Report of the Workshop for the 2018 Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF, held on 4-5 December 2017, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland

Welcome and opening

The Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, Ms. Olga Algayerova, delivered opening remarks. She noted that bringing the global, regional and national levels of the United Nations closer together is one of the goals of the ongoing UN reform, pointing to the present workshop as an example of such collaboration. She stated that the national level is key for SDG implementation, and for reporting on progress achieved. In recent years, the VNRs at the HLPF have become an essential instrument to share experiences at the global level at the high-level political forum (HLPF). She added that the Regional Commissions are contributing to the global HLPF through regional fora on sustainable development. Ms. Irena Zubcevic, Chief of the SIDS, Oceans, and Climate Branch of the Division for Sustainable Development, DESA, made introductory remarks. She thanked the Executive Secretary for the kind hospitality extended by the Commission in hosting the workshop. She noted that representatives of the four other Regional Commissions had been invited and would be participating in the workshop. Thereafter she provided an overview of the workshop, emphasizing that is rationale rested on peer learning, and in this connection, she thanked the representatives of 2016 and 2016 VNR countries who had agreed to participate and share their experiences and lessons learned.

Preparatory process – main elements and institutions

A representative of the Division for Sustainable Development, DESA, provided a brief overview of highlights from the 2017 VNRs. He noted that work undertaken to prepare the [Synthesis Report of the 2017 VNRs](#) showed qualitative improvements in the reports, with countries adding more analysis to the description of progress in their reports. The session on the preparatory process covered the question on institutional arrangements for the VNRs that vary across countries. For instance, many countries have established inter-institutional commissions, often with the President's or Prime Minister's office as key coordinator.

In the opening panel discussion, two countries that conducted VNRs in 2016 shared their experiences. The representative of Switzerland explained that a gap analysis had been carried out, which examined every target and where Switzerland stands, as well as steps that could be taken where implementation is off-target. With respect to Switzerland's second VNR, the aim is to present a comprehensive report to government in May 2018, with a view to presenting a more concise version at the HLPF. The preparatory process is carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Environment. As regards coordination of implementation, there is a task force in place until a final institutional set up is decided upon, under which there is a working group, led by the MFA and Ministry of Environment. An advisory group provides a link with civil society, which is expected to play a part in galvanising interest and awareness, including parliamentarians. Compared the first VNR, which was undertaken on a compressed timeframe and described processes that would be undertaken in the future, the 2018 review would be more thorough, dealing in depth with implementation and monitoring, including all targets.

The representative of Colombia outlined elements of the whole-of-society approach adopted in his country, connecting government institutions through inter-institutional commissions

where sectoral ministries are represented; the national statistics office as provider of data for an evidence-based approach; and creating space for other actors (universities, private sector) to show how they are implementing the Agenda. With respect to a monitoring system, an open data system that will be accessible to all, is being put in place.

The discussion following the panel presentations highlighted that there existed different approaches about how the VNR report is conceived. On one hand, the report is treated as in the first place a government report, although with the views of stakeholders are taken into account, in line with the consultation processes followed. On the other, the VNR can also viewed as more akin to a national report, which endeavours to reflect the views of both government and other actors (typically private sector and civil society). Similar points were covered in the course of the session on stakeholder engagement (see below. It was highlighted that one key to a successful consultation process is the need to establish rules of engagement from the very beginning.

During the discussion, it was highlighted that as regards the main elements of the VNR process, almost all countries started by conducting a mapping exercise between the SDGs and existing national development and sectoral strategies. On that basis, countries identified lead ministries and agencies for individual SDGs and associated targets. Responding to a question from Sri Lanka on the composition of the institutional commission, the representative of Colombia explained that it included representatives of the planning department, the ministry of foreign affairs, environmental affairs, the office of the President, national statistics office, international aid agency, and agencies covering social issues. The commission oversees the preparation of the VNR. He also stated that Colombia intends to link national priorities to SDGs. Similarly, Greece intends to organize its review according to eight interconnected national priorities that cover all SDGs. All ministries were involved in an exercise to rank the SDG targets, in order develop a prioritization; this exercise also had the effect of promoting interest and involvement across government. On a question from the representative of Spain about experiences with involving the local government, the Swiss representative underlined the importance of implementation at the sub-national level. He noted that this level of government can be a leader, in some instances moving ahead more rapidly than the national authorities. In Colombia, steps are being taken to support the integration of the SDGs in local development plans, which is already the case in most large cities, and where local level indicators are being put in place to monitor progress.

