Using Voluntary National Reviews to Advance SDG16 and its Interlinkages Across the 2030 Agenda
Thursday, July 11, 2024 I 8:30 a.m. EST I United Nations Secretariat, SDG Room, 27th Floor

Lab Summary:
Organized by the [Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies at NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC)](), the [UN Development Programme (UNDP),]() and the [UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR),]() in partnership with the [International Development Law Organization (IDLO),]() [International IDEA,]() and the [Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS)](), this Voluntary National Review (VNR) Lab examined how countries and partners can use the VNR process (pre and post-HLPF) to advance Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 at national and sub-national levels, and leverage its interlinkages across the SDGs. This interactive dialogue with governments, civil society, UN colleagues, and international organizations included global perspectives and specific insights from Georgia, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Spain, and Vanuatu.

Overarching messages:
- Across regions, SDG16 has been reflected in many countries' VNRs and national development plans (NDPs) as important in and of itself, and as a **critical enabler** of the 2030 Agenda, amidst often stark global trends.
- **Data availability for SDG16 has increased** from 22 percent in 2019 to 42 percent in the most recent analysis. **Focus on SDG16 in VNR reporting has also increased**.
- Increased **political will** and **evidenced-informed policies based** on an understanding of **SDG interlinkages** are key to addressing stagnation/regression on SDG16 and SDGs broadly. This requires amplification of evidence on how peace, justice, and inclusion can drive progress on other SDGs against time and financial constraints.
- The VNR process is not only about reporting. It is also about evaluation, coordination, cooperation, and follow-up, which inform **policy decisions** on SDG implementation. VNRs identify best practices and challenges for improved policy adaptation.
- **Civil society** must be actively engaged throughout all stages of the VNR process to ensure an accurate picture of a country's implementation of the SDGs.
- Coordination across SDGs is needed for improved results, including cooperation and partnership with civil society. This often requires utilizing **non-official data**.

- **Leaving no one behind** requires the meaningful inclusion of marginalized groups in the VNRs. Countries have done this through local consultations, translating VNRs into **local/indigenous languages**, and using unofficial local data, among other initiatives.
- Complementary to VNRs, **Voluntary Local Reviews** (VLRs**)** and Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) are critical to enhancing the localization of the SDGs, contextualizing data, and improving public engagement with and interest in them.
- Though SDG16 has been seen as the "human rights" SDG, all SDGs are based on human rights. To leverage overlap in reporting processes, complementarity between VNRs and **Universal Periodic Reviews** (UPRs), and other **human rights reporting mechanisms** should be explored and utilized as relevant.
- Access to justice is critical to SDG16 implementation and upholding human rights.
- SDG16 supports **SDG13** and **climate action** through integrated, accountable, and transparent institutions, capacity building, and legal reforms, adapted based on lessons learned.
- **The links between SDG16 and SDG13 are clear in both directions**, with action on SDG16 helping to address climate issues and action on SDG13 decreasing climate-related challenges to SDG16.
- VNR Labs are essential for going beyond what works well and identifying challenges, both substantively and regarding the VNR process itself.

Margaret Williams, Associate Director, SDG16+, Pathfinders, CIC

- Amid growing global polarization and distrust, we need to rebuild the social contract between people and the national and international institutions mandated to serve them. Failing on our promise to "leave no one behind" cannot be an option.
- This is a critical opportunity to harness best practices and concrete examples for the implementation of SDG16 and all other goals, especially as this HLPF sits between the SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future, and SDG16 is under review.
- Though the world is facing extraordinary challenges, many policies, initiatives, and best practices, including those featured in this year's VNRs, give us reason to hope.
- According to last year's Open Society Foundation (OSF) Barometer, on average, 86 percent of respondents want to live in a democratic state. Only 20 percent believe that the latter can deliver what citizens want. The future of democratic government hinges on results.

Priya Sood, SDG16 Knowledge Management and Advocacy Officer, Oslo Governance Centre, UNDP

- UNDP supports member state data collection at the global level, with standards to be applied. In partnership with OHCHR, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and others, UNDP developed a coordinated approach to supporting national capacities in monitoring SDG16 progress and assessing gaps that prevent national statistics systems from fulfilling their mandate.

