The different twinning and South-South cooperation arrangements amplify the impact of the voluntary national review in four key areas. As
outlined below, through an increase in political will, momentum and motivation to accelerate progress, these South-South cooperation initiatives have led to new reforms and enhanced leadership on the Goals. In addition, they have strengthened institutions and the use of data for evidence-based policymaking and the monitoring of progress, and they have also led to an increase in dialogue and greater engagement of stakeholders at a regional level.

A. Social and economic reforms

11. The appeal of participating in the twinning programme lies in the opportunity to connect with and learn from States in the region that are facing similar challenges. Uzbekistan was interested in gaining tacit knowledge from peers in the region who had solved similar problems and successfully reformed their social policy. Connecting Georgia with Uzbekistan was useful, as Georgia had a strong track record of social reforms; therefore, it had the requisite know-how that Uzbekistan was seeking. One of the key lessons emerging from South-South cooperation initiatives is the importance of identifying partners that can bridge knowledge gaps; provide practical solutions; and provide space for States to gain tacit knowledge, have their ideas validated and learn from the approaches and tools that others have tried. Uzbekistan was interested in implementing social policy reform in relation to social security and in strengthening human capital. As a result of partaking in the twinning programme, Uzbekistan was exposed to innovative social policy initiatives that had been carried out in Georgia, such as the targeted social assistance programme, and its representatives met practitioners who had implemented new social protection reforms.

12. The twinning programme was a catalyst, igniting political will and enhancing know-how to implement new social reforms. The 2020 voluntary national review of Uzbekistan revealed the quick response of the Government to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. That response included making changes to its social security programme as part of an anti-crisis package. Following the first review, the Government rolled out a digital social protection single-registry platform at the end of 2020, and it further reformed the social protection system and provisions of cash assistance in the country. While there was a social protection system in place before the review, the twinning programme heightened the impact of the review on social reform by enhancing the tacit knowledge and political will needed to implement the review and bring about change. Interestingly, representatives of Uzbekistan gave a presentation at a workshop to showcase these reforms as part of a new twinning initiative with Mongolia and Tajikistan, and it will also host a study tour in 2023. This demonstrates the power of the knowledge-exchange life cycle, commonly discussed in relation to South-South cooperation, whereby States learn from other States and then share their own results and changes, ideally with other interested States. The twinning programme has therefore proven to be an efficient way for States to explore new social and economic policies and innovative solutions. It has also helped States to develop the political will, know-how and expertise to implement new, evidence-based reforms at home, in particular targeting those left behind.

B. Strengthening data collection on those left behind and institutions for monitoring progress on the Sustainable Development Goals

13. Voluntary national reviews can be a springboard for strengthening institutional arrangements for evidence-based policymaking and for monitoring implementation of the Goals. The twinning programme and regional voluntary national review clinics can be important catalysts for exchanging good practices, creating new mechanisms and enhancing the authority and mandate of existing institutions and oversight bodies.

14. Regional voluntary national review clinics at subregional meetings in North and Central Asia and South-East Asia have acted as platforms for States to exchange good practices on collecting, analysing and utilizing data on those left behind. During these clinics, States have shared their experiences of utilizing data analysis tools to assess the inequality of opportunities and to track progress on key indicators affecting vulnerable and marginalized groups. Furthermore, they have exchanged advice on integrating such data into national monitoring systems and on planning processes to improve the use of evidence in policies targeting those left behind. Twinning initiatives are building on these clinics, by enabling States that are conducting reviews to understand how States in comparable contexts are utilizing these new data to inform and drive evidence-based reforms. National statistical offices are key stakeholders in twinning programmes and study tours, providing the key link between data collection and policy.

15. Several States have utilized the voluntary national review process as a way to strengthen institutional arrangements for collecting and monitoring data, in particular on vulnerable groups. In Tuvalu, the analysis of data on those left behind was integrated into its voluntary national review. In Brunei Darussalam, the State’s second review was being utilized as an opportunity to strengthen its ongoing monitoring of progress on the Goals through the establishment of a data tracker for that purpose. The Government plans to utilize the tracker as an opportunity to see whether further attention is needed to address those at risk of being left behind. In South-East Asia, subregional review clinics and meetings demonstrated that there was interest in exchanging good practices on utilizing data monitoring systems to target data collection on inequalities and those left behind. States from within the subregion, including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia and Timor-Leste, exchanged approaches, ideas and plans. It was concluded that strengthening the collection, analysis and use of data, in particular disaggregated data on inequalities and those left behind, as part of the review process could strengthen the use of and demand for evidence on vulnerable groups in national policymaking.

