



## SDG review as an engine for action: Promising practices from around the world

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## Partners for Review

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Registered offices  
Bonn and Eschborn

Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 32 + 36  
53115 Bonn, Germany  
T +49 228 44 60-0  
F +49 228 44 60-17 66

E [info@giz.de](mailto:info@giz.de)  
I [www.giz.de](http://www.giz.de)

Partners for Review  
[www.partners-for-review.de](http://www.partners-for-review.de)  
[partnersforreview@giz.de](mailto:partnersforreview@giz.de)  
Twitter: @Partners4Review

Responsible editor:  
Thomas Wollnik

Authors:  
GeoMedia GmbH, Kathrin Heidbrink (lead author), Eva Fenster

Design:  
MediaCompany GmbH, Astrid Ostrowicki

Photo credits/sources front page: Thomas Wagner, Fabián Hernández Mena, GeoMedia  
Photo credits/sources back page: Blush Media, Fabián Hernández Mena, Thomas Wagner

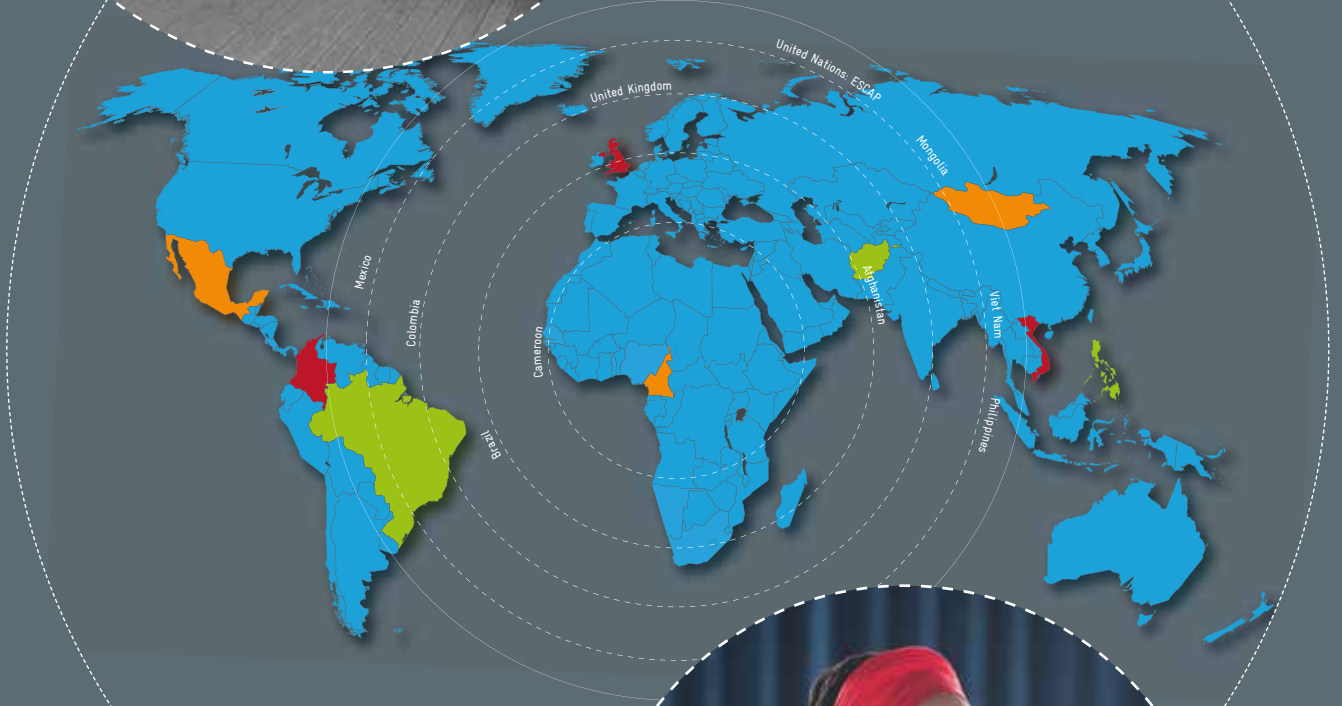
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# Introduction

It is now almost five years since the 2030 Agenda was adopted and four years since the first High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) was held at the United Nations in New York, and in that time the world has made considerable progress in reviewing implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and assessing the results.

In 2018, Partners for Review (P4R) published its first compilation of emerging practices in SDG review. The key lessons learned at the time from the ten examples it presented were that the 2030 Agenda has opened up a range of new opportunities for inclusive policy-making; that carefully building, maintaining and working in partnerships is a key to success; that the 2030 Agenda provides an opportunity to align national programmes and plans; and that peer exchange is conducive to global learning on follow-up and review.

Two years on, in 2020, these initial messages still hold true. However, this second edition of the P4R magazine – again with ten examples from the field – shows how processes have further evolved and how actors in diverse regions and at different levels are using increasingly sophisticated structures and mechanisms to tackle the complexities of SDG review.

One observation that has emerged is that SDG reviews have not only taken root at the national level but are now also being promoted much more actively at the subnational and regional level. In addition, an even greater diversity of stakeholders are being involved in these processes, for example, supreme audit institutions (SAIs), parliaments, the media, foundations and grassroots civil society groups. Correspondingly, stakeholder engagement mechanisms have become more structured and institutionalised, especially in

those countries that have already conducted more than one voluntary national review (VNR).

Furthermore, alternative data and data sources are increasingly being put to the test in efforts to complement official data and thereby filling data gaps. Finally, increasing attention is given to follow-up and review as an engine to spur action to deliver the SDGs.

The ten articles presented in this second edition of the P4R magazine shed light on specific practical experiences, with the intention of providing inspiration and support to others in designing their own solutions. It is our hope that this collection of cases will facilitate peer learning on SDG follow-up and review and contribute to better practices and mechanisms on the ground.

## Acknowledgements

**T**his publication would not have been possible without the input from dedicated individuals who are personally involved in SDG implementation and review processes at different levels.

A key source of information for all articles presented here was extended online interviews with Partners for Review network members, all of whom are representatives of institutions that support SDG follow-up and review processes.

The following individuals, in the order of appearance in the magazine, took time and effort to share experiences and insights from their respective processes:

Partners for Review would like to sincerely thank each of them for their most valuable contributions.

**Ms Adriana Castro González,**  
National Planning Department,  
Colombia

**Ms Patricia Anne R. San**  
Buenaventura,  
Philippine Statistics Authority

**Mr Joseph Enyegue Oye,**  
Sightsavers Cameroon

**Mr M. Nabi Sroosh and**  
**Mr Mirwais Baheej,**  
Ministry of Economy, Afghanistan

**Ms Yolanda Martínez López,**  
Secretary of Wellbeing of Oaxaca,  
Mexico

**Mr Allan MacLeod,**  
Bristol SDG Research and Engage-  
ment Associate, United Kingdom

**Ms Doljinsuren Jambal,**  
UN Resident Coordinator Office,  
Mongolia

**Mr Carlos Lustosa da Costa,**  
Tribunal de Contas da União, Brazil

**Mr Nguyễn Đình Khuyên,**  
General Statistics Office, Viet Nam

**Dr Katinka Weinberger,**  
Environment and Development  
Division, UN ESCAP



# Key lessons from the ten case studies

The following points were repeatedly stated by interview partners and are reflected in the various articles.

## 1. High-level political commitment is crucial

With so many different actors involved, SDG review processes require ownership and commitment at the highest political level. A convincing argument for political leaders is that the SDGs are not an add-on but, in fact, describe well-known problems that every government needs to address. Additionally, many countries, regions, cities and organisations are already doing a lot in support of the SDGs – even if programmes or initiatives are not always labelled in terms of the Agenda. This is also true in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

## 2. The Agenda helps overcome silos and foster policy coherence

The interlinked nature of the 2030 Agenda and the common language it provides represent a great opportunity to foster policy and programme coherence. Integrated SDG planning, implementation and review require intense communication and good co-operation. Stimulating these aspects helps overcome the traditional silos within government and also among stakeholders and between government and other stakeholders.

## 3. Working through umbrella organisations is an effective way to reach out to stakeholders

Working through umbrella organisations and established stakeholder networks allows for the systematic and structured inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives. Asking them to help identify and map who else is working on issues related to the 2030 Agenda has proven to be an effective

way to reach out to actors beyond the 'usual suspects' and ensure no one is left behind.

## 4. Different actors have different roles, and it is important to clarify and communicate them

Different actors have different mandates, interests and capabilities and therefore play distinct and often multiple roles in the review process. Civil society organisations (CSOs) can provide grassroots information that is often not otherwise available to governments. While many of them cooperate with governments in the VNR process, some also put together independent shadow or spotlight reports. SAls, although state agencies, provide independent analyses and assessments of policies and programmes and can thus contribute valuable information on countries' preparedness for the 2030 Agenda and the effectiveness of implementation. With an increasing number and diversity of actors involved, it is important to clarify their different roles and communicate them transparently. This helps build mutual understanding, avoid overlappings and create synergies among them.

## 5. Stakeholder involvement supports continuity

The 2030 Agenda is a long-term framework that often extends beyond any one government's term in power. Changes of government naturally bring with them adjustments in political priorities. However, the Agenda

is an overall framework of goals that are essential for every country and does not prescribe any specific policies. The broad involvement of actors and stakeholders – from the government and different administrative levels as well as the manifold non-state stakeholders – helps preserve the collective knowledge of the Agenda process and sustain continuity, without limiting the ability of governments to set or adjust specific priorities.

## 6. The demand for peer learning is increasing

The demand for peer learning and peer reviews has further increased since the first P4R magazine in 2018 and is becoming more specific. In addition to more general exchanges about challenges and solutions, in-depth exchanges on SDG review and related issues between a small number of countries, with a view to getting feedback on specific issues and learning from each other 'on site', are beginning to take place. Examples include the twinning programme of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in Asia, the joint SAI audits in Latin America and the Caribbean and P4R's first VNR peer exchange in Costa Rica in February 2020.



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## About voluntary national reviews and the High-level Political Forum

When the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in September 2015, UN member states pledged to commit to ‘a robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review process at the national, regional and global levels’. The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) plays a central role in this follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. Once a year, member states present the outcomes of their voluntary national reviews (VNR) to the international community at the HLPF as the basis for debate on implementing the 2030 Agenda and achieving the SDGs. Since 2016, 158 VNRs have been presented by 142 countries. In July 2020, another 47 VNRs (as of 5 June 2020) will be presented at the Forum.

The Regional Forums for Sustainable Development function as complementary regional platforms for assessing progress and exchanging knowledge, good practices and solutions to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. At the SDG Summit in September 2019, the UN Secretary-General issued a call for a Decade of Action to accelerate action and sustainable solutions to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

The national SDG reviews are stated and voluntary in nature. The UN Secretary-General’s reporting guidelines seek to frame the format and content of VNR reports and presentations – yet the 2030 Agenda is non-prescriptive as to national-level proceedings. Absent of binding principles, the review of the Agenda is a norm-building

process in which individual countries’ best practices may inspire others to follow, thereby contributing to setting standards for the international community and raising the level of ambition for implementing the Agenda. Increasingly, subnational entities also conduct inclusive voluntary local or subnational reviews.

