Southeast Asia  
2024 Voluntary National Reviews Clinic  

An Associated Event of the Seventh Southeast Asia Multistakeholder Forum  

Wednesday 8 November 2023, 09:00-15:00  
Bangkok, Thailand (hybrid format)  

REPORT  

On November 8, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) organised a workshop on the voluntary national reviews (VNR) for countries in South and South-West Asia, as an associated event of the 7th Seventh South-East Asia Subregional Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals. The event provided a space for the exchange of good practices in VNR preparation and discussed the role of VNRs as enablers for multistakeholder partnerships and for improved policy frameworks to accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The event was attended by around 25 participants (in person and online), representing different stakeholder groups (Government, Civil Society Organisations, Indigenous People, Intergovernmental Organisations, and others).  

Presenting experiences by civil society, Government, and other representatives of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao P.D.R., The Philippines, Timor-Leste, Thailand, Viet Nam, the event covered three main topics: VNR process; data collection and analysis to leave no one behind (LNOB); and stakeholder engagement.  

During the first session, Government representatives from Cambodia, Lao P.D.R., and Timor-Leste elaborated on their national experience with conducting multiple VNRs. Countries detailed their journeys across multiple VNRs and explained how the VNR process has matured over the years and reporting cycles. Panellists discussed how the VNR process helped reveal complementarities among the SDGs and other national programmes and policies (such as the graduation from the Least Developed Countries category, for instance) and the importance of strengthening policy coherence. Vertical and horizontal coordination are key to ensure a coordinated and holistic approach to development. Enhancing institutional arrangements is a means to this end.  

Discussants also stressed the importance of raising awareness of the SDGs, particularly at the local and community level. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs remain a vague concept for many and the VNRs offer the chance to expand the conversation on sustainable development. Learning from peers was also acknowledged as a useful way to improve VNR preparation. Delegates from Lao P.D.R. (2024 VNR country) presented initial plans for their VNR preparation and received useful inputs from other delegations that presented the reports during the past years, including by providing advice on VNR preparation processes and key challenges encountered in 2nd VNRs.

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The second session promoted a dialogue on a whole-of-society approach for the VNR and to promote policy coherence. Addressing policy gaps is now more important than ever considering the ongoing multiple global crises that the world faces. The identification of synergies and trade-offs, and recognizing interdependencies and interactions in the 2030 Agenda, are key first steps to ensure that public policies are coherent with one another and will achieve their intended results.

Inclusivity in decision making is important. Policy effectiveness can be enhanced by collaborating across domains and with multiple stakeholders. Engaging different actors in VNR processes can facilitate building trust and understanding across stakeholders. Linking VNR implementation to national action plans is very necessary to accelerate progress on the SDGs and voluntary local reviews (VLRs) can help to this end. VNRs should reflect the perspective of all stakeholders and they should be aligned to findings from other processes, such as VLRs, as this would help localise and contextualise the VNRs. Often time consultations happen in the capital cities, so they do not account for those living in rural areas nor for indigenous communities.

Multistakeholder of engagement is important as it fosters a sense of ownership. While the collaboration among Governments and CSOs gives signs of improvement, CSO engagement would benefit from being institutionalised. Children and young people are often neglected, while they should be regarded as partners, rather than just receivers. Engaging them in early stages is rewarding as it gives them the opportunity to be part of the process and bring their innovative child and youth-led solutions.

The last session centered around the role of data for evidence based VNRs as well as policy making. Data and particularly data disaggregation remains a daunting task, but countries are making progress and are adopting new tools to track progress. Data is not only numbers, but also life stories. Qualitative data collected from CSO at the grassroot, and community level can add value to official statistics, as it enriches the narrative of a VNR. Private sector data should also be leveraged. More focus should be placed on citizen-generated data, although reconciliation and harmonisation remain a bottleneck to their use.

An evaluation run after the event showed that overall, participants were satisfied with the content as well as the format of the event. However, more space for informal interactions would be appreciated.