



# Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
12 January 2021

Original: English

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## Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Eighth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

Bangkok, 23–26 March 2021

Item 3 of the provisional agenda\*

**Linking national, regional and global dimensions of  
the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

### **Reflections on second generation voluntary national reviews in Asia and the Pacific**

**Note by the secretariat**

#### *Summary*

The objective of the present document is to highlight the added value of second generation voluntary national reviews in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The importance of second generation voluntary national reviews in the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda is examined and the process for linking the first and second reviews is explored. In order to facilitate peer learning at the Eighth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, the present document includes examples of good practice of second generation voluntary national reviews from the Asia-Pacific region. The document also includes information on areas where second voluntary national reviews could be strengthened as well as an overview of the practical resources available to countries preparing for their second voluntary national review.

## **I. Introduction**

1. Voluntary national reviews of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are the foundation of its follow-up and review framework. Second voluntary national reviews play a critical part in this process by tracking the next steps and recommendations from the first review and identifying concrete next steps to address key challenges in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the country level.

2. The objective of the present document, prepared for the Eighth Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, is to highlight the added value of second generation voluntary national reviews in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In response to requests from member States in the Asia-Pacific region for support in developing their second generation voluntary national reviews, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) analysed

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\* ESCAP/RFSD/2021/L.1.

reports from countries that presented at the high-level political forum on sustainable development for a second time and conducted a series of interviews with government officials within the Asia-Pacific region who were involved in the first and second voluntary national reviews. This led to the creation of a guidance tool on developing second generation voluntary national reviews<sup>1</sup> in November 2020, which contains examples of best practices and practical suggestions and serves as a basis for the present document.

3. Taking stock of progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals since the first voluntary national review is one of the primary objectives of the second voluntary national review. Unlike the first voluntary national review, which provides a baseline for the country's progress with regard to the Goals, the second generation voluntary national review aims to provide a more comprehensive assessment of a country's achievements. It is a tool to analyse the efforts to address findings from the first voluntary national review and the impact of the first report. As second voluntary national reviews are not intended to be stand-alone reports, but to directly follow up analysis from the first review, it is integral that second generation voluntary national reviews consider the factors that have driven change since the first voluntary national review. It is important that second reviews include an analysis of why advances may have been slow and try to attribute improvements that are the result of policy responses/interventions in order to explain why and how successes came about.

4. Second voluntary national reviews should report on the impact the previous voluntary national reviews had on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. When many countries produced their first voluntary national review, there was little data available on all the Sustainable Development Goals and many countries had not yet produced integrated indicators. The second time around, the availability and quality of data should have improved, and national statistical systems have been strengthened. Countries are now in a better position to provide a more granular analysis of progress on the Goals.

5. Second generation voluntary national reviews also add value by enabling countries to demonstrate renewed and continued commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda. Second generation voluntary national reviews have the scope to amplify dialogue and debate about the Goals and encourage more comprehensive stakeholder engagement the second time around. This means engaging more deeply with marginalized groups and more broadly with a wider group of actors throughout the entire voluntary national review process.

6. The process of developing a second voluntary national review report can, also, create the momentum to re-evaluate institutional mechanisms or arrangements for Sustainable Development Goal monitoring and alignment with national policy processes. Following the first voluntary national review, more countries now have a better understanding of the political, technical and coordination functions of the voluntary national review process, enabling countries to utilize the second voluntary national review process to tweak or realign institutional mechanisms with the Goals.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.unescap.org/resources/practical-guidance-tool-2nd-vnrs](http://www.unescap.org/resources/practical-guidance-tool-2nd-vnrs).

## **II. Review of second voluntary national reviews from the Asia-Pacific region**

7. Analysis of second generation voluntary national reviews from the Asia-Pacific region reveals significant changes from first voluntary national reviews. The analysis involved desk reviews and interviews with representatives of countries that presented their second reviews at the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2020 (Bangladesh, Georgia, India, Nepal and Samoa) and in 2019 (Indonesia, the Philippines and Turkey). Analysis from the interviews with representatives of countries that have already presented their second voluntary national review highlights that, in terms of the process, many countries in the Asia-Pacific region overcame several key challenges related to the process for the first voluntary national review. Many countries were able to deepen stakeholder engagement, integrate the voluntary national review effectively into national processes and improve institutional mechanisms. However, due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, several countries encountered new challenges and had to move stakeholder engagement online (see section III).

### **A. Different type of reporting**

8. Analysis of the existing reports from the region shows that second generation voluntary national review reports differ significantly in structure, volume and content. Second generation review reports are generally more comprehensive and detailed. While the first review reports focused more on the institutional arrangements, second generation review reports focused more on the progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and targets (given the advanced Goal implementation). Reporting on the progress towards the Goals was much more comprehensive and complete than in the first review and included analyses of trends and challenges with more specific next steps and examples of best practices.