Effective follow-up and review requires, among other things, creating and maintaining an appropriate institutional and coordination framework; tailoring the global Agenda to national and sub-national circumstances; fostering horizontal and vertical policy coherence; promoting meaningful involvement of stakeholders, including from civil society, academia and the private sector; and strengthening statistical systems to allow for timely and reliable monitoring.



## About Partners for Review

**P**artners for Review (P4R) is a transnational multi-stakeholder network for government officials and representatives from civil society, the private sector, academia and other stakeholder groups involved in the national review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Initiated on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU), the network's objective is to contribute to developing effective global and national review and accountability mechanisms for achieving the SDGs.

P4R facilitates dialogue and peer-learning on good practices and success factors, provides a safe space to explore challenges and lessons

learned, and shares expertise on new and emerging issues related to national monitoring and review. The exchange focuses primarily on three areas related to the review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda: i) national coordination (whole-of-government), ii) stakeholder engagement (whole-of-society) and iii) addressing data challenges.

Since November 2016, the network has grown to assemble a large number of the countries that have presented their voluntary national review at the HLPF. It unites more than 400 key actors from 80 developing, emerging and industrialised countries as well as from international organisations and UN entities – and is unique in this constellation. Between the scheduled network meetings, dialogue is carried out via an online community and through webinars. In addition, the Secretariat of the Partners for Review compiles knowledge products such as this collection of case studies.



Partners for Review



### P4R NETWORK MEETINGS TO DATE

Previous meetings were held in:

1. Bonn, Germany, November 2016
2. Bogotá, Colombia, March 2017
3. Kampala, Uganda, October 2017
4. Tbilisi, Georgia, April 2018
5. Berlin, Germany, November 2018
6. Oaxaca, Mexico, May 2019
7. Hanoi, Vietnam, November 2019
8. Virtual Networking Days, May 2020





**COLOMBIA:**

## Follow-up and lessons learned from repeated VNRs



Colombia has already presented two VNRs, one at the HLPF in 2016 and the second in 2018. In the first VNR, the National Planning Department (DNP) reported on institutional preparations for the 2030 Agenda and provided an analysis of the national context for each SDG. The second VNR focused on presenting lessons learned from developing the national SDG implementation strategy and on showcasing the contributions of non-governmental stakeholders. Adriana Castro González, former SDG Coordinator at DNP, explains these processes and shares some of her insights.



*“Indicators are important. But there is so much more going on. CSOs and the private sector are doing a lot. We need to capture what everybody is doing, and that’s not possible through indicators alone.”*

ADRIANA CASTRO GONZÁLEZ

## A PROCESS WITH A HISTORY

Colombia’s commitment to the SDGs originates from its experience with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Since 2012, the country had been one of the main drivers for a more integrated global agenda and also contributed to developing the SDGs, so it was only natural for Colombia to be among the first 22 countries to present a VNR at the 2016 HLPF.

Knowing what would be coming, Colombia had begun to set up institutional structures at an early stage to coordinate SDG implementation. The main motivation for presenting the first VNR was for DNP to share that process with other countries and to maintain the internal momentum. This report was written exclusively by DNP as the leading entity of the SDG Commission with little involvement by stakeholders. While DNP felt that this was a good start, it was already clear that the further national Agenda process would need to include other stakeholders.

capacities; (iii) creating territorial strategies; and (iv) partnerships and dialogue with non-governmental actors. These reflect, among other things, some of the lessons learned by Colombia from the MDG process. (See box on page 12)

## SHARING LESSONS LEARNED: 2018 VNR

A key motivation for Colombia to present a second VNR after only two years was to share its experience of the strategy process. Besides documenting central-government action and achievements, DNP also highlighted the contributions of other actors. *“There are so many initiatives out there,”* says Castro.

*“They may not be ‘branded’ in terms of the SDGs, but they contribute a lot. So while reporting about our own process and lessons learned, it was important for us to show what the others are doing.”* This meant approaching stakeholders in a different way, stipulating new types of cooperation with and among them, and appreciating all contributions.

Within the government, for example, defining the entities that would be leading and supporting the different SDGs took a while to negotiate, as working together was a new experience for many of them. Ultimately, that process helped break sectoral silos and introduced a new way of thinking about policy coherence.



## FOLLOW-UP OF THE 2016 VNR

The most important step after the 2016 VNR was for Colombia to initiate a multi-stakeholder process to develop the national SDG implementation strategy. This took more than one year of workshops to raise awareness and build capacity and of consultations and technical discussions with line ministries, local and regional governments, and non-state actors. The resulting policy document was adopted in March 2018. It is built around four main policy guidelines: (i) monitoring and reporting; (ii) strengthening statistical



© National Planning Department (DNP) Colombia 2018

## COLOMBIA'S STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: FOUR POLICY GUIDELINES

### 1. MONITORING AND REPORTING

While it had taken several years to develop indicators for the MDGs, Colombia was keen to develop national SDG indicators quickly and address the interlinked nature of the 2030 Agenda. Taking advantage of the global indicators published in March 2016, Colombia developed a set of national SDG indicators, baselines from 2015, targets for 2030 and intermediate targets. For each SDG target, the guideline also defines a leading entity and supporting bodies, which are dedicated to designing policies and programmes to meet the targets by 2030.

### 2. STRENGTHENING STATISTICAL CAPACITIES

A key challenge in Colombia, as elsewhere, is the lack of disaggregated data. National surveys do not always adequately represent sub-national levels or allow for differentiation of aspects such as gender or age. Another issue is frequency of data collection, with periods being too long for effective use in policy-making. The guideline aims to improve this situation by helping local and regional governments to produce high-quality data and by promoting the use of administrative, 'big' and other data to complement traditional surveys.

### 3. CREATING TERRITORIAL STRATEGIES

While the MDGs were perceived as a central-government agenda, the Agenda principle of leaving no one behind in Colombia means addressing regional inequalities too. For example, while national poverty indices have shown improvements over the last two decades, other data reveal that in some regions poverty levels are double the national average. This guideline addresses capacity development and resource mobilisation, with the aim of supporting all local and regional governments in understanding and implementing the Agenda in their territories.

### 4. BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS AND PROMOTING DIALOGUE WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTORS

Non-governmental actors were hardly involved in the MDG process. The goal of this guideline is thus not only to create awareness of the 2030 Agenda and help stakeholders understand their role in it, but also to take account of what civil society organisations (CSOs), companies and academia are contributing to turn the SDGs into reality.



» Working with local and regional governments brought a range of existing SDG-related initiatives to light. This was very motivating for DNP: *"It's amazing to see the commitment of local governments, to see things moving and developing a life of their own on the ground,"* remarks Castro. After local and regional elections in October 2019, DNP began supporting the new mayors and governors in aligning their development plans with the 2030 Agenda.

With the private sector, a pilot project to design indicators based on the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards – developed with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

country office and the GRI, regional partners and sectoral associations – helped measure businesses' contributions to the SDGs. *"This fundamentally changed our conversation with the private sector,"* Castro explains. *"Initially, companies had been mainly expected to help fill the financing gaps. Appreciating what they are doing and inviting them to take part in the learning process as partners made all the difference."* This project has now evolved into the SDG Corporate Tracker.<sup>1</sup>

With civil society, a mapping exercise with umbrella organisations provided an overview of who is doing what in the country. Public surveys, open for anyone to register



projects, complemented the process and helped identify relevant initiatives. A series of regional workshops involved documenting what CSOs are doing and how.

As a result, the 2018 VNR contains five stories about different stakeholders' contributions to the SDGs. An important element in working with all those stakeholders was the web portal that Colombia developed with support from the Swedish Government, and that became a key communication tool in the process.

### REAPING THE BENEFITS

The participatory strategy development and the 2018 VNR broadened public awareness and strengthened local processes. This also helped carry the vision and spirit of the 2030 Agenda through the transition after the 2018 presidential elections. The broad commitment fostered continuity, and the SDGs provided a transcending element for the 2018–2022 National Development Plan. *"In addition, the new First Lady agreed to be our ambassador for SDG 17,"* reports Castro. *"She had already worked with the private sector and others on some Agenda-related issues. Now she's promoting partnerships around the SDGs, and that works very well."*

Reflecting on the experiences, Castro's main recommendation for

drawing up a VNR is to think beyond indicators: *"We need indicators, of course. But there is so much more going on. CSOs and the private sector are doing a lot. We need to capture what everybody is doing, and that's not possible through indicators alone."*

Secondly, she recommends peer learning: *"Preparing a VNR can seem like an impossible task. But when you talk to peers from other countries, you realise that you're not alone. And you see that they've already solved some of your issues."* Castro appreciated the VNR labs at the HLPF and suggests making them even more interactive, using methods that enable one-on-one exchange. *"The real value is learning from the people behind the scenes, how they carried out their pro-*

*cess and how they dealt with the issues."* She would also like to see VNR processes involving 'thematic peers': people from other countries with special expertise in fields such as stakeholder involvement, data and financing. *"But I'm not sure that will be possible, because of resources,"* she regrets.

Asked about possible further VNRs, Castro explains that Colombia had applied for the 2020 HLPF. But since there were already a number of other countries that wanted to present a VNR, some of them for the first time, the application was declined. Would they do anything differently in their third VNR process? She smiles: *"We have several ideas, but I won't elaborate on them now, since we are not presenting. But any time soon, we will."*





## THE PHILIPPINES:

# Using citizen-generated data for SDG review and follow-up



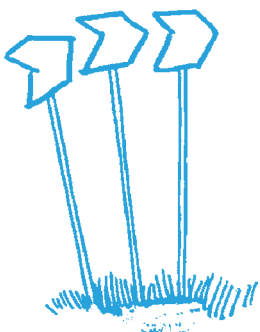
With the country's two VNR processes (2016 and 2019) and consultations on localising the SDG targets, the interaction between the government and CSOs in the Philippines has intensified. In response to interest expressed by both sides, a project launched in 2019 assessed how citizen-generated data (CGD) might be used for official reporting. Patricia Anne R. San Buenaventura, Chief Statistical Specialist, explains the key steps, challenges and results of the project by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21), and describes the PSA's efforts to institutionalise the use of CGD in the Philippines.

Photos: © Philippine Statistics Authority



A data availability assessment for the SDG indicators in the Philippines revealed data gaps in the official statistics on priority sectors. To overcome these gaps, the government and the PSA recognized the need to look for alternative data sources to obtain more frequent and

more disaggregated data. This need was met by expressions of interest from CSOs to contribute data and information to SDG monitoring. In this context, PARIS21 approached the PSA with an idea for a project to assess the potential of CGD for official reporting.



## GETTING STARTED

The four-month project began in July 2019. For initial orientation, the PSA and PARIS21 assessed past CSO involvement in official data generation in the Philippines. The resulting background document identified a few pilot applications of CGD, but no structured approach or institutionalisation. However, several frameworks were found to support CGD use for SDG monitoring: (i) a 2016 PSA Board



Resolution that mandates the PSA to coordinate and mobilize support from the international community, the private sector and civil society to generate and compile SDG-related statistical information, and (ii) the Inclusive Data Charter, which the PSA signed in 2018, and which calls on countries to improve data disaggregation to help ensure that no one is left behind.