- OHCHR, UNODC, UNDP, and six other agencies launched the 2nd Global Progress Report on SDG16 at HLPF. It covers all official indicators and provides the best regional and global data that the UN system can offer across all targets.
- If not reversed, critical trends on SDG16 could jeopardize the achievement of all SDGs, leaving an increasing number of people behind.
- The world is far from peaceful. There has been a 72 % increase in conflict-related civilian deaths, with one-quarter of humanity living in conflict-affected areas. Violent crime is on the rise, and organized crime is an increasing threat to peace and development. Discrimination is widespread, corruption is pervasive, governance is not inclusive, and people are not able to access justice.
- There is an alarming rate of disappearances and deaths of human rights defenders. On average, more than one human rights defender, journalist, or trade unionist was killed or disappeared every day in 2023. In addition, the world witnessed more journalists killed in conflict-affected countries. The situation will not improve until governments protect civic space and build safe environments to help ensure freedom of expression in societies.
- No SDG16 targets are on track; just one target is making moderate progress, two targets are stagnating, and three targets are regressing.
- Data remains a challenge for some indicators. However, data availability has nearly doubled, from 22 % in 2019 to 42 % in the latest assessment.
- UNDP's "2023 VNRs through the Lens of Peaceful, Just and Strong Institutions" finds:
    - There has been a measurable increase in the number of countries prioritizing SDG16. 34 out of 39 VNRs have a dedicated chapter or section on SDG16.
    - Between 2016 and 2023, there has been a progressive increase in the inclusion of SDG16 targets in VNRs, with most targets now covered at about 80%.
    - Depth varies, from short references to extensive analysis of progress.
- This evidences a serious uptake in prioritizing SDG16 and its integration into national plans and priorities.
- Demonstrating its enabling role remains a challenge. Yet, momentum is growing on this, essential to political will and effective, holistic policies. While SDG16 interlinkages research is growing, we need more and better tools to understand policy and programming implications.
- With limited time and financial resources, policymakers tend to look for interventions based on the cost-benefit ratio. Evidence on how peace, justice, and inclusion can drive progress on other (economic, social, and environmental) outcomes can help focus efforts and budgets.

Natia Tsikaradze, Head of the Policy Planning Unit, Administration, Government of Georgia
- This year, Georgia presented its third VNR.
- SDG16 provides the foundational framework necessary to address governance challenges and rising inequalities, combat corruption, and ensure access to justice for all.

- Georgia's implementation of SDG16 has focused on its Public Administration Reform Strategy, which is comprised of policy planning and coordination, civil service and human resource management, accountability, and public service delivery. This strategy is important in establishing a strong and citizen-centric public administration.
- In 2015, Georgia adopted the "On Civil Service" law, ensuring a merit-based, politically neutral civil service system, and is currently focusing on its implementation.
- Georgia is implementing its first unified policy to establish high-quality service delivery across state agencies.
- Citizen satisfaction is a crucial aspect of public administration reform. Through both the Public Administration Reform Strategy and the Public Service Development Strategy, Georgia is focusing on innovation and technology for improved service delivery.
- To increase access to service delivery, as well as increasing efficiency and accessibility, Georgia has created Public Service Halls that provide access to 470 diverse state and private services within a single space, including through the Mobile Public Service Halls.
- The International Budget Partnership's Open Budget Survey ranks Georgia first in budget transparency.
- In 2019, a legal basis was created for a unified standard for planning, monitoring, and evaluating policy documents that prioritize citizen engagement.
- The Interagency Council for Sustainable Development Goals brings together deputy ministers, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia, the private sector, parliament, and municipalities. Four thematic working groups (economic development, social inclusion, sustainable energy, and environment protection, and democratic governance) meet at the working level to support SDG implementation coordination.

