



# Roundtable Discussion for VNR3

15 March 2024

Session on : *Samoa National Taskforce – Experiences and lessons learned from Pacific members and experts*

**Mr. Mark Borg, Senior Consultant, Sustainable Development Management Solutions**

## **(VNR Comments)**

Countries generally appreciate the VNR exercise and the process that is followed in its preparation. Although it is a source of stress, they see this as an opportunity to take stock of their development efforts, not just for the SDGs but also for their own national development plans.

Countries have taken steps and are still taking steps to align their NDPs with the SDGs. The benefits of this are obvious, especially in regard to data collection. It is acknowledged that the NDPs have an even wider scope than the SDGs and require a wider range of data to properly evaluate its progress.

Clearly countries have witnessed improvements with every VNR they have conducted. Improvements have been observed in areas such as coordination, stakeholder consultations, and data availability. In the preparation of the first VNR they did not have much clarity on what was needed in the VNR's preparation. In the second attempt, having gone through the first, there was more clarity and they could focus on improving the report in its various areas.

Countries are appreciative of the support they have received from UN agencies and SPC. They have limited human capacity they can put onto such initiatives, and the support received gave them the ability to access crucial support.

On the issue of financing of the SDGs, we note that countries do not know how much it would cost to achieve the SDGs. The UN Secretary-General proposed an SDG Stimulus of at least \$500 billion US dollars per year. This is certainly welcome, but if we don't know how much it will cost us to achieve the SDGs as countries, we would have no idea how much of these funds we actually need to access every year.

## **Now on Data**

The lack of data is a perennial problem in the Pacific... for decades now and it seems we haven't been able to find a solution. So if I may, I will make a proposal for consideration, in this regard.

If I had to figure out a source of data that we all consider as the most reliable, this would be the census. We have other data sources that we use -for example, the MICS (Multiple

Indicator Cluster Survey) and in some cases the occasional HIES (Household Income and Expenditure Surveys). Economic data are usually regularly kept and readily available. But still, I believe the census is king. The problem with censuses is that they happen every ten years (sometimes longer). 10 year old data may be fine in some areas but certainly not in others. But we know how to do censuses well.

Even if we had to ignore the need for accurate data for our reporting needs, I believe we need more up-to-date data to make the right decisions as well.

So, I would suggest consideration of having more regular censuses, say every four years. This would ensure that we have more frequent reliable data at our disposal practically all the time. Don't dismiss the idea without consideration. I'm very much aware that censuses are very onerous and expensive exercises, no doubt about that. But if we extend the questionnaire with other SDG-related data, we may be able to do away with other surveys that we carry out regularly and channel those funds to support the censuses. The statistics office would also need to have a robust division that would practically be focussing on census preparation, its conduct and analyses on a continuous basis.

Then we could time the preparation of the VNR for the year following the publication of the census results, confident that we have reliable and up-to-date data to work with.

Of course, there is some other data that is problematic to collect. It cannot be collected through the censuses. We don't have systems in our country that could collect this data. Setting up these systems would be onerous and expensive. In the scheme of things it may not be worth our while to set them up when considering the cost-benefit. In this case, it may be preferable to focus on identifying proxy indicators, preferably if they are common across the region (if we want to do some comparative analysis), but otherwise country-specific. This could be a single indicator or a composite indicator.

### **The Key message**

If I had to identify the key message, it would be that countries generally underestimate the effort required to prepare the VNR report. Again and again countries have said that they would have preferred the VNR process to have started earlier. So the suggestion would be to prepare an ambitious front loaded workplan, as in the Pacific we have experienced plenty of slippage, as people seem to be over-committed. Related to this, we might need to have a dedicated SDG Unit that would be working round the clock on the preparations for the next VNR and any VLRs that the country would want to prepare.

Finally, I hope all VNRs in all countries around the world, reflect a true picture of progress towards the SDGs. Glossing over our problems will not help anyone. I believe that was what we tried doing with the Fiji VNR. That means there will be some inconvenient truths that we'll all have to face up to.