## IDENTIFYING CSOS

The first main challenge for the project team was to determine who to work with. This had both a conceptual and a very practical dimension. A well-known definition by Civicus/DataShift describes CGD as “data produced by individuals or their organisations (and actively given by citizens) to directly monitor, demand or drive change on issues that affect them.” However, the PSA was faced with the reality that CSOs in the Philippines provide products and services for a variety of organisations (e.g., local government units, businesses) or conduct their own scientific research. This broadened the range of potential partners, adding complexity to the concept of CSOs and CGD. For the project’s purposes, CGD were defined as “data produced by CSOs, sourced from citizens as respondents, primarily for non-statistical purposes such as monitoring, tracking interventions and/or project monitoring.”

The practical challenge was in the numbers: There are more than 20,000 CSOs, spread all over the country. Having limited knowledge about them and their activities, the PSA decided to work through umbrella CSOs and networks that are known to hold data. In the business sector, the PSA approached foundations and centres such as Philippines

*“CGD can provide very helpful information for policy-makers.”*

PATRICIA ANNE R. SAN BUENAVENTURA

Business for Social Progress, Philippine Business for the Environment and the Grameen Foundation. They also reached out to CSOs such as the Forest Foundation Philippines, the Jaime V. Ongpin Foundation, the WWF and Save the Children. Another partner was the South-East Asia Secretariat of ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability. Nevertheless, creating and maintaining a comprehensive list of CSOs with data was – and remains – one of the main challenges for the PSA in its work on CGD.

## THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The next step was to develop a questionnaire for data collection. Various international NGOs and selected national CSOs helped refine the questions. The questionnaire was introduced at the CGD launching workshop in late July 2019, which was attended by representatives of 14 CSOs and several government agencies. The umbrella organisations then helped distribute the questionnaire to further CSOs in the country.

From July to September, the PSA received 54 responses from the 80 CSOs that were identified using snowballing technique due to time constraints. Obtaining information







from such diverse organisations was a new experience. In the past, the PSA had worked mainly with government and selected business data. Now the boundaries of the new data ecosystem were extended to explore data from all kinds of sources – and quality became a concern that required special attention. For instance, most of the CGD were found to be generated only once as part of project outputs of the CSOs. In order for these CGD to be useful for SDG monitoring and to perhaps complement data generated from official statistics, however, CGD must be released on a periodic basis (e.g. annually or biennially) and should provide data on specific sectoral groups or at sub-national level.

One issue involved the questionnaire itself. Although great effort had gone into developing an easily understandable form, the replies revealed some misunderstandings about the statistical concepts used. This made follow-up necessary to validate and complement the information. The other issue concerned the diversity of methods and tools that CSOs apply. Assessing each of the data holdings showed that the organisations use a variety of approaches to collect and process data. A special task force was established to address these issues.

### AN INNOVATIVE TASK FORCE TO DEFINE THE QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

The mandate of the interagency Task Force (TF) on CGD for Official Reporting is to discuss and agree on the CGD quality assurance framework and help institutionalise the efforts and recommendations of the PSA-PARIS21 project. The TF

includes representatives from three government agencies and the University of the Philippines. Unusually, apart from these four entities, the majority of members are CSOs. As San Buenaventura explains, *“This is a landmark committee, because it is the first time that the Philippines has an interagency TF composed mainly of CSOs.”* The quality assurance framework was used to assess CSO data holdings in terms of (a) relevance of the data, (b) credibility of the source, (c) timeliness and punctuality of releases, (d) documentation of methods used and (e) accessibility of aggregate data. Based on this analysis, a score allocation matrix was subsequently applied to identify which CSO data holdings have the potential to be used as inputs for SDG monitoring.

### FINALISING THE PROJECT AND MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

In October 2019, the PSA organized the national CGD Dissemination Forum and several local forums to share the preliminary assessment with all CSOs that had returned the questionnaire. This gave them the opportunity to understand which quality dimensions of the delivered data require improvement. At the same time, the organisations were able to comment on and help refine the quality assurance framework. *“The dissemination forum was also a way to recognise the CSOs for their inputs,”* says San Buenaventura. *“Their active participation was essential for*

*us to complete this project.”* The final project report will be released in the first half of 2020.

Looking to the future, all eyes are now on ensuring sustainability. After obtaining a commitment from the National Statistician (the head of the PSA) to continue, a roadmap was agreed to institutionalise CGD use in the Philippines. Some elements of this roadmap are:

- Simplifying the questionnaire to make it easier for CSOs to understand the questions and provide reliable information.
- Building on the existing inventory of CGD and evaluating further high-potential data holdings through technical reviews and dialogue with CSOs and related government agencies.
- Capacity building of CSOs, with customised information on statistical concepts and procedures. In the course of the project, many CSOs expressed interest in learning how the PSA carries out surveys, uses estimation techniques, etc. to enable them to implement best practices in their own organisations.



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- Encouraging funding support for CSO efforts on CGD to address concerns regarding sustainability of CSO activities aimed at generating CGD for SDG official reporting.
- Exploring the potential of local-level CGD to support monitoring of the Philippines' regional and local SDG indicators, e.g. by pilot activities in a specific area or province where a lot of CSO data are being produced. These efforts may be combined with the PSA's new responsibility to support an existing community-based monitoring system. The two initiatives are complementary, so staff and resources might be pooled.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

CGD in the Philippines cannot replace official statistics yet as these CGD only cover the priority project

areas of CSOs and information relies on informant and beneficiary reports, which may be limited in scope. However, according to San Buenaventura, using CGD is a recommendation in and of itself. *"This information about specific areas and groups was not available to us before,"* she remarks. The project was the first time that the Philippines' statistical system had looked into CSO data holdings in the context of the SDGs since the PSA was established in 2013, and it revealed great potential for non-government data: *"Frequent, disaggregated and readily available CGD can help our policy-makers act in a timely manner on priority issues."*

In operational terms, she recommends starting to involve umbrella organisations and networks at an early stage so that they can canvass support from their members.

Moreover, it is key to involve government agencies early on to build trust and help create a cooperative spirit between the agencies and the CSOs. The technical assistance from PARIS21 provided the opportunity for the PSA to reach out to a large number of CSOs working on SDGs.

San Buenaventura's third recommendation is for expert statisticians to be realistic in their expectations. CGD can complement official statistics, and the PSA has invested a great deal of effort in quality assurance. However, in most cases, CGD will not meet the formal standards of a statistics authority. It is a matter of finding the right balance between statistical standards and the possibilities of CSOs – a balance from which everyone can benefit.



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## CAMEROON:

# Civil society spotlight report

Inspired by an example from Kenya, the Cameroon Civil Society Forum on the SDGs was set up in 2018 with the aim of pooling and strengthening civil-society contributions to achieving the SDGs. A key objective and the first main task of the forum was to develop a spotlight or shadow report to complement Cameroon's 2019 VNR. In developing the report, the forum engaged in an intense and constructive dialogue with the government. Joseph Enyegue Oye, Country Director of Sightsavers Cameroon and Chairperson of the forum, explains how the forum came about and how its members developed the report.

### CAMEROON CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ON THE SDGS

Knowing that Cameroon was listed to present a VNR at the 2019 HLPE, Joseph Oye visited the SDGs Kenya Forum Secretariat in 2018 and was impressed by how Kenyan CSOs engage with the government with one strong voice. Back home, he shared the experience with the International NGOs (INGOs) Forum at a meeting in Yaoundé.

Following discussions concerning how this example could be replicated in Cameroon, the INGOs Forum tasked Sightsavers (lead) and some other international CSOs with setting up a working group to explore options to replicate the Kenyan model; this led to the creation of what was to become the Cameroon Civil Society Forum on the SDGs.

From an early stage, the group felt it would be wise to communicate

these activities to the government, both for the forum to present itself as a partner and also to receive additional input. The draft terms of reference (ToRs) were therefore shared with the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development and the Ministry of External Relations, both of which commended the initiative for the inclusive nature of the future forum and its timeliness in view of the VNR process.



After further discussion among all group members, the final ToRs were adopted and the forum was officially launched. Its objectives include awareness raising and capacity building for the SDGs; public policy engagement and lobbying; networking and experience sharing; and data and research.

### PUTTING TOGETHER THE SPOTLIGHT REPORT

The new forum immediately started working on a complementary report to the government's VNR. The first decision was whether to focus solely on the five SDGs under review at the 2019 HLPF or to cover all the SDGs. After thorough discussions, the forum decided to look at the status of implementation of all 17 SDGs in the country as a baseline.

Further CSOs were then identified to ensure geographical representa-

tiveness and the broadest possible inclusiveness. Thematic sub-groups engaged with organisations in different sectors to discuss specific issues, challenges, activities and the overall status of SDG implementation.

Based on these consultations, each thematic group submitted a draft version of their findings, which were compiled by the forum's secretariat and reviewed at a two-day consolidation workshop in December 2018. Twenty-five international and national CSOs from across the country attended that workshop. Subsequently, the forum sought further feedback from international partners such as Partners for Review (P4R), Together 2030, Partners for Sustainable Development, and Sightsavers International. To finalise and validate the report, another two-day workshop with over 40 international and national CSOs was held in February 2019. The final challenge was to ensure that



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the entire report was available in Cameroon's two official languages, English and French. A small team worked with translators to master this task.

The report was then submitted to the government as the forum's contribution to the VNR. It presents the forum, the methodology used, the contributions by CSOs and the status of implementation of all 17 SDGs in the country. The latter includes views on Cameroon's institutional framework to implement the 2030 Agenda as well as assessments of challenges for each SDG and recommendations to address these challenges.

### DIALOGUE WITHIN THE FORUM AND WITH THE GOVERNMENT

With the successive increase in the number and diversity of CSOs participating in producing the report, it was no surprise that differences of opinions arose from time to time. *"Some were actually very critical, while others tended to complain about a lack of this or that,"* recalls Oye. *"But our recurrent message was: let's do this in a constructive way and focus on proposing solutions."* At meetings and workshops, for example, small groups were therefore asked to discuss different views, to be as specific as possible and to provide concrete examples of any challenges or suggested solutions. The groups

then presented their results to the plenary, which decided what would be included in the report. It was the Chair's task to ensure that these discussions were constructive.

The point of emphasising non-conflictual discussions, specific assessments and concrete suggestions was to maintain a constructive dialogue with the government. *"The government viewed the forum as a group they could trust,"* he says, *"and we were able to provide relevant information regarding the SDGs."* Based on this constructive spirit, the government asked the forum to write a summary of the spotlight report, which was included in the VNR as an annex. Asked how CSO independence was ensured in this process, Oye underlines: *"The report was written by the*

*CSOs themselves without consulting the government. And the summary for the VNR was included exactly as given, without any changes made by the government."*

### SUCCESS FACTORS AND CHALLENGES

All of this was a great success for the forum. Asked about factors that made it possible, Oye mentions several points: Firstly, the participatory and inclusive approach regarding geographical representation, vulnerable groups and thematic coverage gave the forum a great deal of credibility. Secondly, the constructive engagement with and among all the stakeholders also eased interactions with the government. Moreover, the forum had secure resources:

*"Our recurrent message was: let's do this in a constructive way and focus on proposing solutions."*

JOSEPH ENYEGUE OYE



*“Sightsavers International provided financial and logistical support throughout the process,” says Oye.*

He also emphasises the importance of networking. *“Both the SDGs Kenya Forum and the P4R network meeting in Berlin were really important. The P4R meeting helped me better understand what civil society gains from participating in the VNR process,”* Oye remarks, adding: *“The sessions on VNR presentations and on data were particularly useful. I realised how citizen-generated data can complement official data to help influence policy and practice.”* He also commends the sharing of relevant materials, such as the UN Secretary-General’s voluntary common reporting guidelines for VNRs. *“All this helped us write the spotlight report,”* Oye explains.

