



Regional workshop for Latin American and Caribbean countries preparing their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) in 2021

Monday, 15 March 2021
8 a.m. to 1 p.m. (Costa Rica time, GMT-6)

REPORT

Introduction

On the occasion of the fourth meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development (15–18 March 2021), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) of the United Nations organized a regional workshop for those Latin American and Caribbean countries that are to present their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) in 2021. The workshop was attended by 9 of the 11 countries of the region that will present their VNRs at the United Nations high level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) that will take place on 6 to 15 July 2021, including Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Uruguay. Also in attendance were other countries from the region, including those actively involved in the ECLAC Community of Practice on Voluntary National Reports.

Background

The commitment and sustained effort of the region's governments, in partnership with numerous other stakeholders, to report on their progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) between 2016 and 2020, through 35 VNRs prepared by 24 countries, is strong evidence of Latin America and the Caribbean's level of ownership of the Agenda. That engagement and those VNRs allow for each country's progress over time to be tracked, especially those that have submitted or will submit more than one review, while providing opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and collective reflection on common or cross-border challenges. The region's production of a series of voluntary local reviews—innovative exercises that demonstrate the commitment of subnational and local actors to the 2030 Agenda—is an additional tool for promoting ownership of the 2030 Agenda and complements national follow-up and review efforts.

Purpose of the workshop

The main objective of the workshop was to strengthen the knowledge of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and their capacities for drafting and preparing their VNRs as part of their national strategy for the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It was also intended to strengthen the regional dimension in the VNR preparation process and with a view to the reports' presentation at the HLPF global forum.

Working method

The workshop included interactive sessions on national VNR preparation and follow-up efforts for the 2030 Agenda in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific areas were discussed, including strategies and road maps for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the medium and long terms and the importance of territorializing the SDGs. Lessons learned from the 2016–2020 VNR submissions were also examined, and a discussion took place on VNRs as a tool to build forward better after the pandemic and to accelerate the fulfilment of the SDGs.

The workshop was conducted in an interactive spirit of learning among peers, based on the participating countries' concrete experiences. The countries were invited to give presentations based on guiding questions, which were followed by interactive discussions to encourage dialogue and exchanges among all the participants.

Participants

The meeting was attended by representatives of Latin American and Caribbean governments, United Nations Resident Coordinators from across the region and other officials of the United Nations system, including experts from DESA and ECLAC, and representatives of civil society. In total, more than a hundred people participated at the regional workshop.

Meeting programme

The meeting programme is attached to this report as Annex 1.

Outcomes

The workshop allowed exchanges of lessons learned, good practices and concrete recommendations for addressing the challenges of sustainable development and confronting the impact of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean —such as increased poverty, inequality, and gender-based violence— as well as for dealing with climate change and working to close financial gaps.

It also strengthened the regional dialogue on the content and role of VNRs in implementing and following up on the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, it encouraged peer-to-peer learning about good practices in the formulation, dissemination and presentation of VNRs in different national contexts, thereby strengthening the participants' ability to link their VNRs to national, subnational and local strategies for the long-term implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The regional workshop's key messages and outcomes are outlined below.

Key messages

Inauguration

- Four observations about the 35 VNRs that 24 Latin American and Caribbean countries presented between 2016 and 2020: (1) VNRs are the main tool for measuring progress and identifying challenges and opportunities on the path towards sustainable development and the region's fulfilment of the SDGs. (2) Because they are voluntary and not necessarily —or exclusively— an exercise in accountability, these reports offer an opportunity for highlighting messages and initiatives in a different way. (3) A distinction must be drawn between the VNR document and the process through which it is drafted and presented, since the report is merely one milestone in the 2030 Agenda implementation strategy and the partnerships created in its preparation support and strengthen subsequent stages in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. (4) Since they portray each country's individual reality, VNRs from different countries are not truly comparable. However, countries face similar challenges in preparing them, and for that reason peer learning at regional forums is of great value.
- Cooperation is critical in interconnecting subnational, national, regional and global efforts to meet the 2030 Agenda, accelerate action for the SDGs and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries presenting VNRs for the second or third time are of particular relevance in the 2030 Agenda implementation process, as this allows continuity between different VNRs and provides an opportunity for accountability by reporting on the challenges addressed, as well as for the generation of data, highlighting the funding of gaps and the sharing of lessons learned.
- The VNR Group of Friends, chaired by the Government of Mexico through its permanent mission to the United Nations, works to strengthen the intercountry VNR dialogue. The group was created by the Presidents of the General Assembly and ECOSOC and is mandated to review the VNRs, support peer-to-peer learning and undertake the thematic review of the HLPF. National VNR preparation processes should be leveraged to make the reports more substantive, inclusive and effective. VNRs offer a marvellous opportunity for bringing different stakeholders to the table and incorporating the SDGs into national and subnational plans and tools for tasks such as planning, development and budgeting.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has not halted the 2030 Agenda review process, since by 2021, 85% of the region's countries will have submitted their VNRs to the HLPF. The nature of VNRs evolves from description to action and there is turnover of the stakeholders that prepare them, which poses challenges to institutional capacity-building for implementation and reporting. Nine years before the deadline for achieving the 2030 Agenda's targets, warning signs can be seen: the prevailing trend in most of the SDG indicators points to a need for changes in public policies. There are persistent challenges to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, such as multilevel and inter-agency coordination. However, several innovations can be observed in the region's VNRs, such as the involvement of a broader range of actors and the incorporation of the SDGs into medium- and long-term development plans and into subnational plans and budgets. The regional dimension, such as the venues afforded by the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development and the Community of Practice on VNRs, plays an important role for peer-to-peer learning and for identifying common priorities and challenges in the region's attainment of sustainable development by 2030.