16. In Sri Lanka, prior to its second review, the national Sustainable Development Council already had a clear mandate for the coordination, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. However, the sharing of its institutional arrangement for sustainable development with civil society, private sector and government representatives from Pakistan enabled the Sustainable Development Council and Sri Lankan actors to reflect on their own mechanisms, internalize their own lessons learned and seek to enhance their impact.4 On the basis of a critical and analytical re-examination of the observations it wanted to share, the Sustainable

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4 Representatives of Sri Lanka shared tacit knowledge and expertise on the State’s institutional approach to the Goals through a study tour to Pakistan and online meetings. Peer reviews of each State’s voluntary national review draft report were also carried out.
Development Council of Sri Lanka further strengthened its institutional architecture. It was now developing a new monitoring and evaluation framework for sustainable development with national and localized targets. In addition, through exposure to the federal and provincial Sustainable Development Goal units of Pakistan, Sri Lanka was examining how it could further institutionalize the 2030 Agenda at each governing level and involve parliamentarians more actively to strengthen political ownership and institutional capacity throughout the country.

17. Representatives of Pakistan utilized the opportunity of the twinning programme to gain tacit knowledge and understanding of how the institutional arrangements of Sri Lanka underpinned the review and the Government’s overall approach to coordinating efforts and monitoring progress towards the Goals. While its own voluntary national review played an important role in strengthening the role of the Sustainable Development Goal units in Pakistan, and in enhancing their mandate and reach, the twinning programme amplified it by enabling the Government to learn from the approach and lessons learned of Sri Lanka. ESCAP brokered the knowledge exchange on institutional approaches between the two States, which allowed representatives of Pakistan to pose questions, discuss different approaches and propose new measures to strengthen its institutional mechanisms based on its local context. During the study tour and the online workshops, representatives of the two Governments shared information about innovations in high-performing sectors in each country. Representatives of Sri Lanka highlighted reforms in the education and health sectors. Representatives of Pakistan subsequently shared good practices on engaging young people in technology initiatives to strengthen the economy and on utilizing spatial data to improve decision-making on service delivery.

18. Oversight and accountability institutions, such as parliaments and supreme audit institutions, are increasingly playing an integral role in the voluntary national review processes. It is evident that the twinning programme can help elevate the role of these oversight actors not only in the review process, but also in scrutinizing progress on the Goals. The involvement of parliamentarians from both Georgia and Uzbekistan in the twinning process led to a unique exchange on how to increase the involvement of parliamentarians in overseeing the implementation of the Goals. It also highlighted innovations in the new role of the State Audit Office of Georgia in assessing preparedness for the Goals. Georgia shared the reforms it had undertaken in transitioning to a parliamentary system of governance and the adoption of the strategy for monitoring the implementation of the Goals.

19. As a result of learning of the reforms and institutional changes taking place in Georgia, representatives of Uzbekistan sought to heighten the role of its parliament in overseeing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. To that end, it organized a parliamentary commission to develop a workplan to support the 2030 Agenda. It also established an interparliamentary forum on development for the Goals, which adopted an important declaration on the Goals. Crucially, representatives of Uzbekistan then shared this new expertise with peers in the region by advising 2023 twinning partners on how best to include these oversight actors in the voluntary national review process and in ongoing scrutiny of the 2030 Agenda. Although the involvement of oversight actors in voluntary national reviews was already increasing in the region, it was evident that the twinning initiative was amplifying their impact on progressing key reforms through the strengthening of their institutional mandate, motivation and know-how. Due to the commonality of culture and reform context, brokering the tacit knowledge exchange between parliamentarians and government officials from both countries on the role of oversight actors is
leading to renewed political will to make these institutional reforms. In order to ensure the greatest institutional impact, it is vital to involve government officials alongside parliamentarians in the twinning process. Doing so will also improve the coordination of, and create a direct link to, national planning and budgeting on the Goals.

C. Leadership on the Sustainable Development Goals

20. South-South cooperation is leveraging the impact of second voluntary national reviews by providing mechanisms to strengthen leadership on the Goals. Twinning and connecting States and stakeholders through clinics in the review process is now going beyond solely supporting more effective processes to instigating greater leadership on the 2030 Agenda. Leadership can be understood as influencing change and building the capacity of individuals and institutions to thrive. Leaders should understand the importance of adaptation, and they should recognize the role of collective efforts and the need to mobilize coalitions of people to tackle key sustainable development challenges. By providing space for Governments and stakeholders to reflect upon and share innovations and lessons, the twinning programme and related subregional peer-learning initiatives heighten the confidence, know-how and drive of leaders, helping to scale up their efforts.