#### SUCCESS FACTORS IN THE PROCESS

- Inclusive nature of the group
- Constructive engagement
- Credible group and clear process
- Financial support from Sightsavers International
- Networking (P4R Meeting, SDGs Kenya Forum)

Among challenges encountered in producing the report, Oye mentions capacity issues. *“Many still find it hard to understand the 2030 Agenda, and some do not have the technical or organisational capacity to contribute,”* he comments. In his view, it therefore makes sense to rely on a core number of CSOs in this kind of process because not all are able to engage and contribute. Another challenge is bringing the different voices together. As Oye remarks, *“CSOs are diverse, and they have very diverse views.”* To strengthen coordination and cooperation in the future, more effort will be devoted to networking and sharing experience among stakeholders.

Ensuring the necessary capacity is also one of his key recommendations to others when producing a spotlight report: *“You need three to four committed people to move the process forward,”* he explains. *“It all boils down to people, technical*

*capacity, financial resources and time”.* Another important recommendation is to still keep engaging in the overall VNR process: *“One thing should not exclude the other; the two are complementary”.* Finally, he reiterates that it is important to have an inclusive and representative group engage in the process, and that recommendations should be made in a constructive, non-conflictual manner: *“All stakeholders and the government need to be informed about the process and know that civil society is preparing this report.”*

Overall, Oye is satisfied with the process and its result. The forum has now been recognised by the government and the UN as a credible, representative, inclusive stakeholder group for monitoring, review and accountability, and its members are being invited to attend and contribute to many official events. Now post-VNR, the forum will continue to engage with the government and other stakeholders to support awareness raising, advocacy and capacity building and to demand accountability for the SDGs in Cameroon.







## AFGHANISTAN

# SDG review in a fragile context

The Government of Afghanistan has been actively working on the SDGs since 2016. It presented its first VNR at the HLPF in New York in July 2017. The Ministry of Economy (MoEc) is the government's lead agency on SDGs. Two experts from the Ministry, Mirwais Baheej, Director General of Planning and Consolidation, and M. Nabi Sroosh, Director General of Policy & Results-Based Monitoring share some of their insights and provide recommendations for others.



*“You need to convey that the SDGs are not a plan, but a framework that has something for everyone.”*

NABI SROOSH

## THE CONTEXT

Fragility and violent conflict are increasingly recognised as serious obstacles to the SDGs. About two billion people worldwide live in countries that are affected by these conditions. The OECD ‘States of Fragility 2018’ report forecasts that, if this issue is not addressed, more than 80 per cent of the world’s poorest could be living in fragile contexts by 2030.<sup>2</sup>

In Afghanistan, long-lasting armed conflict has weakened government institutions and economic performance, with 55 per cent of the population now living under the poverty line. While development progress has significantly slowed since 2014, the country is deeply committed to the 2030 Agenda.

## SDG NATIONALISATION, ALIGNMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

In 2016, Afghanistan established an Executive Committee to oversee SDG nationalisation, alignment and implementation. The Committee ensures that all budget entities include the SDG targets and indicators in their development strategies and policies. The MoEc is the designated SDG focal point and mandated to lead national coordination, planning, monitoring and reporting on SDG implementation.

To nationalise the SDGs, the MoEc’s SDG Secretariat conducted comprehensive consultations to develop targets and indicators suited to the country’s special context and circumstances. The consultations involved stakeholders as diverse as government agencies, civil society organisations, the private sector,



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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/publications/states-of-fragility-2018-9789264302075-en.htm>





academia, international development partners, women and youth groups. As a result of this process, Afghanistan adopted 110 targets and 177 indicators for 16 of the 17 global goals.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, and in close cooperation with the Executive Committee, the MoEc worked with government agencies to align Afghanistan's SDGs with development programmes and priorities. Each goal, target and indicator was assigned to one of eight budgetary sectors, which form the basis not only for Afghanistan's SDG document but for all national and sectoral strategies. The Ministry continues to work closely with all relevant stakeholders to ensure the successful implementation of the SDGs.

### SDG PHASES IN AFGHANISTAN

- Nationalisation:  
March 2016 – May 2017
- Alignment and Integration:  
July 2017 – December 2018
- Localisation and Prioritisation:  
January 2019 – September 2020
- Implementation:  
January 2021 – 2030



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### ACHIEVEMENTS

According to Baheej and Sroosh, initially it was difficult to convey the message that the SDGs were not something external but an opportunity to align national programmes and plans. *“It took quite some time to convince people that the SDGs are no different to their daily development practice. Rather, they are all about the people, economic development and the planet,”* says Baheej.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan has achieved some noteworthy successes. The strong engagement of stakeholders in the process led to vibrant awareness-raising campaigns throughout the country, mobilising and building partnerships with different groups and bringing all sectors of society together. Furthermore, donors have aligned their programmes with the SDGs and most of the national development projects are aligned with the global goals. *“Development plans countrywide are now very much SDG-oriented,”* explains Sroosh. Afghanistan's economic model is under development

and it will be based on the SDGs of Afghanistan. The Strategic Framework 2021-2030 for implementation of the Agenda, which will align all the programmes and projects in the country, is currently under consultation. Another success story was the VNR presentation at the HLPF in July 2017. *“We presented the report in a unique manner with a video clip, voices from Parliament, the President's adviser and NGOs, followed by a short presentation and government statements,”* says Sroosh. *“This was very well received by the international audience at the HLPF.”*

### CHALLENGES AND THE WAY AHEAD

As with other conflict-affected countries, Afghanistan faces a number of challenges that impede progress on the 2030 Agenda. The first is the lack of accurate and authentic data to track progress. Although foreign partners are helping to address this issue, a significant amount of effort still needs to go into building a comprehensive database of SDG-related information. The lack

of data also made it difficult to draft, structure and present Afghanistan's VNR. Government agencies helped improve the report's consistency and validate its accuracy. When presenting the VNR to the HLPF, "creativity was our solution," Sroosh says proudly.

Another challenge relates to weak private-sector participation. "We are good at engaging all government entities. But a whole-of-society approach is more difficult," says Baheej. A key task for the government will be to find ways to improve its engagement with the private sector. "We need to get ideas from other countries," Baheej remarks. However, he and Sroosh acknowledge the increasing involvement of academia in the process: "to numerous events held in Afghanistan to build awareness and engage stakeholders, academia is becoming increasingly engaged in the SDG process", they explain.

Furthermore, there are capacity deficits and a need for more technical know-how. Capacity development is critical to ensuring effective policy-making, implementation, data gathering and analysis. In addition, mobilising and sustaining resources for SDG implementation remains difficult in Afghanistan. After many years of support, donor funding is diminishing. When asked about the role of foreign partners, Baheej and

Sroosh underline that continued international support will be crucial for Afghanistan to implement the 2030 Agenda successfully. "Even if peace comes to the country, we will still need support for some time," says Sroosh.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

How can the SDG implementation and review be kept on course? Based on their experiences, Baheej and Sroosh recommend that countries in fragile and conflict-affected settings focus on communication and promote multi-stakeholder engagement. "What we've learned from the entire process is how much communication matters," says Baheej. By visiting the provinces and speaking with a variety of stakeholders in

2017 and 2018, they realised that language is particularly important. "You need to adapt the language to different stakeholders, for example CSOs and academia," he suggests. By developing tailor-made presentations, it was easier to gain stakeholder buy-in: "We adapted the Agenda and the SDGs to the language and needs of the people, especially at the local level." Also, it is important to communicate that the government is not imposing the Agenda on the population: "You need to convey that the SDGs are not a plan, but a framework that has something for everyone," says Sroosh. Finally, he suggests that governments implement an oversight mechanism that involves everyone in a meaningful manner and helps monitor and report on progress with the Agenda.



*"We adapted the Agenda to the language and needs of the people, especially at the local level."*

MIRWAIS BAHEEJ





## OAXACA, MEXICO:

# SDG review at state level

The 2030 Agenda has brought winds of change to the State of Oaxaca. Multi-stakeholder participation in the public policy process and integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development are new experiences for all involved, and they are beginning to transform the relationship between citizens and the state government. Yolanda Martínez López, Secretary of Wellbeing in Oaxaca, explains how the process has been unfolding and what role the voluntary sub-national review has played in it.





Oaxaca is the fifth largest of Mexico's 32 federal entities. It is one of the most biodiverse and most ethnically diverse states in the country – and with two thirds of the population living in poverty, it is also one of the poorest. What made the 2030 Agenda interesting for Oaxaca is its multi-dimensional approach to fighting poverty and its non-political nature. As Martínez López explains: *“Political will at the highest level is key, but the Agenda principles and the SDGs transcend party politics.”*

### A COUNCIL TO INTEGRATE MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

The SDG implementation process formally began in early 2018, when the Governor of Oaxaca issued a decree to establish the State Council for the Fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda. The Council includes representatives of all stakeholder groups and is organised in three committees: environmental sustainability, economic growth and social inclusion. It is the first time that the Government of Oaxaca has worked closely with civil society, business, academia and municipalities on public policies.

The non-government Council members were identified through a public call, which triggered a large number of applications. The selection was based on two main criteria: Firstly, organisations had to be registered with the national tax

office – a criterion that reflects the spirit of the Agenda, as formalisation leads to better jobs and social security. Secondly, they had to have a good reputation and propose an experienced individual. A total of 23 representatives of non-governmental stakeholder groups were appointed as Council members.

### ONE YEAR INTO THE PROCESS: OAXACA'S FIRST VOLUNTARY SUB-NATIONAL REVIEW

The Council's rules provide for regular reviews of Oaxaca's 2030 Agenda process. By March 2019, the Council had been working for about one year, which seemed like a good moment to reflect on what had been achieved.

Additional motivation for the review was sparked by the P4R network meeting in Oaxaca, which was scheduled to take place in May 2019 and at which the Council was keen to share its experience with international partners. In fact, the idea of hosting that event resulted from Martínez López' participation in an earlier P4R meeting: *“When I saw all this knowledge and experience sharing*

*among different countries, I thought: I want this in Oaxaca. I want all my colleagues to gain knowledge from others, so we get a better idea of how to do this.”* The governor was supportive of the idea, so the process was ready to get started.

### CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

This first review was prepared by the Technical Committee of the Council and coordinated with other stakeholder representatives. During the process, Oaxaca encountered two main challenges: indicators and civil society involvement. The lack of indicators limited the ability to measure progress with the SDG targets. The review therefore mainly considered the process, and this first report ended up being more qualitative than quantitative. To improve the situation in the future, the Council began working with both the Oaxaca branch of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and the state's own statistical office, the latter of which is now formally represented on the Council. Current work focuses on developing indicators and closing data gaps.

*“If we want to reach our objectives by 2030, the people on the ground need to be involved. Because every small action counts.”*

YOLANDA MARTÍNEZ LÓPEZ







The challenge of involving civil society relates to the traditional role and self-perception of CSOs. They are spread all over the state territory and work mainly in the field. The review was the first time that they had been asked to participate in a policy process. Coming together, working for a common cause and challenging the state government in the process was an entirely new experience. For both sides, it ultimately meant re-considering the role of civil society, not only as 'recipients' of public policies, but as partners and drivers of social change.