Irais Graciela Barreto Canales, Executive Secretary of the National 2030 Agenda Board and Director of the Global Economic Intelligence Unit, Government of Mexico
- This year, Mexico presented its fourth VNR.
- To ensure inclusivity, this year's VNR was published in Nahuatl and Maya languages, as well as English and Spanish. VNRs are first presented in Mexico and then at the UN.
- Both the national development plan and the budgetary programs are aligned and linked with the 2030 Agenda, with "for the good of all, first the poor" and "to leave no one behind, and no one out" as guiding principles.
- Emphasizing "well-being," Mexico's VNR considers the impact of its policies and programs on the country's social fabric, ecology, and political and economic future.
- The results concretely show convergence with the 2030 Agenda. Between 2018 and 2022, the national poverty rate went from 51.9 million to 46.8 million, a 9.8% reduction.
- Low inflation is essential to reduce poverty and improve livelihoods; employment can also support peace. Civil society and private sector partners are needed to achieve this.

- Mexico has prioritized localization of the SDGs. So far, there have been 21 VLRs and VSRs, with the goal being 42 by the end of the year.
- This has required engagement with local governments, coordination across federal entities to understand the different needs across the country, as well as collaboration across actors. This is why the VNR has a "human face." It's not just about sharing the accomplishments and statistics; it's about sharing the stories of the people behind these accomplishments.
- Programs such as "Sembrando Vida" aim to improve the quality of people's lives in rural areas and promote economic development through sustainable production, the promotion of self-consumption, the sale of surpluses, self-employment, and collective work. The "Jovenes Construyendo el Futuro" program allows young people without jobs to enter the labor force. In a country with a drug-trafficking context, this type of program is relevant to combating poverty and supporting peace.

Paula Fernandez-Wulff, Director-General of the 2030 Agenda, Ministry of Social Rights, Consumer Affairs and the 2030 Agenda, Government of Spain
- This year, Spain presented its third VNR.
- VNR Labs are essential for going beyond what works well and identifying challenges, both substantively and regarding the VNR process itself.
- Spain looks at the SDGs as a rights-based agenda, meaning that the SDGs mirror human rights obligations. Though SDG16 is often considered the human rights SDG, human rights are present in all the goals.
- The National Human Rights Institution of Spain participated in the reporting process this year to strengthen the links between VNR reporting and UPRs. Though VNRs and UPRs can be complementary, they are ultimately separate exercises.
- Spain has presented three VNRs as of 2024 and three rounds of UPRs and is a candidate for the Human Rights Council.
- Spain's 2024 VNR reports on aspects of SDG16 throughout different priority areas, demonstrating its cross-cutting nature and reflecting on tangible progress since the last VNR (2021), including a law on the prevention of violence against children, a law to protect the rights of LGBTQAI+ people, and the Democratic Memory Law.
- Spain's Sustainable Development Council is a formal space for civil society participation that is mandated and ensures consistent civil society engagement. The Council is actively engaged in the design of the Sustainable Development Strategy and will assist in the mid-term review. The Council also wrote a report, an annex in the VNR that evaluated the strategy's main weaknesses.
- VNRs should not only look back to reflect on progress and challenges but also look forward to policy design, i.e., retrospective and prospective. This may require a shift in how governments engage with the VNR process.

Joseph Samah, Assistant Director of Planning, Policy and Research, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, Government of Sierra Leone

- This year, Sierra Leone presented its fourth VNR.
- The VNR will focus on understanding the impact of SDG implementation on people's lives and welfare, and the government has prioritized a multi-stakeholder process.
- Sierra Leone has identified access to justice and the rule of law as crucial to sustaining peace. It has also identified SDG16 as a critical enabler of all other SDGs.
- The Justice sector's continued reforms are fundamental catalysts for promoting sustainable peace and development, guaranteeing and protecting citizens' human rights.
- The government has focused on improving access to justice, such as separating juveniles and adults in detention centers, creating a special court for trying gender-based and sexual-based violence, improving access to information, and promoting the rights and integration of migrants.
- The justice sector has established a monitoring and evaluation framework for the systematic tracking of progress towards SDG16 and related targets.
- The country has also initiated the process of operationalizing the local court administration to improve access to justice at the grassroots level, especially in rural and remote areas where formal justice institutions may be lacking.
- The Sierra Leone Legal Aid Board continues to provide access to justice for underprivileged persons. It has also embraced the Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanism for speedy out-of-court settlement of cases.
- Engagement with civil society has been critical not just in consultations for VNRs (especially in community-level engagement) but also in data collection.
- Increasing political polarization threatens the country's democratic gains and the implementation of the SDGs. However, the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion, which has civil society at the heart of its operations, continues to promote dialogue and facilitate peace mediation and reconciliation.

