



Community of Practice on Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) for Caribbean countries

3 December 2020

Meeting Notes

Participants

Bahamas, Belize, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and ECLAC.

Recording and presentation

To access a recording of the meeting, please visit:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pUeUu9iRrc&feature=youtu.be>

The presentation by Trinidad and Tobago is enclosed as an attachment to these notes.

Objective of the meeting

This community of practice on Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) for Caribbean countries is an informal space for exchange among peers and sharing of good practices with regards to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in general and the preparation of VNRs in particular; and aims to provide a space to regularly communicate among peers. The specific goal of this session was to address the issue of stakeholder engagement, showcasing the recent example of Trinidad and Tobago, which presented their first VNR at the virtual HLPF in July 2020.

Introduction

ECLAC welcomed participants and stressed that the topic of stakeholder engagement is very relevant during the VNR process, the VNR presentation and after the VNR process has concluded. ECLAC pointed at the participatory nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as the preparatory process leading to its approval was the most comprehensive participatory process in the history of the United Nations, involving millions of voices from people all over the world and their aspirations for the future. Indeed, a great diversity of stakeholders from all sectors of society, ranging from civil society and indigenous peoples, to the scientific and academic communities and the private sector, local authorities and parliaments, contributed to the intergovernmental process leading to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in New York in September 2015.

This great milestone in multi-stakeholder engagement raised ambitious expectations for future participation, consultation and meaningful engagement of diverse stakeholders as critical elements of an effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including the VNR process. The clear message was that the 2030 Agenda cannot be implemented by governments alone, but only via a collective ownership of the SDGs, with a whole-of-society approach and including the most marginalized, vulnerable and excluded communities and individuals in order to leave no one behind.



ECLAC indicated that rather than just checking the box on stakeholder engagement, the central question should be *what is the value added* of engaging stakeholders in the VNR process and how their contribution can be best reflected, for example by including best practices or projects they implemented, including them as reviewers or drafters of certain sections or chapters of the VNR report or inviting them to the delegation presenting at the high-level Political Forum. As the VNR process is very visible, with a high-level presentation in a global platform, and entails including sometimes competing agendas, mandates and priorities of a wide variety of governmental and non-governmental actors, a VNR stakeholder engagement strategy and clear plan (with allocated resources) is essential.

Presentation

Trinidad and Tobago presented their experience in stakeholder engagement for their VNR process during 2020. The presentation (enclosed attachment) included the following key points:

- Trinidad and Tobago successfully presented its first VNR report at the virtual 2020 HLPF, after the unexpected off-set of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated already existing challenges and led to minor setbacks in the country's VNR process. Nevertheless, the country completed its VNR with many lessons learned, focusing on eight of the 17 SDGs, namely Goals 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 13, 16 and 17.
- The entry point to the VNR process, including stakeholder engagement, was the UN DESA Handbook. Based on this document, Trinidad and Tobago developed a project schedule, with an entire section dedicated to stakeholder engagement, including the development of a stakeholder database, as well as a communication and social media strategy. Three consultants in total were hired to conduct the stakeholder engagement plan, namely one dedicated person for Trinidad, one dedicated person for Tobago, and a third for generating stakeholder data. The stakeholder engagement plan was strongly interlinked with the overall 2030 Agenda communication strategy, including the design of branding material for the VNR process.
- Trinidad and Tobago conducted various consultations with diverse stakeholders, which were divided into internal consultations (led by different ministries and governmental departments) and external stakeholder engagement (with support from the UN Resident Coordinator, ECLAC, UNDP), which helped to disseminate stakeholder information, use the platform dedicated to the VNR process, and procured the lead consultant of the VNR report.
- As a result, Trinidad and Tobago ensured 45.000 media interactions, 49 face-to-face interviews and 4 focus group sessions under the stakeholder engagement plan. As response to the pandemic, the country also quickly developed an online survey, to which 1008 responses were received. The survey responses demonstrated some lack of knowledge on the SDGs and highlighting the need to raise general public awareness on the SDGs. Unfortunately, public consultations as well as those planned with trade unions had to be cancelled due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measures in place.
- Both the VNR report and the actual presentation at the HLPF 2020 included the participation of various stakeholders, ranging from different government representatives (Education, Health, Labour, Office of the Prime Minister, and the Tobago House of Assembly), the private sector (Green Alternatives in Action, Energy Chamber of Trinidad and Tobago, and sectoral association), civil society (Buccoo Reef Trust, Autism Tobago, CANARI, Trinidad and Tobago Transparency Institute and United Way). CANARI was part of the official delegation presenting the VNR report at the HLPF, focusing on their SDG 13 (Climate Action) shadow report which showed civil society's contribution this goal in Trinidad and Tobago.