An additional challenge in implementing the 2030 Agenda is to empower Oaxaca's 570 municipalities, 417 of which are ruled by traditional systems, where leaders typically stay in office for only 1–2 years. This high fluctuation weakens the capacity of the municipalities. A cooperation project with GIZ addressed this issue using an existing legal process: Local development plans need to be approved by the state government. This is an entry point for the government to encour-

age and support municipalities to craft longer-term visions and plans. The project worked with ten pilot municipalities. The resulting experience and recommendations were compiled in a manual and summarised in a video to help local leaders integrate the SDGs into municipal development plans.<sup>4</sup>

### IMPACTS AND OUTLOOK

Gradually, this new integrated process is beginning to change the relationship between the state government and the people. By creating the Council, involving representatives of all stakeholders and backing the process at the highest political level, the Government of Oaxaca is trying to prove that everybody is part of the 2030 Agenda and that citizens can indeed drive social change. The Council provides a safe environment for people to propose public policies, discuss implementation and engage in follow-up. At the same time, it helps the government communicate the idea that people also need to take change into their own hands. Balancing the leader-

ship and the supporting role of the government can at times be quite complex. But everybody is learning.

Martínez López' ambition for the future is to get many more people on board. *"Whether or not they participate in the policy process,"* she says, *"we want everybody to feel that*





*they are part of the SDGs. People need to be aware of the problems. But they also need to know that they can create a better world – and that every action counts.*” Communicating this will require considerable effort, as Oaxaca’s population is very diverse and widely dispersed, including many isolated indigenous communities with their own languages. In addition to social media, the communication strategy will rely heavily on radio and television, as these are used by most people.

Asked about connections across the nation, Martínez López mentions two main bodies: The first is the National Council for the 2030 Agenda, which is led by the federal government and meets twice a year. These are large and important meetings, but she feels that they might benefit from some more interactive elements in small groups. The second is the National Conference of

Governors (CONAGO), which has a working group on the 2030 Agenda. *“This is a space where we share the knowledge and experience from the states,” explains Martínez López. There are also bilateral contacts. “For instance, Michoacán recently contacted me, as they were interested in our work with civil society and academia. So we shared our knowledge and experience directly with them.”*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

According to Martínez López, the commitment and work at sub-national level is key to moving the 2030 Agenda forward. In Mexico, the states are the link between the federal and the local level; they are close to the people and familiar with local conditions. Moreover, multi-stakeholder processes at sub-national level can help ensure long-term continuity, for example when national governments change.

Martínez López raises three points for others conducting a voluntary sub-national review:

1. Both implementation and review begin with commitment from the highest political level: *“If our governor had not been willing to push this agenda, things would not be working as they are now.”*
2. It is vital to involve the population, especially young people: *“Many people ask how they can be part of this. The answer is: Every action counts. Recycle waste, create formal jobs, avoid corruption – all this is part of the Agenda and a way to participate.”*
3. It is very important to use the review for self-reflection: *“This is not a competition. It is an honest reflection of what has been done, the positive things and achievements, but also the problems and challenges.”*



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## BRISTOL, UNITED KINGDOM: Voluntary Local Review – Connecting the SDGs with local realities

Bristol was the first city in the UK to produce a Voluntary Local Review (VLR), the equivalent of a VNR at city level. The report was presented at the HLPF in New York in July 2019. Allan MacLeod, Bristol SDG Research and Engagement Associate, shares some of his observations and experiences from the SDG review at local level.



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### BRISTOL'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SDGS

The Bristol approach to the 2030 Agenda started in 2015, when the city was European Green Capital and many organisations and stakeholders began considering how the SDGs were relevant to them.

A number of meetings towards the end of the year brought together people from across the city to discuss the Agenda. This led to the formation of the Bristol SDG Alliance.

The Alliance is a network of organisations from all sectors of society,

including academia, business, charities, third sector organisations and Bristol City Council. Having evolved from a group of local stakeholders, it used existing networks and organisations to draw in new actors. The Alliance currently has more than 140 members discussing and working on implementation of the SDGs in the city of Bristol and advocating for the 2030 Agenda in the wider region and across the UK.

To strengthen the process of localising the SDGs, the members of the SDG Alliance successfully bid for funding from the University of Bristol. As a result, the Alliance commissioned a report in 2016 on “The SDGs and Bristol”, which assessed the relevance of the goals for Bristol, the city’s successes and challenges in meeting the global goals, and the landscape of existing stakeholder activities. To push things forward, the University of Bristol decided to fund the role of an SDG focal point

for the city. In this capacity, Allan MacLeod focuses on three areas: SDG research, city engagement through the SDG Alliance, and engagement with the City Council.

The Bristol SDG Alliance’s objectives are to use the SDGs to:

- drive the policy framework for long-term city-region development and resilience;
- increase awareness and share best practices, information and activities within and among Alliance organisations and networks;
- monitor progress and enable the city region to hold itself to account; and
- clearly connect community and city-level action to national and global challenges.

In Bristol, planning, implementation and review of the SDGs go hand in hand. As a result of the Alliance’s work and the report, the SDGs were

*“It is important that cities take on the 2030 Agenda, because they are the ones closest to the people that are affected.”*

ALLAN MCLEOD



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integrated into Bristol's One City Plan and linked with local priorities. Seventy-five of the 169 SDG targets were found to be directly relevant to the city and were mapped onto initiatives within Bristol's One City Plan. This was a key success for the Alliance in localising the SDGs in Bristol.

The One City Plan was developed through extensive internal council consultations and through external citizen and city stakeholder engagement and aims to serve as a long-term vision for organisations and individuals across the whole city. *"There is an explicit dedication within the One City Plan to meet the SDGs by 2030,"* emphasises MacLeod and explains that it took several years to develop the One City Plan with many different stakeholder groups: *"What we found was that a lot of the issues that people wanted to see delivered and tackled were issues that were within the SDGs."* He highlights the fact that the SDGs offer a common language for all city partners – public, private and third sectors – across all

### BRISTOL'S ONE CITY PLAN

was launched in January 2019. It sets out the city's key challenges up to 2050 and brings the city together around a shared vision. The approach unites a wide range of public, private and third sector partners that share the aim of making Bristol a fair, healthy and sustainable city and is updated annually to reflect new challenges and priorities within the city.

three dimensions of sustainability. The VLR was produced with a second grant from the University of Bristol especially dedicated to this purpose. In addition to a comprehensive review of statistical indicators, the process involved an extensive consultation exercise: Information for the VLR was collected and shared through the networks of the SDG Alliance, the network

of councillors and a variety of other stakeholder forums that exist in the city, such as the multi-faith forum, the disability forum, the LGBT+ forum and the inclusive cities forum. The VLR process thus helped engage the wider city, reaching organisations and groups that had not previously been involved.

### LESSONS LEARNED

According to MacLeod, *"the review process is all about iterating, updating and renewing."* Prior to being presented at the 2019 HLPF, the draft VLR was discussed at one of the city gatherings that are held every six months to reflect on the future direction of the city. MacLeod states that the VLR will be fed into the next stage of the One City Plan: *"Where we have seen challenges in our SDG work, we have worked to reflect them in the One City Plan and its priorities."*

There are significant lessons to be learned from the VLR process in Bristol. These include: reaching out and learning from others; using existing networks to engage the wider city; engaging representatives from all three dimensions of sustainability; seeking political support; and engaging citizens and communities. As MacLeod states: *"There is more weight to the argument for the SDGs if you have universities, major businesses, charity groups and the environmental sector all engaged and interested in this issue."*

However, it took a lot longer than initially expected to get the funding approved for this process, leaving less time to develop the actual report. Given the time constraints, finding the right data was one of the challenges. Moreover, urging stakeholders, including the City Council, to adopt the SDGs as a development framework was difficult at times.

*“We had to help them recognise that a lot of what they were doing was already contributing to the SDGs,”* states MacLeod. On a positive note, the Bristol experience shows that it is possible to convince city leaders that the SDGs do not necessarily create extra work but can help them achieve their existing goals.

Overall, the SDG review in Bristol has led to increased engagement with the 2030 Agenda, even beyond the city boundaries. Many local action plans and the City Council’s corporate strategy and business plan are now being mapped against the SDGs. There is a clear mandate to consider the SDGs in future plans with the City Council. Moreover, having undertaken the review, *“other cities and international organisations are now asking us questions,”* remarks MacLeod. Through local and national events, Bristol is sharing its experiences and lobbying for better representation of the local level in the national reports. For example, to help motivate other cities to conduct a VLR process, Bristol is engaging with the multi-stakeholder

network UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD), which supports organisations that advance sustainable development and helps facilitate delivery of the SDGs in the UK. Moreover, Bristol is part of several international city networks that support SDG engagement and exchange of experiences among cities across the world.

A priority for the near future is a gap analysis of Bristol’s VLR. This “review of the review” is to be fed back into the One City Plan to further increase the momentum of the 2030 Agenda process. Furthermore, Bristol has launched a VLR handbook to help other cities understand how they can implement the SDGs, and to provide guidance to those interested in producing a VLR. Another initiative focuses on education and awareness raising: a Global Goals Centre in Bristol is being developed to help children and citizens understand the relevance of the SDGs to their own lives and the impact that their choices have on others around the world.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE VLR

- Build on existing networks and expertise
- Engage citizens and communities
- Demonstrate the value of the SDGs for people’s lives
- Use anchor institutions (e.g. universities)
- Seek political support (e.g. from the mayor)
- Designate a focal point and/or a small team to push things forward
- Reach out and learn from others

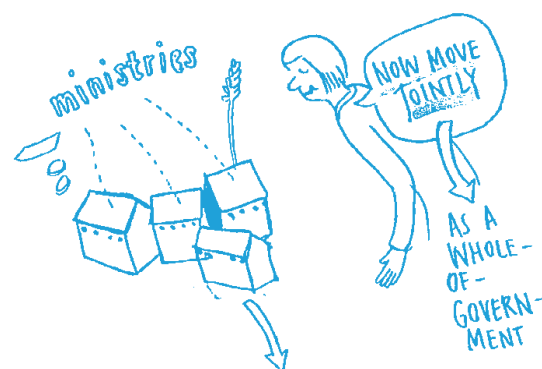
Asked about recommendations, MacLeod highlights that it is worth considering the variety of ways of doing a VLR. For instance, the funding can come from a university, but there are also many other options such as consultancies or charities. Secondly, he underlines that city-wide engagement is a very powerful tool to understand what everybody is working on. *“Using existing networks to communicate and disseminate information will help you reach a wider audience,”* he suggests.

Against the backdrop of his experiences, Macleod thinks that a VLR as carried out in Bristol raises public awareness and interest in the SDGs. *“It is important that cities take on the 2030 Agenda, because they are the ones closest to the people that are affected,”* he stresses. *“Without cities working to adopt the goals, you end up with a large disconnect between the national government and the local person experiencing it.”*





## Enhancing policy coherence



Enhancing policy coherence is one of the main challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda. To address this issue, Mongolia's NDA led a systematic review of existing policies to assess their alignment with the SDGs. This helped detect inconsistencies between different policies and establish the need for coordination. Doljinsuren Jambal, former Director of Development Policy and Planning at the NDA and current Development Coordination Officer at United Nations Mongolia, describes the process and shares lessons learned.