Malcolm Dalesa, Climate Attaché, Permanent Mission of Vanuatu to the United Nations

- This year, Vanuatu presented its second VNR.
- The process of seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on climate change is not only an example of the interlinkages between SDG13 and SDG16 but also an example of broader collaboration between member states, local and regional governments, the Vanuatu Climate Action Network, Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change, and the World Youth for Climate Justice. This included the contributions of data collection by non-state actors for court statements.
- This process has highlighted the importance of improved inclusion of non-state actors in ICJ processes.
- The core states of the ICJ proposal are also working to develop a resolution for adoption in the UN General Assembly.

- Vanuatu has been lobbying for ecocide to be included as the fifth crime against peace in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. They have also been advocating for the establishment of a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty that encompasses elements of non-proliferation, fair phase-out, and just transition.
- Vanuatu's VNR process focuses on SDG16 and the rule of law as an enabler of climate justice and resilience through:
  - Institutional integration:
    - Strong institutional frameworks have strengthened responses to governance and climate challenges.
    - Integrating climate action into governance policies to create a cohesive approach to support the rule of law and climate justice measures.
  - Transparency and accountability:
    - Enhanced data collection has improved transparency and accountability and assists in tracking and implementing the SDGs.
    - Inclusive stakeholder engagement promotes civic participation, oversight, and equitable climate policies.
  - Capacity building and legal reforms:
    - Capacity building of local governments increases the implementation of governance and climate initiatives.
    - Legal and policy reforms are aligned with climate actions and justice through the VNRs.
  - Learning and adaptation:
    - Documenting challenges and best practices increased policy adaptation in line with both SDG13 and SDG16.
    - Continuous learning and adaptation from the VNRs ensure responsiveness to evolving challenges.

Peter van Sluijs, Coordinator, Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS)

- The VNR process should be continuous; follow-up is necessary to maintain the stock of progress coordination.
- Understanding and reflecting on inclusion in SDG reporting is necessary, but analysis should also include how difficult elements are reflected in the VNRs.
- It is essential to distinguish between UPRs and VNRs, but there is a way to see how SDG implementation and follow-up can be bolstered by human rights reporting.
- Following up on Sierra Leone's process of involving civil society, as well as engaging and consulting in the creation of data, using non-official data is needed to strengthen reports and ensure data analysis and reports are more inclusive.

Sophiko Akhobadze, Director, Regional Environmental Centre for the Caucasus

- The link between SDG16 and SDG13 is very important this year and requires a coordinated approach, especially in highlighting the views of local communities.
- Cooperation is needed to ensure the implementation of the SDGs. One example is the cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia despite armed conflict.
- Interlinkages are present between SDG13 and SDG16, including:
  - Promoting land rights to ensure a clean and healthy environment.
  - Addressing environmental challenges can positively impact peace at the local level.
  - Promoting institutions can increase equitable access to natural resources.
- Climate change poses an incredible challenge to peace and must be addressed to achieve all other SDGs.

Henk-Jan Brinkman, Permanent Observer, International Development Law Organization
- Trust in national and international institutions is low because they are unable to deliver services. Georgia is commended for focusing on service delivery. 72% of people in South Africa would prefer an authoritarian government if it could reduce crime and provide jobs.
- The process is often as important as the outcome, as it can rebuild trust between people and the government, as exemplified by the VLRs in Mexico and the participatory approach in Spain.
- Whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches are critical.
- SDG16 also emphasizes the rule of law at the international level and Vanuatu's push for an ICJ advisory opinion was an example of how important it can be.
- We need to reflect further on the extent to which the SDGs reflect human rights and how this is presented in VNRs.

Massimo Tommasoli, Director of Global Programmes, International IDEA
- Since the adoption of the SDGs, most countries have gone through two or three electoral cycles, in some cases with increasing polarization of political competition. Risks of violent conflict have impacted the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
- Recognizing the growing political volatility of many national contexts, ensuring continuity in defining and monitoring policy implementation throughout those cycles is essential.
- Independent commissions and oversight agencies, such as National Human Rights Institutions and Election Management Bodies, have the potential to play a stronger role in the VNR process.