Addressing the question of the motivation for conducting a second VNR, Switzerland noted that the first review primarily highlighted Switzerland's commitment to the Agenda, whereas the second one will be a full-fledged report reporting on implementation. Countries preparing their second VNR stressed that they plan to integrate lessons learned from their first VNR. Colombia intends to broaden the number of stakeholders involved in preparing the VNR. On the question of shadow reports, the representative of Spain stated that parliament had requested the government to consider shadow reports to be prepared by SDSN, WWF, and the Spanish UNICEF national committee.

Format and content of report and presentation at the HLPF

A representative of the Division for Sustainable Development, DESA, provided a brief overview on the format and content of the report and presentation at the HLPF. She outlined some of the lessons learned, including a focus on quality not quantity, seeking to include more analysis,

lessons learned and examples, showcasing strengths and shortcomings, spelling out areas where support was needed, and spelling out the next steps for implementation. In the panel discussion that followed, three countries that had conducted VNRs shared their experiences and lessons learned.

The representative of Mexico underlined the need to ensure that the report was as true a representation of the country situation as possible, thus avoiding falling into a "beauty trap". The importance of starting preparations early could not be over-emphasized, because consultations take time, especially in cases where the consultation mechanisms with civil society, academia, and private sector are not in place already. He also noted the importance of following the voluntary guidelines. On the 2018 report, he stated that the President's office is the coordinating body for drafting the report. A directory of contact persons has been established in each ministry for communication, feedback, and raising awareness; however, the level of the contact points varies and frequently within ministries they do not talk to each other. There is a need to ensure that the focal points have the capacity, decision-making authority, and understanding of the Agenda. Additionally, questionnaires have been sent to each ministry to identify SDG priorities. The submission is being mapped to establish a linkage between the identified priorities and the actual work of the ministries concerned. As regards activities at other levels of government, a directory for the subnational mechanisms is being compiled, and 17 out of 32 state-level mechanisms will be ready by the end of 2017.

The representative of Ethiopia explained that the 2017 VNR was approached as an opportunity to garner ownership for the SDGs and to localize them. It was to further amplify the national development plans in line with the SDGs. The report highlighted the government's commitment and national ownership in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. An assessment of the initial implementations of the SDGs is that some are already integrated into the national plan, challenges were identified, and a two-year implementation plan has been drafted. The National Planning Commission, led by a cabinet-level minister, is the main coordinating body. It established the contacts with the ministries and reflected the implementing agency's view. As regards the presentation at the HLPF, he stated that the delegation was composed of sectoral ministers, parliamentarians, and civil society, including women, private sector, and youth.

The representative of Indonesia stated that the 2017 VNR process was led by a national coordination team that includes government, non-state actors, academia, NGOs, and civil society. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Development Ministry are leading the SDG implementation. For the VNR, seven teams of a task force (per each goal, composed of government and non-state actors) were established to draft the report. Online and off-line consultation and endorsement were undertaken on the report, including a statistical data in annex. Each goal had a coordinator who served as a relevant lead body for the report, supported by the statistical and other technical entities. Mapping of the interconnectedness between the theme of the HLPF and 7 goals of the VNR was carried out, as well as being linked to two priority themes for Indonesia: economic sustainability and human capital development. The ministers of foreign affairs, national development planning, civil society, business, and philanthropic groups were present at the VNR presentation.

Points raised during question and answer session included the following: it is advisable to have a government representative not a consultant lead the drafting of the report; where possible the

report should cover all 17 goals rather than focusing on a few considering the universality and the interconnectedness of the Agenda; encouragement to prepare a succinct yet comprehensive report, aided by setting a page limit at the outset; fostering approaches that cement SDG implementation place across election cycles; and alignment of the budget with the SDGs, including initiatives at the sub-national level.