Mongolia was an early adopter of the SDGs. In 2016, the Mongolian parliament approved the Sustainable Development Vision 2030 as the country's overarching long-term development strategy. In an effort to foster policy coherence and alignment, the NDA agreed with the government in 2018 to undertake a review of sectoral and inter-sectoral policies. As a first step, the NDA screened existing policy documents to identify relevant short-term, medium-term and long-term policies. The result of this exercise was a list of 200 sectoral and inter-sectoral policy documents and a first impression of inconsistencies between individual policies and of policies with the SDGs and with Mongolia's Vision 2030.

### ALIGNING POLICIES WITH THE 2030 AGENDA AND LOCALISING THE SDGS

In response to these initial findings, the Prime Minister decreed the establishment of an inter-ministerial working group, chaired by the

Head of the Cabinet Secretariat and involving all relevant line ministries and government agencies. The first task of the group was to conduct a more thorough policy coherence assessment to support the long-term sustainable development vision. The NDA provided methodological guidance, templates and training for working group members to ensure consistency in the analyses and assessments. According to Jambal, this was the second-best solution: *"Ideally, the assessment should have been done by independent researchers. But because it concerned 200 policies, that would have required a lot of resources,"* she says. The work was therefore done internally, i.e. by the working group and its members. By June 2019, the NDA had received and compiled all the results and prepared them for submission to the Cabinet.

The next task of the working group concerned localisation of the SDGs. Eight subgroups were established, each consisting of representatives from different sectors, including



NGOs and academia, to identify national SDG indicators and targets. “Basically, we divided the 244 SDG indicators into eight clusters, and each subgroup reviewed one cluster of indicators,” Jambal explains. Again, the NDA provided the necessary technical support, templates and training for the working group members to draft long-term and intermediate targets and indicators and to assess the related data availability. The results were then fed into national stakeholder consultations for feedback. After a final round of comments on the consolidated feedback, the set of national targets and indicators was finalised in December 2019, setting the ground for results-based monitoring of the 2030 Agenda in the country.

### LOOKING BEYOND 2030

In another initiative, the Head of the Cabinet Secretariat launched a process in March 2019 to develop a long-term vision document for Mongolia up to 2050. The draft Vision 2050, which was finalised with inputs from line ministries and academic experts, was submitted to parliament for discussion at the end of 2019. The UN Office in Mongolia also provided feedback on the draft Vision 2050 and its alignment with the 2030 Agenda. “We expect the existing Sustainable Development Vision 2030 to be amended as part of Vision 2050,” says Jambal. “The indicator target sets we developed will then also support effective implementation of the 2050 Vision.”

To ensure continuous improvement of policy coherence in Mongolia, the NDA is also advocating for an amendment of the Law on Development Policy and Planning. This law regulates the type of policies

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### EXAMPLE: AIR POLLUTION

Air pollution is a complex development challenge in Mongolia, especially in the capital city and during winter time, affecting public health and productivity while creating substantial costs to the economy. Unequal opportunities and extreme weather caused by climate change have forced thousands to migrate to the capital and live without central heating. Many Mongolians burn coal to stay warm in cold winters, a key cause of the capital’s hazardous air. The government banned the use of raw coal in households in 2019, which led to the use of pellets for heating homes. Although this reduced pollution by up to 50% in Ulaanbaatar, lethal accidents occurred in households due to the incorrect use of pellets.

To address these issues, the Mongolian VNR (2019) specifically reviews and analyses the problem of air pollution from a cross-sectoral perspective. Besides looking at all 17 SDGs, the report identifies key bottlenecks to address the problem of poverty-induced air pollution. These include: weak policy coherence and coordination; poor policy implementation; insufficient capacities; and lack of effective participation and knowledge among stakeholders. The review has led to a set of concrete policy recommendations on how to address the causes and consequences of air pollution that can be implemented in a coherent manner. Mongolia aims to apply this model to overcome other development hurdles in the country too.





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that Mongolia adopts, who is in charge of which policies, and what the accountability mechanisms are. *“This is quite an important law, and it needs to be amended to overcome our existing challenges regarding policy alignment, coherence and institutional coordination,”* Jambal explains. Moreover, there is an ongoing process to amend Mongolia’s constitution, strengthening the powers of the Prime Minister in an effort to improve political stability and advance economic development. The NDA has been advocating for policy coherence and sustainability aspects to be emphasised in this amendment.

## CHALLENGES IN THE PROCESS

In Jambal’s experience, one of the main challenges relates to staff capacities, as not everybody is fully familiar with the SDGs or the complex issue of policy coherence. *“We therefore needed to provide detailed guidance for the working groups to deliver their products,”* she says. Another challenge encountered in the process was resource allocation. *“We felt that, rather than developing another long-term vision up to 2050, resources should have been focused on improving the existing Sustainable Development Vision 2030, mainstreaming it with the SDGs, and looking at how all this will be implemented and prioritised in the medium to short term,”* she adds. However, things being as they are, actively contributing to the draft Vision 2050 was a constructive way to deal with this challenge.

Overall, Jambal assumes that, based on the results of the policy coherence assessment, actual adjustments can only be made and policies

*“Without policy coherence and strong coordination, the SDGs will not be achieved.”*

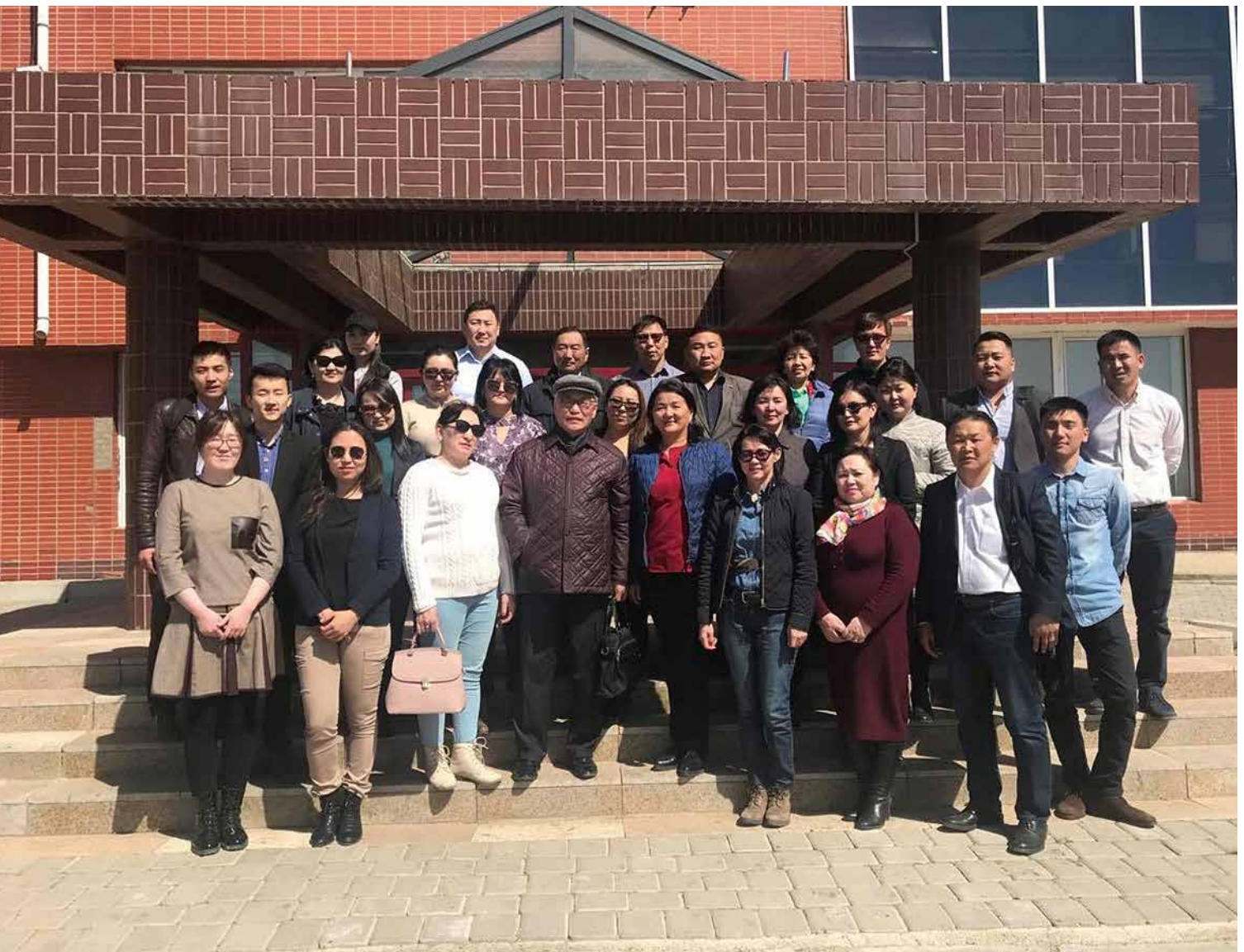
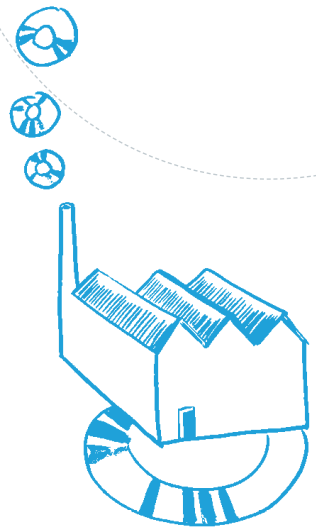
DOLJINSUREN JAMBAL



aligned with the SDGs after the upcoming parliamentary elections in June 2020. In the past, changes in government priorities have sometimes resulted in many new policy documents without ensuring consistency and coherence, which in turn has impeded effective policy implementation and results.

Reflecting on her experiences, Jamal highlights that it is critical to not only focus on coherence between different policies, but also to ensure

proper links with financing, monitoring and reporting. In her view, this requires strong leadership and coordination. *“I am 100% convinced that without policy coherence and strong coordination, the SDGs will not be achieved,”* she says. Overall, she thinks that the 2030 Agenda is a powerful tool for governments to assess and review their existing policy system. *“To succeed, we cannot just implement individual SDGs, because each SDG is linked with all other SDGs,”* she concludes.







BRAZIL:

## The evolving role of supreme audit institutions in SDG reviews



Brazil's supreme audit institution (SAI), the Tribunal de Contas da União (TCU), has taken a very active role in the 2030 Agenda process. As the leader of the Technical Commission for the Environment (COMTEMA) of the Organisation of Latin American and Caribbean SAIs (OLACEFS), the TCU has led several international projects to assess government preparedness and implementation of the SDGs. Carlos Lustosa da Costa, Director of the Environmental Audit Area at the TCU, speaks about the approach, practical experiences and lessons learned.

Mr Lustosa, many people wonder what SAIs have to do with the SDGs. How would you describe the role?

**LUSTOSA:** I would say that SAIs have a very relevant role, because they contribute to accountability, transparency and efficiency of public administration. This puts them at the core of effective and inclusive implementation of the 2030 Agenda. For example, when we performed the SDG preparedness audit in Brazil, we met with the President's Office. Brazil had signed the Agenda, but there were no concrete actions yet. So we asked: How do you intend to implement this? Is there a strategy, a commission, a follow-up system? I think one of the main tasks for SAIs is to encourage the government to organise itself.

