

South and South-West Asia 2024 Voluntary National Reviews Clinic

An Associated Event of the Seventh South and South-West Asia Subregional Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals

Monday 9 October 2023, 09:00-15:00

Sur Sudha Hall, The Soaltee Kathmandu

REPORT

On October 9, 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 and South-West 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 implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The event was attended by over 50 participants (in person and online), representing different stakeholder groups (Government, Civil Society Organisations, Intergovernmental Organisations, private sector, volunteers, and others).

Presenting experiences by civil society, government, and other representatives of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, 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 India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka elaborated on their national experience with conducting multiple VNRs. Panelists noted the importance of building on lessons learnt from previous reports, when conducting a second or consequent review. They emphasized the need for more awareness raising for the SDGs, as well as the VNRs to create stronger ownership at different levels and remarked upon the value of engaging different stakeholders throughout the process. Delegates from Nepal (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 and 3rd VNRs.

The importance of leveraging the VNR as a tool for enhancing policy coherence at all levels was acknowledged, particularly in the context of Graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category. Peer learning, including through twinning was also recognized as a remarkable means to improve the VNR process, shedding light on the importance of connecting with a broader array of



stakeholders, as well as institutions to increase synergies and minimize trade-offs across policy domains.

The second session centered around the role of data for evidence based VNRs as well as policy making. Monitoring the progress on the SDGs is a continuous exercise. The data journey for the VNR should start as early as possible and be led by National Statistical Offices (NSO), as the national coordinating institutions and primary data holders. Data collection as well as reconciliation requires time and capacity. While data collection and analysis are an important step, it is also necessary to learn how to assess and validate it.

Data can be quantitative as well as qualitative. For instance, in various countries CSOs are developing People's Scorecards that provide a qualitative assessment of the implementation process for each SDG. However, CSOs generally feel that there is a lack of trust with respect to their capacity to produce reliable data. Uniformity in data collection and analysis remains indeed a challenge. Citizen-Generated Data (CGD), while it is useful, it might not always be integrated in official reporting, as it does not align with international standards.

The last session promoted a dialogue on a whole-of-society approach for the VNR. What emerged was that while stakeholder engagement for the VNR process is there, it is not always meaningful. Meaningful participation of stakeholders requires sustained platforms and funds, rather than ad-hoc events and one-off consultations. Follow-ups to stakeholder consultations remain weak. It was also noted the necessity to include more diverse constituencies in stakeholder consultations.

The discussion underscored the usefulness of conducting reviews at the subnational and local level. Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) should be leveraged and inputs from local governments need to be included in VNRs to increase accountability. The capacity of local governments, as well as CSOs and other stakeholders to contribute to national monitoring processes and VNRs needs to be strengthened.

An evaluation run after the event showed that overall, participants were satisfied with the content as well as the format of the event. Nevertheless, they noted the necessity to include a broader range of stakeholders to the table (especially representatives from Academia, the private sector, youth, and National Statistical Offices) to allow for a deeper and more encompassing discussion.