Session 1: Voluntary national reviews and the 2030 Agenda implementation strategy

- Between 2016 and 2020, 168 countries submitted more than 205 VNRs to the HLPF, with between 40 and 45 countries doing so each year. Notwithstanding the challenges posed by the pandemic, 43 countries will present their VNRs in 2021. Over the years, an impressive wealth of global evidence has been accumulated, comprising online databases, summary reports and external analyses. In general, the global VNR process is maturing, with more learning from past experiences and from the experiences of other countries, including through digital platforms. The guidelines for drafting VNRs are not prescriptive: countries are the captains of their own ships.
- The SDG Moment, which takes place in the framework of the United Nations General Assembly, was established in 2019 to increase commitment, ambition and action for the SDGs. As the world is dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the SDG Moment provides a high-level forum for exchanging lessons learned on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, with an emphasis on poverty and inequality, climate change and planetary health, and achieving gender equality, while also addressing such cross-cutting issues as financing, partnerships, governance and technology.
- There are many reasons for preparing a VNR, including social accountability, developing and building partnerships and establishing better forms of cooperation between different actors, accelerating action in pursuit of the 2030 Agenda, building back better after the pandemic, and so on. Instead of “building back better”, we talk about “building *forward* better”, or *pro*-building instead of rebuilding, to ensure a better recovery that avoids returning to the previous scenario.
- Synergies must be created between the various global agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda, national human rights reports, the Paris Agreement and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. VNRs offer the opportunity to solicit donor support, mobilize partners and raise funds, while maintaining open communications channels between the national and global levels.
- One concrete lesson learned from previous reviews to inform the 2021 process is the construction of a legal or institutional framework for implementing the 2030 Agenda that includes the establishment of a high-level committee for sustainable development, involves various ministries —such as finance and foreign affairs— and allows for good coordination between various key actors and better communications, such as by means of regular round tables. This would provide a cross-sectoral institutional framework for leading SDG implementation, similar to Colombia's SDG Commission. Foreign ministries can play a key role in this process, as in the case of Paraguay.
- Recommended courses of action include the prioritization of certain SDGs, a comprehensive approach towards sustainable development, the alignment of SDG indicators with national development plans and the creation of territorial strategies to localize the 2030 Agenda.
- More than just a product or a report to the HLPF, a VNR is an inclusive, participatory, transparent and comprehensive review process at the national and subnational levels. The more practical recommendations include devoting sufficient time to the report's drafting, adopting a systematic, cross-sectoral and pragmatic approach to addressing the SDGs and never losing sight of the long-term sustainable development perspective. Another essential element is consistency between policies, laws and budgets on the one hand and human rights and environmental protection obligations on the other.

- Capacities for producing statistics and generating data and empirical evidence remain a challenge. In this context, a robust baseline is important to ensure continuity between reports and so that statistics and indicators can be used to develop evidence-based public policies. Up-to-date legislation is also important so that national statistical systems and offices can address the challenges of conducting measurements among vulnerable groups and those most at risk of being left behind, such as children, young people and women.
- Other vital tasks include reinforcing the multi-stakeholder approach of the 2030 Agenda and integrating its inputs into the VNR process in a meaningful way. In that context, clear participation mechanisms and concrete budgets should also be established so that civil society can be involved in the design of public policies and regulatory frameworks. To address the challenges posed by COVID-19 containment measures, an effective communication plan at the national level was proposed, using online surveys, social media and other channels to facilitate collaboration among different stakeholders.