- The country faced several challenges in the VNR process, including guaranteeing a dedicated VNR budget in times of competing priorities, which was secured with the support of the UNCT. Another challenge was the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular in regard to conducting stakeholder consultations, which was solved via an online survey for public stakeholder engagement. Another challenge is the development of post-VNR activities, which continues to be an area for improvement.

Discussion

ECLAC inquired about further details on the challenges resulting from requesting stakeholder inputs in a multi-island context as well as for the criteria to select stakeholders, taking any sensitive issue in this selecting process into account, for example with the constituent of the private sector.

Belize shared the challenges in completing the VNR process due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lock-down of the country. Belize was not able to secure the dedicated budget and receive the necessary support from the UNCT to successfully present their VNR at the HLPF in 2020. Resources, both in terms of financing and technical capacities, remain an enormous challenge for developing countries. Belize was not prepared to deal with the full lock-down and move all stakeholder consultations online via new technologies. Belize inquired about how much disaggregated data was available in Trinidad and Tobago before the pandemic. Belize concluded by stating that the VNR is a powerful tool to create momentum and continue post-VNR activities.

Bahamas asked whether Trinidad and Tobago had engaged new stakeholders in the VNR process and continued to build on these VNR stakeholder relationships after their VNR presentation at the HLPF. Bahamas also inquired more details on the VNR timeline, especially on any recommendation on when to start drafting the report, start engaging stakeholders and how to stick to the deadlines. Bahamas indicated it intends to have their first VNR draft ready in January 2021 for public circulation and comments.

Trinidad and Tobago explained that they could ensure the adequate representation of both islands in the VNR report via the dedicated consultants for both Trinidad and Tobago and a close interaction between them to mirror the stakeholder engagement plans for both islands. The country identified umbrella organizations for each of the eight SDGs that were addressed in their VNR report, based on the expertise of the consultants, who guided the selection process of the stakeholders. The generation of disaggregated data was a challenge, as reflected in the country's statistical annex to the VNR report, which had some missing information, such as on SDG 10. The solution to the data challenge was two-fold: collecting general information on progress and trends versus generating specific information on targets and indicators. At times, Trinidad and Tobago could not find adequate data and had to use proxy data instead. In terms of the timeline, Trinidad and Tobago would strongly recommend to contract dedicated staff for certain sections of the VNR report, such as stakeholder engagement, bridge the different dimensions, establish milestones and submit inputs in a certain



timeline, organize regular team-meetings to report on progress, and identify a champion to push things forward and ensure that the special challenges of SIDS are well represented in the VNR report.

ECLAC asked Trinidad and Tobago how to build on the momentum of the presentation of the VNR report and respond to the demands of stakeholders to engage in post-VNR activities.

Trinidad and Tobago admitted that they have not been able to meet with the stakeholders post-VNR, yet, and that post-VNR activities remains a challenge, as the country did not have a formal stakeholder engagement mechanism in place to continue the engagement post-VNR. As stakeholders have expressed their interest to engage in post-VNR activities, the country is planning to continue the interaction in the near future in order not to lose the VNR momentum.

Community of Practice Webpage

ECLAC presented the newly created webpage dedicated to the Community of Practice, which can be found on: <https://www.cepal.org/en/topics/2030-agenda-sustainable-development/eclac-community-practice-voluntary-national-reviews>

The webpage contains all materials from previous sessions of the Community of Practice for participants' reference, including meeting minutes, power-point presentations, list of country participants, session goals and occasional links to further events and resources. Participants were encouraged to share the link with colleagues and any other person who might find the resources useful.

ECLAC closed the meeting by reiterating its ongoing commitment to supporting the countries of the region in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and in the preparation of the VNRs through the monthly meetings of the Community of Practice.

Next Steps

- ECLAC will share the presentation along with the minutes of the meeting with the participants.
- The next meeting of the Community of Practice for Caribbean countries will take place on **12 January 2021 at 12:00 pm (Chile time)**.