Topic A – determining national priorities and areas of progress

The following were some of the points emerging from the small group discussions on the above topic:

Participants discussed what their areas of priority were and how they had been identified. It was widely agreed that no one size fits all, that there was a need for country-specific approaches to identify priorities. However, most countries had undertaken a mapping or gap analysis to determine how to approach priorities. Some agreed that the approach should be to start from existing policies and build from there to determine priorities. Others found it helpful to use the selected goals to be reviewed by the HLPF and use those as a guide for the review. Several countries mentioned how they had aligned their national development plans with the SDGs.

On the question of strengthening data, participants agreed that it was a challenge. Some mentioned that different institutions or different levels (national, federal, local) had distinct kinds of data collection thus there was a need for better coordination. The importance of tailoring the indicators to the national context was mentioned, as not all UN indicators were relevant for countries to tell their stories. Likewise, indicators at the regional level were important, so that regional progress could be measured. The issue of strengthening data was both a matter of lack of funds but also lack of human resources and capacity.

Regarding international cooperation, it was noted that priorities for international cooperation should derive from national development priorities and plans (e.g. investment, ODA, DRM, statistics). Donor coordination was mentioned as one of the challenges in developing countries while participants also presented some approaches to overcome this challenge. Jamaica and Sudan mentioned how they had discussed with donors and UN agencies in the country to see what was funded and where the gaps were, while Armenia mentioned an SDG lab established with the UN country team to connect the dots on implementation and funding gaps. Participants agreed that countries from the North could also learn from the South, who have ample experience on MDG implementation.

Topic B – Creating ownership, enhanced coordination and coherence.

The following were some of the points emerging from the discussions on the above topic:

Many countries had set up a mechanism to bring ministries and agencies to work across the institutional boundaries by way of either establishing a new leading entity such as a Steering Committee/General Secretariat or utilizing an Inter-Ministerial Working Group, composed of line ministries, private sector and civil society. Palestine for example had a Steering Committee which is composed of line ministries, civil society, and the private sector. It also worked closely with the UN system by paring one UN focal point to each ministry for continuous dialogue and cooperation.

The importance of political leadership was underlined as well as the importance of designating decision-making power to the people in the coordination mechanisms to increase effectiveness. In some cases, high-level political will was needed to encourage collaboration between line ministries. Furthermore, it was important to have a whole-of-society approach and several countries mentioned that they had a broader coordination mechanisms that went beyond government institutions. Another critical issue was access to budgets and alignment between budget and policies.

On sub-national and local government involvement, it was noted that consultation from the bottom up was important to create ownership. While some countries mentioned the challenge of involving local authorities, others presented ways of doing just this. In some cases, the SDG implementation of local authorities was more efficient than at national level. Their role in service delivery was also recognized. Ecuador mentioned that they had a representative of local governments in the national planning council. In addition, they had developed an app for CSO and youth to have a say on the priorities chosen by the executive branch of the government and as such engage in the SDG discussion. 4 million people addressed these priorities. Mexico had produced a guide on how to integrate the SDGs into the municipal plans, which is available online.

Several participants noted the crucial role that parliaments played, in SDG awareness-raising, monitoring and budget approval, while other participants underlined the need to increase parliament involvement as they had not yet engaged in the SDG discussion. Slovakia noted that peer-to-peer contact was a successful way to engage parliamentarians and referred to the cooperation they had with Finland on this issue, with the support of IPU. Latvia mentioned that their parliamentary committee on sustainable development included both the opposition and the parties in power.

Secretary-General's voluntary common guidelines

A representative of the Division for Sustainable Development, DESA, provided a report back from an expert group meeting held on possible updates to the voluntary common reporting guidelines for the VNRs. One of suggestions emerging from that meeting was to have the guidelines place more emphasis on analysis, as opposed to descriptions of plans and institutions. Two presenters then reflected on the country perspective in using the guidelines. Drawing on the experience of his country's VNR in 2016, the representative of Germany stated that the guidelines had been used as much as possible. Each SDG had been analysed according to three criteria - implementation and impact in Germany; impacts on other countries and on global public goods; and supporting other countries through international cooperation. As a greater number of countries conduct second or third reviews, it will be important to learn how they had followed up at national level. The representative of Egypt stated that her country's VNR in 2016 had been conducted to signal commitment to the Agenda. The guidelines were helpful in the process of coordination and in communicating with ministries involved in the review. She noted the importance of analysis, identifying the root causes of challenges and how to tackle them. She stressed the possibility of differentiation in the guidelines for countries conducting the first and second reviews. She also noted the importance of reporting on all SDGs, to promote comparability.