You mentioned the SDG preparedness audit. What exactly is that?

That was a very interesting recommendation from the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI), our global umbrella organisation. They had realised that SAIs need to be proactive and get involved in the SDG process from the beginning. This is a long-term agenda, so it would not make sense to wait until 2030 and then just assess the outcomes. On the other hand, you cannot ask the government in the first year what it has achieved. By asking about preparedness, you change the focus. You are not demanding results; instead, you are offering support. This establishes a more cooperative and constructive dialogue with the public managers.

It sounds almost as if the SAI acts as an advisor to the government.

No, that is not our role. As SAIs, we can identify the outcomes of public policies, ex ante or ex post. We analyse all the documents and





## WHAT IS A SUPREME AUDIT INSTITUTION?

A SAI is an important actor in a country's accountability chain. It is a government entity whose external audit role is established by the constitution or the supreme law-making body. SAIs are traditionally responsible for their oversight of public expenditure, but they are increasingly taking a more comprehensive view of reliability, effectiveness and efficiency of policies and programmes, contributing evidence for informed policy-making.<sup>5</sup>

speak to the different stakeholders. We do not only look for mistakes or problems; we also identify opportunities and room for improvement. The point is that we are independent, so our task is to arrive at and present evidence-based findings. The decisions rest with the government.

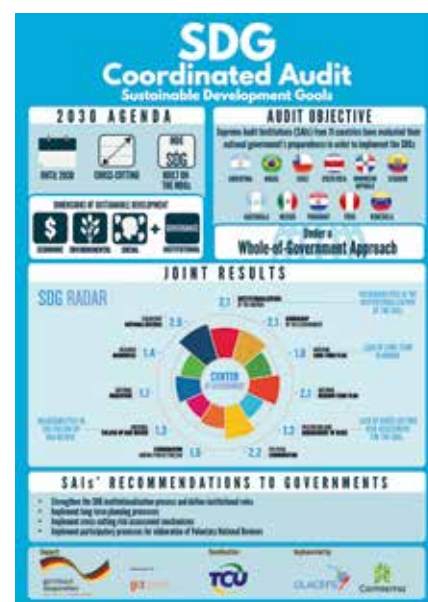
How did you go about the preparedness audit? What steps did you take?

Firstly, I should say that we did not do it on our own. Brazil led the project, but we worked with SAIs from other countries too. I will explain that later. As for the steps, our first challenge was how to define preparedness. We could not find a defini-

tion, so we discussed and came up with the following: 'Preparedness is the presence of governance structures' (for instance, a strategy, a coordination structure, accountability mechanisms, a follow-up system). We think that this is the foundation. Many governments still work in silos, but the Agenda requires a whole-of-government approach. It is this integration of public policy that we looked at in the preparedness audit.

How did you do that? What methods did you use?

We adapted a methodology from the SAI in the United States called F-O-D: fragmentation, overlap and duplication.<sup>6</sup> For the SDGs, we added a fourth dimension: the omissions, to identify possible gaps. Another novelty was that we worked with a broad range of actors. As SAIs, we usually audit a specific policy and the related agency. But given the importance of integration, we needed to look at all the stakeholders and their interaction. This made the process more complex. In addition, we had to consider the time frame. For many governments, a four-year plan is 'long term'. But you cannot eliminate poverty or address climate change in just four years. That is why we assessed whether there is a longer-term strategy and if so, whether it contains any incoherencies or omissions.



You said that you collaborated with other SAIs on these audits. How did that work?

In OLACEFS, the Latin American and Caribbean group of SAIs, we have a tradition of international projects called 'coordinated audits', where SAIs from several countries audit a topic of common interest. At the beginning of a project, we meet



<sup>5</sup> Source: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/external-audit-supreme-audit-institutions.htm>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.gao.gov/framework\\_duplication/overview](https://www.gao.gov/framework_duplication/overview)





to plan the approach. Then we all use the same methods and tools for the audit. At the end, we meet again to share our findings and consolidate a common panorama. The objective is to obtain both national analyses and a regional assessment on the topic of the audit.

**What are the benefits of this international cooperation?**

There are many. The 2030 Agenda is a common language, so we also need to develop a common language for the audits. Our exchange of knowledge and experience is an important element. Each SAI has its own context, but we have common challenges, so we share good practices. There is a very solid capacity-building component. We offer online courses on specific topics, and we have in-person workshops. At the planning workshop for a coordinated audit, we agree on the strategy, the methodology, all the paperwork and our communication. And we meet again to share our findings before the report is finalised. It is a complex process, but it is very productive, because you bring together SAIs with different capacities and resources. By working together, we can overcome the gaps.

**So you used this coordinated approach for the preparedness audit?**

Yes, that was our first coordinated audit on the 2030 Agenda. Brazil led the project, and SAIs from 11 countries in our region participated. It was very interesting. We actually audited two things: general preparedness of governments to implement the Agenda, and specific preparedness to implement target 2.4 on sustainable food production. A little later, 16 OLACEFS members also participated in a global project led by INTOSAI that focused on preparedness to implement SDG 5, gender equality.

**Is there a difference between whether you audit general preparedness or preparedness for a specific goal or target?**

Not really, it is mostly the scope that changes. At a strategic level, there needs to be a governance structure to implement the Agenda as a whole. And a specific goal or target requires specific governance. For target 2.4, for example, we mapped out all the related public policies – and there were plenty. One of the findings in Brazil was that the government has a public programme to stimulate sustainable food production. But in another programme, large amounts of financial subsidies are given to farmers to buy pesticides. That is just a small example, but it shows that if you take this integrated view to evaluate policies,

you will find contradictions. These can make policies ineffective or inefficient – or both.

**What was the impact of the preparedness audit? Did anything change because of it?**

In Brazil, for example, our questions prompted the government to create the National Commission to implement the SDGs. In addition, there is now work in progress to elaborate a long-term strategy. And the government adopted the F-O-D methodology to assess policies, both *ex ante* and *ex post*. I would say the preparedness audit has encouraged a change of mindsets, away from silos and towards more of a whole-of-government approach. But it is a process, and it takes time to consolidate these things.

**Now that you have done the preparedness audits, what are the next steps?**

We are now carrying out implementation audits. There is an ongoing coordinated audit to assess the contribution of protected areas to SDGs 14 and 15, life below water and on land. Brazil is leading this project too, and this time 18 SAIs are participating. In the preparedness audits, we looked mostly at structures and processes. Now we are assessing whether the governments



have achieved the targets. This also provides an opportunity for us to follow up on the preparedness audits. Again, we are all using the same approach and methods – adapted to each country's context, of course. We will soon have the findings workshop, so we will see how these goals are being implemented.

Overall, what would you say are the key challenges and success factors for these SDG audits?

One of the main challenges was to change our own mindset. As I mentioned, as auditors we are not used to taking this multi-dimensional view. I think one of our success factors was to understand that the SDGs are not just an environmental agenda, so we established multi-disciplinary teams. This makes the process more complex, but having different expertise and perspectives leads to richer results. Another difficulty was that initially, some governments seemed to be hesitant. The 2030 Agenda is what we call a soft law; it is not mandatory. But the SDGs describe well-known problems that every government needs to address. What is new is this integrat-



ed approach that involves partnerships and collaboration. So a very important success factor was that we started with the preparedness audit, as it allowed us to hold discussions with the government without immediately pressing for results.

Based on your experience, what recommendations would you make to other SAIs and auditors regarding the Agenda?

My main recommendation is about the mindset. The Agenda, even each SDG, is not a specific policy. So you have to analyse the entire context,

the background, the interaction between different policies and stakeholders, all the positive and negative effects. As SAIs and as auditors, we need to adopt a systemic view for this kind of analysis.

Do you also have any recommendations for other stakeholders who may be less familiar with SAIs?

Many people think that SAIs just audit government accounts, purchases, contracts and so on. But our mission extends to evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of public policies, and everybody can benefit from our analyses. We produce and publish in-depth reports that are based on evidence. These are not personal or government opinions; they are independent, impartial views. Universities, NGOs, businesses – everybody can use this information to help them in their activities. I would encourage anyone interested in a topic of societal relevance, especially the SDGs, to go to their SAI's website. The chances are that they will find a report on that topic, and it will be a valuable source of information for them.







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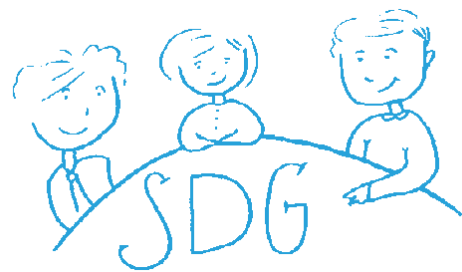


## VIET NAM:

# Developing and harmonising indicator systems

In an effort to bring the long-term development strategy into line with the 2030 Agenda, Viet Nam elaborated the SDG National Action Plan, translating the 169 global targets into 115 national targets. To monitor and evaluate implementation, Viet Nam issued a set of sustainable development statistical indicators. Nguyễn Đình Khuyến, Deputy Director of the Methodology Standards and IT Department of the General Statistics Office (GSO), explains how this set was developed and harmonised with other indicator systems in the country.





Viet Nam's statistical law describes the set of sustainable development statistical indicators as a system of interrelated ministerial and sectorial indicators. A total of 22 ministries and agencies are tasked with collecting and synthesising data on the country's 158 SDG indicators and making them available to the GSO for compilation. The GSO is part of the Ministry of Planning and Investment and is mandated to evaluate and approve indicators from all line ministries, aiming to harmonise and unify the country's many statistical indicator systems.<sup>7</sup>

#### DEVELOPING THE SET OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STATISTICAL INDICATORS

To arrive at the set of sustainable development statistical indicators, the GSO first assessed and compared the compatibility of national targets

with the global framework and the similarities and differences between them. Next, it analysed the feasibility and suitability of the global indicators in the Vietnamese context. The evaluation also identified a baseline and data sources for each national SDG indicator. To leave no one behind, Viet Nam further evaluated the indicators regarding gender equality, people with disabilities, labour, children and the growing population. In accordance with national legal provisions, the set of indicators was formulated by an editorial team that included representatives from the GSO, line ministries and other organisations such as the Viet Nam Women's Union and the Viet Nam Union of Science and Technology Associations. Finally, the results were shared at several technical and consultative workshops, where line ministries, experts, and international and development organisations provided comments and feedback



<sup>7</sup> These include: the national statistical indicator system; a line ministry indicator system; and indicator systems for different sectors (sustainable development, gender, youth) and administrative levels (provinces, districts, communes).





Photos: © Statistical Methodology and Information Technology Department, GSO Viet Nam



on the draft list and the content of each proposed indicator.

## INDICATORS ON GENDER EQUALITY

Achieving gender equality is a key goal for Viet Nam. SDG 5 is one of the goals with most targets in Viet Nam and has 16 indicators. Gender equality is also addressed in 54 indicators of other SDGs. The full set of 78 gender development indicators, which Viet Nam issued in July 2019, reflects the National Gender Equality Strategy, the UN Minimum Set of Gender Indicators, and the Core Set of Gender Indicators for Asia and the Pacific.