21. Georgia, Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan continued to demonstrate leadership on sustainable development and South-South cooperation following their voluntary national review process and their involvement in the twinning programme. Georgia utilized the twinning programme in 2020 to increase its role in the region as a knowledge provider on sustainable development, stakeholder engagement and social and economic reforms. After sharing its innovations, approaches and lessons learned with Uzbekistan during the twinning programme, the Government of Georgia has expressed in interviews an interest in scaling up its South-South cooperation initiatives in the region for its third voluntary national review, which is planned for 2024. The Government of Sri Lanka leveraged the voluntary national review and twinning process to broaden and deepen the leadership and convening role of the Sustainable Development Council and to extend its impact on the 2030 Agenda. The twinning programme and accompanying study tour of multiple actors to Pakistan inspired the Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka to mobilize coalitions and strengthen mechanisms to involve key stakeholders, such as civil society and the private sector, in tackling crucial sustainable development challenges. The Sustainable Development Council was also integral in consolidating the interministerial steering committee to continue providing political leadership and guidance on implementation of the Goals after the review. As a result of the voluntary national review, Sri Lanka is in the process of implementing new strategic mechanisms to engage relevant authorities to address the gaps identified in each sector during the review process.

22. In Mongolia, the Government is utilizing the twinning programme with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as a vehicle for demonstrating leadership on the Goals. By sharing its expertise in online workshops with twinning partners on

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the nationalization of indicators, stakeholder engagement and institutional strengthening, Mongolia is demonstrating how it is influencing change by building the capacity of individuals and institutions to deliver on the Goals. Representatives of Mongolia shared good practices in relation to the country’s national committee on sustainable development and its interagency group on the voluntary national review. They also shared information on the recent open day on the Goals, during which the Government strengthened outreach, advocacy and engagement on the Goals in Mongolia. The open day heightened the confidence, know-how and drive of Mongolia to scale up its efforts. Interestingly, as Mongolia has fully embraced the Goals, it joined the twinning programme seeking both to take on a leadership role and to learn from others, with a view to fast-tracking its own efforts. For example, Mongolia is keen to learn from other States about how they integrate data on inequalities and vulnerable groups into voluntary national reviews and ongoing monitoring processes. The State sees itself as both a knowledge provider and a seeker of knowledge, and it embraces South-South cooperation as a vehicle to strengthen its voluntary national review and to enhance its leadership on the Goals. Mongolia is demonstrating to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan how to influence change through the building of the capacity of individuals and institutions to conduct a national review and how to enhance its leadership on the Goals.

D. Regional engagement and action on the Sustainable Development Goals

23. South-South cooperation in the voluntary national review process can be a conduit for enhancing dialogue and the engagement of stakeholders on sustainable development at the regional level. Regional study tours facilitated through the twinning programme can promote South-South cooperation between Governments and civil society, national statistical offices, the private sector and parliamentarians at the regional and international levels. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, part of the current twinning programme, have demonstrated their willingness to share lessons learned and work collaboratively on social policy reform, data system strengthening, media reform and parliamentary leadership on the Goals. It is evident that States learn by being exposed to the utilization of multi-stakeholder approaches by their regional peers. In online workshops and on the study tour, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan sought to include similar government officials working on comparable policy issues, as well as parliamentarians and representatives of civil society organizations. The direct alignment of representatives from both countries was designed to enhance regional cooperation and action. Such tacit knowledge helps to increase their know-how and their confidence in involving more stakeholders in their own reform and review processes, and it helps to promote inclusive dialogue at national and regional levels, which can lead to greater regional cooperation and exchanges on key areas that underpin the success of the Goals.

24. As Governments prepare their second, third or even fourth voluntary national reviews, they increasingly seek to be connected with peers who face similar challenges. They want practical solutions and approaches to common problems. Regional lesson learning, dialogue and cooperation on the Goals are some of the key enablers to fast-track progress at this crucial point of the 2030 Agenda. Regional forums on sustainable development, such as the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, and associated events are playing a growing role in brokering greater regional collaboration. They act as focal points for South-South cooperation initiatives, and they provide a platform for exchanging tools and approaches and for further regional dialogue and action. Strengthening South-South cooperation in the review process therefore adds
value to the 2030 Agenda through its ability to promote meaningful regional sharing of expertise and collaboration on common challenges.