Session 2: Voluntary national reviews as a tool for national and subnational ownership of the 2030 Agenda

- The territorialization of the 2030 Agenda means knowing which SDGs, targets and indicators States have prioritized, with a view to devising strategies and actions chosen by the territories themselves and implementing a methodology to support those processes. The 2030 Agenda is more relevant than ever, because it is a universal, civilizing agenda, agreed on by the countries, with the 17 SDGs at its core. There is an urgent need to accelerate action on the SDGs, in line with the decade of action.
- Voluntary local reviews (VLRs) allow for local monitoring and national and subnational coordination. In the region, subnational entities in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay have conducted VLRs. While VLRs are not a direct mandate of the 2030 Agenda and are not an official part of the HLPF, they are currently being discussed in the HLPF review negotiations and could play a more prominent role in the future. VNRs and VLRs are closely related, in that they provide a more complete picture of SDG implementation and challenges, help assess and deal with territorial inequalities within a country, encourage participation, incorporate marginalized groups so that no one is left behind and support national efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda.
- Attention was drawn to the daunting challenges nations face in producing a VNR during complex times, with the pandemic compounded by other natural or anthropogenic disasters that have an impact on the achievement of the SDGs, on economic growth and on the productive sector, health, education and the environment.
- In addition to the VNRs, countries have reports and policies that guarantee ownership of the 2030 Agenda and its integration into territorial plans, programmes and projects, and the participation of different sectors and territories can be strengthened through national and territorial dialogues, partnerships and consensus.
- Localizing the 2030 Agenda is a cross-cutting issue in countries, and improved visibility and communication of local governments' efforts towards the 2030 Agenda and building forward better after the pandemic is essential for subnational governments in rural areas, not only city mayors. Similarly, a specific sustainable development budget must be allocated to subnational governments so they can localize the 2030 Agenda.

Session 3: Voluntary national reviews in the Caribbean

- While two of the four countries in the Caribbean subregion —Antigua and Barbuda and Cuba— will submit their first VNRs to the HLPF in 2021, the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic will be presenting their second reports. Irrespective of the progress made in their VNR processes, the four countries share many similar sustainable development challenges on account of the current context.
- The 2030 Agenda is the road map for sustainable recovery following the pandemic, which has had a profound socioeconomic impact on the Caribbean subregion. Growth rates were already low before the current crisis, and Caribbean economies have been contracting since COVID-19 appeared. Three of the “Five Ps” of the 2030 Agenda are at risk: people, prosperity and peace. However, recovery from the crisis provides an opportunity for people-centred development, with the SDGs showing the way: health and well-being, poverty eradication, inclusive economic growth, inclusive education of high quality, innovation and creativity, gender equality and regional integration (including South-South cooperation).
- As a result of the pandemic, Caribbean countries find themselves facing major financial weaknesses. The travel restrictions imposed because of the pandemic have greatly affected their economies, which are heavily dependent on the tourism industry. This has resulted in huge economic losses, particularly for microenterprises and small and medium-sized businesses, while the social consequences have included increases in poverty, gender-based violence, food insecurity, unemployment and school closures. What was a health emergency is evolving into a serious social, economic and financial crisis in the Caribbean. In addition to the pandemic, as small island developing States, the countries noted their extreme vulnerability to the effects of climate change and the potential of natural disasters to cause massive destruction, and their high levels of indebtedness.
- A particular challenge for the VNR process is establishing national-level baselines for the ongoing compilation of disaggregated statistical data. The creation of a multidimensional vulnerability index could assist in more accurately measuring the subregion’s potential for attaining the SDGs. Unfortunately, the data-collection process was interrupted by the pandemic and by budget cuts, as many resources were reassigned to urgent short-term crisis mitigation measures.
- The classification of some Caribbean countries as high-income countries has prevented them from accessing concessional financing and external debt relief. In that context, diversifying the subregion’s economies is an essential task, so they do not depend exclusively on sectors such as tourism. One priority is to address debt relief in the subregion’s countries and to create a resilience fund for adaptation to climate change.
- The 2030 Agenda is the road map for recovering from the multidimensional crisis and for creating a renewed strategy to strengthen resilience and build a better future. VNRs serve as tracking documents that show where we are and in what direction we are advancing. They offer comprehensive assessments that examine the 2030 Agenda holistically. VNRs have the potential to pinpoint certain issues, such as the large increase in domestic violence against women and children caused by the pandemic, and to align them with human rights principles.

- Opportunities should be created for meaningful participation by different stakeholders in the preparation of VNRs, to ensure a transparent and inclusive process with the objective of leaving no one behind. Major efforts have already been made to engage various stakeholders in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including people with disabilities, climate activists, academics, the media and the private sector. The discussion also highlighted the need to innovate with new technologies, maintain good relations with the media and install multidisciplinary work teams for coordination among various actors.

