VNR Lab at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

Using VNR data as part of a synthesis of global evaluative evidence on progress towards SDG17

12 July 2023, 2.00 – 3.00 pm EDT
Conference Room 11, UN Secretariat Building, New York

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The SDG Synthesis Coalition presented lessons from its VNR analysis, conducted as part of a larger effort to triangulate and synthesize evaluative evidence on progress towards the Partnership Pillar of the SDGs. Representatives of France, Ireland, Liechtenstein and Lithuania shared their experience with developing VNRs, with a focus on partnerships, and reflections on the work of the Coalition.

Country experiences highlighted the following:

- Contextual factors such as COVID-19, the war on Ukraine, the climate crisis and the cost-of-living crisis/inflation have impacted countries' abilities to prioritize international development and quantify their efforts through data and evidence, e.g., on capacity development. At the same time, these overlapping crises have helped improve resolve, as challenges are increasingly global.
- Second generation VNRs, such as many of those presented in 2023, have been greatly enriched through multi-stakeholder engagement and open consultations, involving e.g., CSOs, NGOs, youth, community projects, libraries, parliamentarians, and local authorities. Good practice examples were online public consultations and "open drafting", e.g., for the first-ever Youth chapter in Ireland's VNR. This has helped promote the idea that the SDGs are relevant at home and abroad. This participatory process has in some instances created networks of people working on sustainable development, including experts across areas of expertise and from the public and private sectors. This may help build capacity in-country, boost access to data, start new collaborations beyond the VNRs, and even increase policy coherence. Providing the right technology and collaboration platforms are crucial for the success of such

consultations, and could have great value to foster international and multilateral partnerships in general.

- In general, progress on SDG 17 is perceived as adequate, however policy coherence remains a common challenge. An understanding is growing among populations and policy makers that tax treaties and digital strategies for instance have to be beneficial to all parties. Some negative spillover effects of heightened partnerships have also been noted, such as carbon footprint related to imports. Several countries acknowledged that ODA should increase to accelerate the SDGs.

With regard to the work of the SDG Synthesis Coalition, and its presentation on the Partnership Pillar, the following reflections were shared by discussants and the general audience:

- Synthesizing evidence with a hard cut-off point of 2015 (i.e., excluding evidence from previous years) may miss some the biggest accelerations that happened before 2015, e.g. in child nutrition and poverty reduction.
- Some countries might regard SDG 17 as a mere means towards the other SDGs and may not be interested in reporting thoroughly on its indicators. It may therefore not be best placed to help identify "what works and why".
- Data from VNR syntheses needs to be triangulated and complemented by other, potentially more objective sources. VNRs follow a common template (VNR Handbook) resulting in a homogenizing effect on countries' VNRs; and gaps in progress towards SDGs might not be reflected adequately in the VNRs.
- The declining number of VNR submissions by middle- and high-income country since the COVID-19 pandemic is not indicative of a decreasing interest in the VNRs, but a result of ECOSOC limiting the number of VNRs to be presented at each year's HLPF to 45, and encouraging especially low-income countries that have not yet presented any VNR to do so.
- While statistics indicate progress against the SDGs, the specific contributions of policies and initiatives has been notoriously hard to tease out. This is where syntheses of evaluative evidence can make the greatest contributions going forward. They can also help shed light on equity issues (Progress made for whom? Policies work for whom and where?).

- The lesser focus on technology in VNRs on SDG 17 needs exploration, given the growing role of AI and the private sector in development. More consultation with the private sector might be one remedy.