III. Lessons on good practices: critical enablers that have contributed to the successful facilitation of South-South cooperation initiatives and evidence-based policymaking in the voluntary national review process

25. At the midpoint in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, it is vital to understand what factors are driving successful results in efforts to achieve the Goals. In order to do so, it is important to examine the channels through which voluntary national reviews affect the attainment of the Goals, and how twinning and improving the use of data in policymaking help to amplify that impact. The present section contains an outline of the different factors that may have contributed to the successful facilitation of South-South cooperation initiatives and to the utilization of data on vulnerable groups in the voluntary national review process. It also includes an examination of how those factors heighten the impact of the reviews. The present section is aimed at helping member States to understand the key drivers of successful voluntary national review twinning; and the factors that can increase the integration of data on vulnerable groups into policymaking.

26. The careful matching of States with comparable political and social contexts can underpin an effective twinning programme by exposing States to good practices and lessons from the region. States often choose to participate in the twinning programme so that they can be exposed to practitioner knowledge and learn the “how-to” of reform and institutional processes. ESCAP has organized several twinning workshops on data analysis and the monitoring process in response to States expressing interest in learning from the approaches used by other States. States often wish to learn from interventions and tools that are relevant to their local context as they feel it is more efficient and effective. States may specify an interest in being connected with States that have similar reform climates and contexts. Paying close attention to such a request during the matching process leads to a greater likelihood that approaches and good practices shared among peers will be adopted. It can also lead to greater uptake of good practices in relation to the voluntary national review process and the involvement of diverse stakeholders, such as civil society, the media and the private sector. As Governments often feel tailored advice is more relevant, the careful matching of States can help mobilize political will to put advice into practice.

27. Connecting States within the same geographical region with a comparable cultural context can also facilitate deeper connections, respect and trust. Pakistan and Sri Lanka developed an open and friendly partnership over the course of the study tour and the online workshops. That partnership facilitated an honest exchange of peer feedback on the first draft of their reports. Representatives of both States felt that the recommendations from their regional peers were helpful and pragmatic, especially as they were coming from a State that had a comparable context and had encountered similar challenges. The role of careful matching and the building of trust should not be underestimated in South-South cooperation, as they highlight the importance of careful facilitation over time, which helps to build relationships and partnerships that can form the foundation for learning.

28. Integrating study tours into the voluntary national review process as a core component of South-South cooperation is vital. It creates an interactive platform for obtaining and transferring practitioner knowledge and insights on
the review process, the Goals and the 2030 Agenda as a whole. By visiting institutions and engaging with counterparts from national statistical offices, ministries and the parliament, for example, participants can learn the “how-to” elements of key reforms. They can engage in peer reviews of each other’s draft reports and strategies, and they can share advice and insights on the review process. Participating in study tours also facilitates the identification and provision of tailored capacity development and technical support to government officials or stakeholders from the United Nations system in relation to the voluntary national review. Such development and support services include support to stakeholder engagement, data analysis, the development of road maps and institutional strengthening, all of which are integral to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda beyond the completion of the review.

29. Supporting States to understand, in practical terms, how to utilize and integrate data on those left behind in the voluntary national review process, and in ongoing planning processes, is an important contributing factor in enhancing evidence-based policymaking. ESCAP has adopted a combination of effective approaches to support States, including providing training in the utilization of data-analysis platforms and tools; facilitating peer exchange and the sharing of lessons with States in the subregion; and connecting national statistical offices, government ministries and civil society organizations from twinning States to share their approaches to collecting and monitoring data on those left behind. It is this combination of approaches that is most effective in ensuring that States acquire the know-how, tools and willingness to adopt, and to continue to use, new approaches and systems for data analysis and to support the ongoing use of evidence in policymaking.

30. The role of ESCAP as a convenor and facilitator of the South-South cooperation twinning initiative in Asia and the Pacific is a key enabling factor of the successful programme, and ESCAP carries out that role while adhering to the principles of non-interference and mutual respect. By initiating and brokering the connection and exchange between the twinning States, ESCAP creates a space and a platform for stakeholders and officials to meet, interact, ask questions and share. ESCAP can play an important role in identifying and synthesizing key commonalities and lessons in planning, monitoring and reform processes between the States. It can also broker discussions between the Governments on these issues. Furthermore, it is possible to identify blockages to communication; identify common challenges and areas of interest; and support the integration of stakeholders into the twinning process. It is also an efficient way to highlight capacity requirements in the voluntary national review process as they arise, which can help improve the efficiency of the review process and provide a more effective foundation for the twinning programme to deliver maximum results. Furthermore, due to the regional role of ESCAP, it is possible to share these lessons with other States at the regional level and with other regions.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

31. As the midpoint in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda nears, voluntary national reviews are becoming crucial instruments in mobilizing Governments to take concrete action on the Sustainable Development Goals. As Governments present their second, third or fourth reviews, the roles of strengthening data analysis on those left behind and enhancing South-South cooperation are increasingly important to enable States to acquire the data, know-how, partnerships and political will to keep up the momentum. South-South cooperation in the voluntary national review process can play a key role
in bringing about much-needed leadership and evidence-based policymaking on sustainable development.