Points raised during question and answer session included the following: whether to highlight particular principles from the Agenda and, if so, which ones; the difficulties in establishing suitable baselines; engaging the local level; guidelines are helpful and a good way to communicate between different stakeholders in the drafting of the report; and the need for more information in the guidelines on how to present the statistics in a meaningful way in the statistical annex.

DAY 2

Preparatory process - stakeholder engagement

A representative of the Division for Sustainable Development, DESA, provided a brief overview in relation to stakeholder engagement, noting the that the HLPF had diverse ways for stakeholder engagement, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 67/290. She explained that at the global level, stakeholders had self-organized an HLPF stakeholder Coordination Mechanism to help coordinate their own strategies and engagement in the forum's work. The Coordination Mechanism also self-selects 1-3 questions to be posed during the VNR presentation at HLPF. In the panel discussion that followed, two countries that had conducted VNRs shared their experiences and lessons learned.

Addressing engagement with stakeholders, including civil society organizations (CSOs) and the private sector, the representative of the Netherlands underlined need to consider "what's in it for them". This could help create entry points for dialogue, set expectations, and ask stakeholders to report on results. He stated that for companies engaging on the SDGs had the potential, among other things, to enhance brand value and increase employee satisfaction. The government had worked with the private sector on a SDG Charter to ensure there was a national dialogue and to work together to find solutions to the challenges raised by the SDGs. The government organized a national conference together with companies and CSOs toward the national review process, with a report from the national statistics office providing the foundation for the dialogue on where the country was doing well and areas where more homework was required. For the purposes of the national review process, six stakeholder groups were identified: national government, youth, CSOs, sub-national government, private sector, and academia. Each group was tasked with preparing a report, with the understanding that elements from the stakeholder reports would be included in the formal VNR report. This way of proceeding was intended to foster dialogue with stakeholders.

The representative of Brazil outlined how basis of a whole-of-society approach in his country, with view to having the public authorities and civil society work together to address public policies and create new policies that contribute to SDG implementation. Brazil outlined the structure and function of the National Commission for Sustainable Development, which is composed of 16 representatives from federal, state, district, and municipal governments, as well as civil society. The Commission is a parity collegiate body, in that 8 seats are filled by representatives from various parts if government and the other eight by stakeholder representatives. The Commission, which has an advisory function, is responsible, among other things, for the preparation of an action plan for the implementation of the Agenda. The Commission had already achieved significant coordination and prepared a unified plan of action for implementation of SDGs in Brazil.

In the question and answer session, it was highlighted that there exist a wide range of approaches for gathering and reflecting stakeholder perspectives in the VNR report. Some described the VNR report as by its nature a government report, with government engaging with stakeholders, but in the end determining its content. In this context, shadow reports by civil society can play an important role; however, the VNR is government-led report, which should not be confused with separate shadow report. It was added that a high degree of trust by stakeholder in government facilitates acceptance of the government report by other actors. Another approach treated the report as a vehicle to cover the position of government, as well as other actors (typically private sector and civil society). Thus the views of civil society and the private sector could be taken up in the VNR report, without necessarily achieving a common position.

Other points raised during the discussion included: allowing for comment periods on the draft report, including circulating it to stakeholder networks; the importance of including youth in the engagement process; using umbrella bodies and representatives in multi-sectoral commissions to promote meaningful consultation; capturing stakeholder inputs in an annex to the VNR report; and national communication strategies on the SDGs. Among the challenges that participants noted regarding stakeholder engagement was how to manage the expectations of stakeholders, as they sometimes have much higher ambitions. Another area that was found to be challenging was how to get the private sector on board.

