



VNRs and Progress Measurement Beyond the HLPF

By Elena Marmo

Since 2016, 142 countries worldwide have submitted Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) as part of the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF), reporting on progress made towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the action plan of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The VNRs play a prominent role in the annual Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) HLPF with both criticism and acclaim. However, it's important to consider how VNRs are taking hold beyond the formal sessions in the HLPF every year. The VNRs elucidate gaps in the global indicator framework and are appearing in discussions of UN Country Teams (UNCTs), the UN Statistical Commission and the Committee for Development Policy (CDP).

The UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), a document used by the UNCTs to establish a coherent system-wide working plan with host governments, references the role VNR data can serve in establishing a development cooperation framework. The UNSDCF notes that it "is informed by Government prioritization, planning, implementation and reporting vis-à-vis the 2030 Agenda, including the preparation of evidence-based Voluntary National Reviews." This places significant emphasis on the role of VNRs in shaping UNCT priorities and objectives.

UN Resident Coordinator (RC) in Costa Rica, Alice Shackelford, reiterated this thinking, speaking of her role as an RC in facilitating "a dialogue with the Member States and those countries in terms of national priorities but also using instruments like the Universal Periodic Review and others which are giving recommendations to the governments and to those countries to work together." Mr. Philippe Lazzarini, RC for Lebanon, also noted that "the government submitted its first VNR last year and has committed to develop its first national vision on sustainable development, outlining its ambition on where it wants the country to be in 2030. Having this is a breakthrough in a context like Lebanon, a country where there hasn't been any national development plan since the seventies". Participation in the VNRs in the case of Lebanon aid the RC, along with the UNCT, in developing mutually agreed upon and coordinated plans for development action.

VNRs also can have a role at the regional level. In her [statement](#) at the ECOSOC Operational Activities Segment (OAS), Executive Secretary of Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) Alicia Bárcena noted:

“Regional multilateral/intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder platforms—in particular the regional forums for sustainable development— have become the locus for peer learning, for preparing voluntary national reviews, for discussing gaps and barriers for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and for strengthening integration between the three dimensions: economic, social and environmental.”

Bárcena explained that not only are regional SDG fora seen as a space to prepare for VNRs, but they are also a space to share learnings from the VNR process to guide regional decision-making. This illustrates the role VNRs and country-level data could play in strengthening regional and national organizations’ ability to work effectively, share learnings and develop regional strategies.

This is essential, as without VNR data to guide national and regional priorities and planning, UN country-level programming can run the risk of being heavily influenced by donor interests, lacking sufficient regard for the country situation. This is not to ignore the challenges and flaws of the HLPF VNR process as a whole—often regarded as a “beauty contest” for Member States; there are certainly pitfalls in ensuring VNRs present a realistic development picture and ambitious plan in each country. Exploration of these pitfalls is taking hold beyond the HLPF as well.

The politics of indicators

The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), to be launched at the SDG Summit in September 2019, has been referenced alongside the Secretary-General’s Progress Report both within conversations related to the HLPF and beyond that, namely, at the ECOSOC Operational Activities Segment meant to track the progress made on UN Development System (UNDS) Reform. At a briefing on the report, the [Deputy Secretary-General](#) noted that “the many gaps in data and the requirements of the current indicator framework limit our ability to provide a detailed and through overview of progress”. This recognition of the limitations of the current global indicator framework highlights the danger that it will operate to reshape the 2030 Agenda and its goals and targets.

The selection of global indicators is an inherently political process, not simply a technical one as often claimed. These dynamics were examined in some detail in a special issue of the journal *Global Policy*, “[Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring SDGs Numbers and Norms](#),” co-edited by Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Desmond McNeill. In her commentary in this issue

Barbara Adams highlights the fact that it shows how measurement of progress made towards the SDGs can shape global policies and the 2030 Agenda overall in a negative way. When weak or misleading indicators are agreed upon, she points out, especially without reference to clear trade-offs that exist between goals, two challenges present themselves: either goals are “met” while true progress has not taken place or developing countries are set up for failure, tracking progress against indicators they cannot meet.

Indicators can in turn shape the agenda, showing the need for greater action on certain goals or recognizing progress in others. A GPW briefing, “[Who influences whom in the policy arena? Statisticians seek greater voice](#)” explores this “tense interface between data and policy-making and the asymmetrical power dynamics that shape it”. This tension was noted as an important topic of conversation at the 50th Session of the UN Statistical Commission. If results are only measured against the global indicators, the true value of the 2030 Agenda is lost, especially when governments are held accountable to achieving the SDGs using indicators they haven’t had much (if any) say over. Using this critical lens to explore data places even more significance on the role of the Resident Coordinators, UN Country Teams and Regional Commissions. Their coordination, particularly around peer-learning as it relates to VNRs can not only identify strategies for tackling the SDGs but also gaps and faults in the indicators that exist.

Measuring progress in the VNRs

The [Committee for Development Policy’s \(CDP\) 2019 review](#) of the VNRs elucidates the point that the substantive content of the Voluntary National Reviews “could be significantly strengthened through the provision of more detailed information on strategies for achieving the 2030 Agenda”. With this in mind, it is important to recognize the constraints within which Member States are reporting: if the indicators themselves are weak and insufficient, it is nearly impossible for VNR reporting (and in turn national development plans) to present robust strategies for achieving the 2030 Agenda. With particular reference to Goal 10 which was reviewed this year, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Thea Smaavik Hegstad of [CDP note](#):

“the inequality goal in fact has no target to reduce the unequal distribution of income and wealth, and it does not include an indicator that would show whether a country’s level of economic inequality declined over the period 2015-2030. There is also no target or indicator on reducing income inequality amongst countries.”

Again, without clear and participatory indicator settings, driven by policy and not politics, the VNRs will not be best placed to reflect progress made to date on the SDGs as well as strategies for their achievement. CDP’s 2019 report notes, “there is a risk that a narrow focus on indicators could lead to a reinterpretation of the Goals that does not reflect the fundamental

concepts and spirit behind the Agenda.” It is precisely this threat that could destroy the vision and ambition of the 2030 Agenda.

On track for a new direction?

It is clear that voices at the national and regional levels are expressing interest in and value from the VNR process. While seen as an imperfect process by many, the imperative now remains for civil society to demand space for meaningful and impactful engagement at global, national and regional levels with VNRs, and for all civil society, Member States and UN entities to maximize the opportunity of the upcoming HLPF review in 2019-2020 to affect substantial changes to the HLPF, rather than allowing it to be solely about modalities.

The deadline of 2030 is fast approaching and as the Secretary-General, Deputy Secretary-General, President of the General Assembly, President of ECOSOC and many others have reminded everyone, the global community is “off track” to achieve the SDGs. This means that now more than ever it is critical to shape the HLPF review and VNR processes to better serve the development challenges at present. As the United Nations is increasingly positioning and “repositioning” itself to serve the 2030 Agenda, there is the danger that without substantial changes to the HLPF, the organization runs the risk of losing widespread faith in itself as an institution and multilateralism as a means to affect change, further engendering the nationalist and individualistic world it, along with people worldwide, is fighting to change.

Social Watch

Avda. 18 de Julio 2095/301
Montevideo 11200, Uruguay
socwatch@socialwatch.org
www.socialwatch.org

Global Policy Watch

205 E 42nd St | 20th Fl
New York, NY 10017, USA
globalpolicywatch.org

Global Policy Forum

Koenigstrasse 37a
53115 Bonn, Germany
gpf@globalpolicy.org
www.globalpolicy.org