Closure

The event called for the 2030 Agenda and the VNR process to be seen not only as a source of hope and optimism but also as a road map and an opportunity for emerging from the pandemic crisis and building forward a better future for the region while leaving no one behind. This optimism characterizes Latin America and the Caribbean, a region that is highly committed to the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs.

Annex 1: Programme

- 8 to 8.15 a.m. **Welcome and workshop goals**
- Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC
 - Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, DESA
 - Juan Sandoval Mendiola, Deputy Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations and Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)
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- 8.15 to 8.30 a.m. **Voluntary national reviews as a tool for the ownership of the 2030 Agenda and peer learning in Latin America and the Caribbean**
- María Ortiz, Deputy Chief, Office of the Executive Secretary of ECLAC
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- 8.30 to 9.40 a.m. **Session 1: Voluntary national reviews and the 2030 Agenda implementation strategy**

Moderator: María Ortiz, Deputy Chief, Office of the Executive Secretary of ECLAC

Presentation: Voluntary national reviews in the United Nations high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) (10 minutes)

- Joop Theunissen, Deputy Chief, Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development, DESA

Update on the 2021 SDG Moment(5 minutes)

- Lara Blanco, Deputy-Director, Sustainable Development Unit, Executive Office of the Secretary-General

Presentation: Voluntary National Reviews and a Resilient Recovery (10 minutes)

- Javier Surasky, Coordinator of the Governance for Development Area, International Centre for Strategic Thinking (CEPEI)

Country panel (10 minutes each)

- Adriana Elena Cozma, SDG Group Coordinator, Technical Directorate for Public Policy Evaluation and Monitoring, Department of National Planning of Colombia
- Alfredo González Reyes, 2030 Agenda Lead, Secretariat of the Economy of Mexico
- Nimia Torres, Director of Social Analysis, Operational Management Unit, SDG Interinstitutional Commission, Paraguay

Guiding questions

- How will your 2021 VNR build on reports from previous years?
- What lessons from previous reports informed the 2021 VNR process?
- How does your VNR contribute to the national 2030 Agenda implementation strategy?

Discussion with participants (20 minutes)

- 9.40 to 10.10 a.m. **Break**
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10.10 to 11.30 a.m.	<p>Session 2: Voluntary national reviews as a tool for national and subnational ownership of the 2030 Agenda</p> <p>Moderator: Joop Theunissen, Deputy Chief, Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development, DESA</p> <p>Presentation: Alignment of the SDGs with national and subnational plans (10 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alicia Williner, Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Economic and Social Planning (ILPES), ECLAC <p>Presentation: Voluntary local reviews: local monitoring and national and subnational coordination (10 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Riina Jussila, Sustainable Development Officer, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, DESA <p>Country panel (10 minutes each)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Juan Carlos Sánchez, General Director of Planning, Ministry of Finance and Public Credit of Nicaragua • Horacio Bafico, Advisor to the Director of the Office of Planning and Budget of Uruguay <p>Trigger questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the VLR process supported the ownership of the 2030 Agenda at the subnational and territorial levels? Is there an example or success story that you would like to share? • Are you familiar with VLRs in your country? How can this process reinforce stakeholder engagement and dialogue at different levels of review and follow-up? <p>Discussion with participants (20 minutes)</p>
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11.30 a.m. to 12.40 p.m.	<p>Voluntary national reviews in the Caribbean</p> <p>Moderator: Abdullahi Abdulkadri, Coordinator, Statistics and Social Development Unit, ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean</p> <p>Presentation: The 2030 Agenda as a road map for sustainable recovery in the face of the current crises (10 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abdullahi Abdulkadri, Coordinator, Statistics and Social Development Unit, ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean <p>Country panel (10 minutes each)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joy-Marie King, Director of International Trade in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Antigua and Barbuda • Susset Rosales Vázquez, Director of Strategic Planning and Development, Ministry of Economy and Planning of Cuba • Aneesah Abdullah, Chair, Social Inclusion Committee, Focal Point for the SDGs and Regional and International Partnerships, Sustainable Development Goals Unit in the Office of the Prime Minister of the Bahamas
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- Luis Ortega, Technical Coordinator, Sustainable Development Technical Secretariat, Ministry of Economy, Planning and Development of the Dominican Republic

Trigger questions:

- What are the challenges to sustainable development in your country in the current context?
- How do you think the VNR will contribute to addressing these challenges in the short term and promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in your country?

Discussion with participants (20 minutes)

12.40 to 1
p.m.

Final reflections and closing (15 minutes)

Moderator: Joop Theunissen, Deputy Chief, Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development, DESA

Closing remarks (5 minutes)

María Ortiz, Deputy Chief, Office of the Executive Secretary of ECLAC