Update on the regional fora

The regional commissions shared information with the participants about the regional fora on sustainable development to be organised in each region. The dates are as follows: ECE, 1-2 March in Geneva; ECLAC 18-20 April in Santiago, ESCAP, 28-30 March in Bangkok, ESCWA 24-26 April (venue TBC); ECA, mid-May, (venue TBC). The emphasis on the peer-learning component came across in all regional fora as well as the importance of stakeholder engagement in the fora. The representatives of the Regional Commissions also highlighted the opportunity to emphasize a regional approach to the SDGs (specifically on the integrated approach to implementation and how to account for the interlinkages). They also said they would undertake analysis of where each region stands on SDGs.

Knowledge Exchange

The knowledge exchange session started with a roundtable discussion, followed by short presentations by UN entities and other stakeholders on tools, mechanisms and approaches for SDG implementation, as well as small group discussions.

The following were some of the points emerging from the opening roundtable discussion:

- The importance of leaving no one behind, both in the process of VNR as well as in implementation of SDGs. ODI discussed how to develop an integrated approach to understanding who is left behind and how data, policy, finance and institutions are influencing efforts to deliver services and infrastructure to these groups.
- The challenges of multi-sectoral coordination and policy coherence. OECD had developed tools that could support policy makers and other actors in their efforts to analyse, apply and track progress on policy coherence for sustainable development.

- The importance of involving parliaments. Spain mentioned how their parliament was taking action on the SDGs and how the Spanish local governments were helping to build vertical integration of SDGs. Ethiopia mentioned that their national development plan was endorsed by the parliament.
- The need for enhancing the discussion on big data and VNRs as well as the need for financing data collection.
- IPU stated that only about 25 % of VNR countries' MPs were part of the process of the VNR report.
- The importance of including youth in the process and engaging in an intergenerational dialogue on the SDGs. UNICEF mentioned that recommendations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as recommendations from other human rights bodies, could contribute to leaving no one behind.

During the discussion in small groups, the following topics were discussed more in depth:

Leaving no one behind: The group discussed one of the core principles of the 2030 Agenda, leaving no one behind, and the approaches and mechanisms available for ensuring that the principle can be upheld at the country-level. Several participating entities presented their action-oriented trainings and tools aimed at ensuring inclusion of vulnerable groups, such as refugees and persons with disabilities, as well as women, children and youth. Country representatives highlighted their interpretations of the principle and actions oriented to ensuring that no one is left behind, as well as their plans of including the principle in their VNR reports, such as using it as a theme for the review or including a section on the issue in their report. Monitoring and measuring implementation of leaving no one behind was also briefly discussed.

Data and monitoring: The group discussions provided examples of successfully managing to match countries requiring specific support to providers, for example Greece with the OECD measuring distance tool or Sri Lanka with the OECD policy coherence tool. The discussion also identified a need to provide more effective access to SDG data and monitoring tools. There are various 'central' information hubs such as dedicated websites by the United Nations Statistics Division on SDG indicators, the World Bank on SDGs and the OECD, but many participants saw value in creating a single, easily accessible information hub.

Knowledge products and policy tools: Delegates who participated in the session wanted to gather information on the possible products/tools the participating agencies could offer (IFAD, UNEP, UNIDO, UN Water). There was interest in using the tools to gather and/or analyse data or to see if the UN agencies and other partners already had a data set they could tap into.

Private sector engagement: It was noted that there was an initial awareness of the 2030 agenda among the private sector. WBCSD noted that the deeper awareness of the SDGs as business value to be engaged in was still developing. Participants discussed how to get the private sector more engaged in SDG implementation and some ideas included turning the SDG language into something that resonates more with the business community and matching the SDGs to their needs. The challenge of including SMEs was also noted. Colombia mentioned that they were initiating an exercise to see how business has contributed so far to the implementation of the SDGs together with UN Global Compact and GRI. Participants further discussed the added value of Public Private Partnerships.

Stakeholder participation: This group saw an exchange on tools and approaches for stakeholder participation in the VNRs, including by UNITAR, which has organized courses for delegates on stakeholder engagement. Other contributions came from the IPU, United Nations Volunteers (UNV), and the International Trade Union Confederation.