So far, the data for the 158 national SDG indicators are mostly collected from official sources. Non-official data are sourced, for example, from the Survey of Public Administration

Performance Index (PAPI), national research on women's health and life experiences, and the Child Labour Survey. *"There is a huge demand for data, and resources are scarce,"* says Khuyển. In his view, non-official data can play a significant role in filling data gaps for monitoring and evaluation at national level.

## CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The limited resources and capacities of official statistics constitute major challenges for Viet Nam in measuring progress on all SDG indicators: So far, there are data for only about one third of the country's 158 SDG indicators, and these are often not sufficiently disaggregated. However, collecting and using data from new sources (e.g. big data) brings about unresolved issues of data legitimacy and information technology. Data and information sharing between the GSO and the line ministries poses another challenge.

To address these issues, the GSO has set up a coordination mechanism with the ministries, aiming to avoid overlaps that may result in excessive operational or financial burdens. Furthermore, it is complementing the National Statistical Survey Programme to collect information on indicators that so far have no data. *"We have been able to mobilise financial and technical support from international organisations to collect data for new targets and develop methods of calculation,"* explains Khuyển. Research is also being undertaken on the use of administrative data, e.g. from the tax department. Moreover, the GSO is testing the waters of big data. According to Khuyển, it has great potential to support the statistical process from beginning to end.



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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER COUNTRIES

To tackle the complex task of differentiated SDG monitoring, *“each country needs to evaluate its particular conditions and compare them with the global criteria for SDG indica-*

*tors,”* Khuyến recommends. He also thinks that it is crucial to identify priority goals and targets for specific periods, to allocate the required resources and to develop an effective implementation plan. Finally, he strongly recommends a) establishing mechanisms for coordination and

data sharing among stakeholders and b) mobilising resources for data collection and monitoring from a variety of sources: the state budget, the private sector and international organisations.







UN ESCAP:

# Role and experiences of a UN regional commission in supporting VNR processes

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is the largest inter-governmental platform in the region, with 53 member states and 9 associate members, ranging from Turkey to the Pacific Islands. ESCAP's strategic focus is to foster implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including VNR processes. It does so by performing its key functions of (i) supporting intergovernmental processes, (ii) providing advisory services and capacity building and (iii) making knowledge products available. A fourth initiative, the twinning programme, was added in 2019 to promote peer learning on VNRs. Dr Katinka Weinberger, Chief of ESCAP's Environment and Development Policy Section, explains how the different programmes work.



Photos: © UN ESCAP



## REGIONAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

ESCAP's annual Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development serves as a preparatory meeting for the HLPF. It usually focuses on the set of SDGs that are under review at the HLPF and provides a space for member states to exchange experience and good practices concerning the process of conducting a VNR. In 2019, about 1,200 participants attended this event, of whom around one third were government officials, one third came from civil society and one third represented other groups such as UN agencies, other international organisations, academia and the private sector.

Given that the forum is an intergovernmental meeting, it follows a formal structure with clearly assigned speaking rights. To enable a dialogue among all stakeholders about VNRs, a special session is offered to participants from countries that will be presenting a VNR at the subse-

quent HLPF. In 2019, a total of 12 countries took part in this session. In addition to government officials and UN resident coordinators, participants included representatives from parliaments, supreme audit institutions (SAIs) and various stakeholder groups. Questions were used to prompt interactive discussions concerning challenges and solutions that the countries had identified.

The plan for the future is to slightly adapt the structure of that session. About half of the 11 countries from the region that are going to present VNRs at the 2020 HLPF will be doing so for the second time. *"Their VNRs have usually already achieved a different quality, and they are struggling with different issues,"* explains Weinberger. In her experience, the 'first-timers' tend to be most interested in discussing the process and the steps they have taken to develop a good VNR. For the 'second-timers', the issues are more about follow-up: how to use the VNR recommendations, how to match

them with appropriate funding and how to ensure proper budgeting, etc. *"We are therefore thinking of giving separate spaces to first-timers and second-timers to discuss their different issues."*

## COUNTRY-LEVEL SUPPORT

For technical capacity building on VNRs, ESCAP cooperates closely with the UN resident coordinators and their teams to support a number of countries every year. In 2019, for example, ESCAP worked over several months with eight of the 14 countries from the region that are developing a VNR. Beyond conceptual input and training, this involved helping the partners identify country-specific answers to all questions that are relevant to them. Issues covered included the following:

1. Clarifying the overall VNR process, e.g., what are time frames,







- how to work with different agencies and organisations and how to structure the various inputs.
2. Data and statistics, e.g., where to find the required data, what data sources may be tapped beyond official statistics, and how to work with and present these data.
  3. Stakeholder engagement, e.g., whom to bring on board for the VNR, how to engage with CSOs, how to adequately reflect their inputs and how to communicate back to them.
  4. Using the VNR to support a multi-dimensional policy approach: systems thinking, i.e., looking at problems and identifying solutions in an integrated way.

The knowledge products complement technical capacity building. Much of what goes into capacity building is based on previous research and analyses. ESCAP has tools on stakeholder engagement and integrated assessments, for example, which are shared in the capacity building programmes. In

addition, it is launching a dedicated online course on VNRs hosted on the ESCAP SDG Help Desk.

### FOSTERING PEER LEARNING ON VNRs

Catering to the increasing demand for peer learning and south-south exchange, ESCAP recently incorporated a new element: the twinning programme, which helps create a closer working relationship between pairs of countries. Each pair consists of one country that is conducting a VNR for the first time, and one for the second time. *“We have been thinking about this for a while,”* says Weinberger. *“However, funding constraints kept us from launching it before 2019. And since there are now countries doing a second VNR, we felt it makes sense to bring first-timers and second-timers together.”* In this pilot round of the programme, four countries were paired up: Uzbekistan with Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan with Armenia. All four of them are preparing a VNR for the 2020 HLPE.

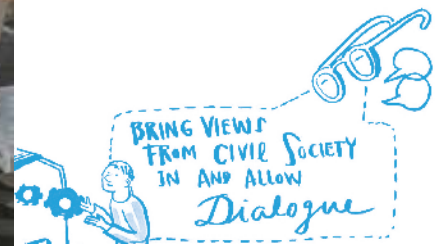
For Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan it is the first time, while for Georgia and Armenia it is the second.

At the heart of the programme is a week-long study tour, during which the first-timers visit the second-timers. The groups were deliberately kept small (between 12 and 16 people) to enable in-depth quality discussions. Nevertheless, each delegation had representatives both from the relevant ministries and from civil society, parliaments, the private sector and academic groups. The individual participants were selected through a dialogue between the national focal point, ESCAP head office and the UN resident coordinator – a rather time-consuming process. However, the organisers felt it was important to ensure that the participants represent diverse stakeholder groups to help foster the understanding that all stakeholders need to be involved in a VNR.

Thematically, all elements were incorporated that, based on ESCAP’s previous experience, require the most attention: data and statistics, how to engage with various stakeholders, and looking at inter-linkages. Going forward, financing and budgeting are to be included as well, as this issue is increasingly raising concerns, especially for the second-timers. In terms of meeting formats, one element was direct peer exchange, e.g. a parliamentarian with a parliamentarian, or a business person with a business person. The other format consisted of dialogues among all representatives from both countries. The UN resident coordinators were heavily involved throughout the visit, as they will continue to provide day-to-day support at country level.



Photos: © UN ESCAP



The feedback on this initiative has been very positive. Given that all participating countries are in the process of developing a VNR, everybody picks up new ideas from the dialogue. Since the first-timers come from another country, they look at things in a different way and ask different questions, so the second-timers also get new suggestions. *“There is definitely high interest in peer learning, in our region and at global level,”* Weinberger remarks.

However, there are no formal calls or an application process for the twinning programme so far, because funding has not yet been secured. The pilots were funded from the regular budget to support capacity building in countries conducting a VNR, with the demand for this specific activity having been expressed by the participating countries. *“If we can secure funding for this programme, we will be happy to formalise it,”* states Weinberger. For now, a proposal has been made to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) to consider allowing the twinned countries to present their VNRs together at the 2020 HLPF, thus helping them and others take joint learning forward.

## SUCCESS FACTORS AND OBSERVATIONS

According to Weinberger, the most important success factor in a country’s VNR process is sustained ownership and commitment from the government. In her experience, a structure right under the prime minister’s office helps provide the political clout. Furthermore, she emphasises the need for countries to understand that a VNR is not just a report that can be easily put together from existing resources or by international consultants. *“Stakeholder involvement is key, and you need to start early bringing different ministries, agencies and other stakeholders to the table,”* she says. *“I think that is something that many countries underestimate.”*

One area where Weinberger thinks that everyone’s efforts still need to be reinforced is in helping countries ensure that no one is left behind – neither in implementing the Agenda nor in the VNRs. She observed that many countries are still struggling to show how they are involving the most marginalised groups and how they will work with them going forward. *“I think that collectively, we need to support countries better to achieve that particular principle of the 2030 Agenda,”* she concludes.

Overall, Weinberger feels that this is where ESCAP and other UN regional organisations can make a real difference. *“When we have the opportunity early enough to make countries aware of these things, then the results are usually better,”* she says. *“We have seen some very impressive VNRs from our region, and we believe we have made an important contribution through our support to the countries.”*

*“There is definitely high interest in peer learning, in our region and at global level.”*

KATINKA WEINBERGER



## List of Acronyms

BMU	Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und nukleare Sicherheit (Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety), Germany
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development), Germany
CGD	Citizen-generated data
COMTEMA	Comisión Técnica Especial de Medio Ambiente (Technical Commission for the Environment), OLACEFS
CONAGO	Conferencia Nacional de Gobernadores (National Conference of Governors), Mexico
CSO	Civil society organisation
DNP	Departamento Nacional de Planeación (National Planning Department), Colombia
F-O-D	Fragmentation, overlap and duplication
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (German Agency for International Cooperation)
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
GSO	General Statistics Office, Viet Nam
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
INEGI	Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (National Institute of Statistics and Geography), Mexico
INGOS	International NGOs Forum, Cameroon
INTOSAI	International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MOEC	Ministry of Economy, Afghanistan
NDA	National Development Agency, Mongolia
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OLACEFS	Organización Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Entidades Fiscalizadoras Superiores (Organisation of Latin American and Caribbean SAIs)
P4R	Partners for Review
PAPI	Survey of Public Administration Performance Index, Viet Nam
PARIS21	Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century
PSA	Philippine Statistics Authority
SAI	Supreme Audit Institution
SDGS	Sustainable Development Goals
TCU	Tribunal de Contas da União (Supreme Audit Institution), Brazil
TF	Task Force
UK	United Kingdom
UKSSD	UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development
UN	United Nations
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
VLR	Voluntary Local Review
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WWF	Worldwide Fund for Nature







Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Sitz der Gesellschaft / Registered offices  
Bonn und Eschborn / Bonn and Eschborn

Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 32 + 36  
53113 Bonn, Deutschland / Germany  
T +49 228 44 60-0  
F +49 228 44 60-17 66

Dag-Hammarskjöld-Weg 1 - 5  
65760 Eschborn, Deutschland / Germany  
T +49 61 96 79-0  
F +49 61 96 79-11 15

E [info@giz.de](mailto:info@giz.de)  
I [www.giz.de](http://www.giz.de)