32. Member States could be encouraged to analyze and integrate data on those left furthest behind
7 into the voluntary national review and evidence-based policymaking on sustainable development. Analysing inequalities of access to basic opportunities and improving data collection and analysis on vulnerable and marginalized groups are important components of the voluntary national reviews. However, it is vital that data analysis inform the policy recommendations of the review and be integrated on an ongoing basis into policy and planning processes for sustainable development. Member States could consider strengthening data collection and analysis tools to ensure they effectively target those left furthest behind. They could also integrate data collection and analysis tools into national data monitoring systems for the Goals.

33. Member States preparing their voluntary national reviews could be supported to exchange best practices on data analysis with other States and to share lessons and advice for integrating data into policymaking and planning processes. Facilitating the exchange of good practices and lessons on data analysis and monitoring processes among States in the region as part of the review process, through peer workshops, exchanges or twinning, is an important way for member States to learn new approaches, overcome obstacles and improve the uptake of evidence on those left furthest behind in policymaking.

34. Member States should be encouraged to consider participating in the ESCAP voluntary national review twinning programme and establishing South-South cooperation initiatives. Member States preparing their second, third and fourth voluntary national reviews could consider joining the twinning programme as participation in it brings tangible benefits to the review process and to a State’s acceleration efforts on the Goals, including identifying key priorities for learning, exchange and capacity development. The twinning programme provides a unique opportunity and platform to share expertise, data systems, reforms and approaches with other States and to learn from their experiences. It thereby enhances leadership on the Goals.

35. The exchange of good practices and lesson learned should be enhanced across regions and institutions in relation to South-South cooperation initiatives and peer learning on data analysis. The ESCAP twinning programme provides an opportunity to share examples of emerging good practices of South-South cooperation and provide advice to institutions on key enabling factors. Member States could be supported in sharing their institutional arrangements for South-South cooperation and in developing initiatives that are guided by South-South cooperation principles.8 As more is learned about the factors driving successful South-South cooperation initiatives and the value they bring to voluntary national reviews, member States may wish to share key insights with other States. Member States could also consider enhancing the reporting of South-South cooperation activities

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7 Evidence on those left furthest behind in 16 Sustainable Development Goals is available for 29 States in Asia and the Pacific. See ESCAP, “Leaving no one behind” platform. Available at https://lnob.unescap.org/.
8 South-South cooperation principles should continue to be guided by the principles of respect for national sovereignty, national ownership and independence, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference in domestic affairs and mutual benefit.
and the support structures in their voluntary national reviews to promote the successful initiatives being undertaken.

36. Member States should encourage civil society representatives, parliamentarians and private sector stakeholders to participate in South-South cooperation and data analysis initiatives. Member States could consider involving key stakeholders in twinning initiatives to facilitate the exchange of experiences and knowledge among counterparts. The engagement of key stakeholders in the review process and ongoing monitoring of progress on the Goals could subsequently be increased.

37. It is important to strengthen understanding of the impact that South-South cooperation initiatives have on efforts to achieve the Goals. Member States are encouraged to reflect upon and share the changes that the twinning initiatives have brought about, taking the South-South cooperation principles into consideration. Evidence is emerging on how South-South cooperation is strengthening institutional architecture and data systems for monitoring the Goals, encouraging the adoption of social reforms and strengthening regional and national leadership on the 2030 Agenda. In order to scale up these initiatives, it is important to understand the mechanisms by which the strengthening of technical know-how acquired during the twinning initiative leads to positive changes.

38. South-South cooperation initiatives to support the acceleration of the achievement of the Goals should be scaled up, both in the Asia-Pacific region and globally. Member States with expertise and experience in South-South cooperation may consider funding and organizing initiatives as part of the voluntary national review twinning programme, or establishing additional initiatives, in relation to data analysis and monitoring. There is significant potential to enhance South-South and triangular cooperation activities in relation to specific topics, such as leaving no one behind, climate change and green growth, with a view to accelerating progress on the Goals. Member States could consider identifying key thematic priorities or specific areas for data analysis for South-South cooperation and outline key areas of support required to facilitate and scale up the initiatives.

39. Participants in the Tenth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development may wish to discuss the recommendations set forth in the present document and to provide the secretariat with guidance on which recommendations should be explored to a greater extent. These recommendations may serve as a basis for discussion between member States and other stakeholders on opportunities to strengthen South-South cooperation and improve the utilization of data on those left behind in the voluntary national review process.