9. A key starting point for connecting the first and second voluntary national reviews is to track the implementation of the recommendations and next steps from the first voluntary national review. This is vital to evaluate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. A synthesis of voluntary national reviews in 2019 reveals that, although many reporting countries outlined next steps or recommendations in the first review, few reports included specific follow-up actions. To varying degrees, second voluntary national reviews reflected on lessons learned and areas of progress since the first review. Such findings were also reflected in second voluntary national reviews in 2020. The global 2020 voluntary national review synthesis report shows that half of the countries conducting their second voluntary national review mentioned their first review only indirectly or very briefly. Clearly, connecting the two is vital. Countries could report on next steps in various ways, such as by including a road map that defines key activities and next steps between reporting periods or including a special chapter on lessons learned and next steps from one voluntary national review to the next.

### **B. Refreshing institutional mechanisms and policy coherence**

10. Prior to developing their first voluntary national review, many countries established a permanent Sustainable Development Goal committee or commission within a specific ministry to monitor progress towards the achievement of the Goals. In the 2019 voluntary national reviews, 50 per cent of reporting countries indicated that they had set up a national Sustainable

Development Goal or sustainable development committee or an equivalent.<sup>2</sup> During the first voluntary national review, many of those committees or processes were in the setting up phase. Several countries were still identifying the key institutions to work with and which ministries should take the lead. Evaluating whether such institutional mechanisms support the achievement of the Goals is an important step in developing a second voluntary national review. However, a global synthesis of voluntary national reviews, presented in 2020, highlights that very few voluntary national reviews provided information on the actual impact that their institutional arrangements had on overall policies and achievement of the Goals. It is therefore recommended that countries in the process of developing a second voluntary national review conduct a self-assessment, and obtain feedback, on the effectiveness of their institutional arrangements during the first voluntary national review process. Such an assessment can trigger changes in institutional structures and refresh certain processes. By evaluating institutional mechanisms and ensuring they are fit for purpose, countries can ensure that their institutional arrangements going forward are best positioned to support accelerated action to implement the 2030 Agenda.

11. The process of developing a second voluntary national review has the potential to create the momentum to refresh the wider institutional mechanisms for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals and assessing alignment with national policy processes. This can play a crucial role in creating a more effective institutional framework, political buy-in and wide participation of society in accelerating progress towards achieving the Goals. It can also play an important role in ensuring an adequate level of policy coherence and linkage with national priorities and planning.

12. In Bangladesh, sectoral ministries (including at the divisional level) were directly involved in the second voluntary national review process. Each ministry or division was allocated a role for each Sustainable Development Goal: lead, co-lead or associate. The sectoral ministries were then responsible for collecting data, holding consultations and developing progress reports on their specific Goal to feed into the voluntary national review. They were given a template and format and asked to include information on best practices, innovative ideas, partnerships and progress on leaving no one behind. Each sectoral ministry was asked to produce data and work closely with civil society and the private sector. Although this process was successful, ministries still required a lot of support. It was crucial to manage time well to ensure all progress reports could be reviewed and incorporated into the voluntary national review.

13. In Samoa, the second voluntary national review built completely on the processes established in the first voluntary national review. They deliberately aligned their 2020 voluntary national review (the country's second voluntary national review) with the review of the national development strategy, which was also taking place in 2020. The Sustainable Development Goal task force utilized national data processes that were established for the national development strategy and improved over time. Building on lessons learned from the first review, the Goal task force inserted the voluntary national review directly into national processes and utilized the already planned annual sector review reports. By linking the second voluntary national review to reviews of the national development strategy, it was easier for the public to relate to the process and see the relevance. Lessons from their first voluntary national review highlighted the importance of utilizing data and analysis from existing thematic sector reviews and incorporating sector leads in the Goal task force.

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<sup>2</sup> Also called commissions, steering committees, task forces or working groups.

### C. Strengthening stakeholder engagement

14. Stakeholder engagement is a crucial area that many countries seek to strengthen in their second voluntary national review. Many countries reported challenges with stakeholder engagement during their first voluntary national review. The second review is therefore an opportunity to take stock and seek internal and external feedback from different stakeholders on how the engagement went the first time around. The second voluntary national review can be used to try to put the feedback and lessons learned into practice in order to develop more timely and meaningful engagement with stakeholders. The second time around, countries have learned which are the key institutions, inside and outside government, to engage with, and what type of outreach strategy is needed to promote the meaningful participation of marginalized groups in the voluntary national review process. Open feedback from different stakeholders must be sought on how the engagement went the first time around.

15. Interviews with representatives of countries that conducted first and second voluntary national reviews, and the synthesis of voluntary national review reports, reveal that many countries encountered the same types of challenges when engaging stakeholders in the process. These challenges relate to managing civil society's expectations; planning adequately for translating documents into local languages; engaging sufficiently at the subnational level and with marginalized groups; balancing formal and informal engagement within different levels of government; and lacking time to organize comprehensive stakeholder engagement activities. Addressing these problems may involve carefully defining the scope of stakeholder engagement to ensure that initiatives are meaningful. This requires detailed stakeholder mapping and the development of a stakeholder engagement plan. In order to ensure that diverse groups can provide useful feedback on the drafts of the voluntary national review, it is important for countries to consider the translation of voluntary national review drafts and consultation documents into local languages. Stakeholder engagement also involves communicating and engaging with different levels and parts of government. Starting discussions with all levels of government, including subnational governments, from the beginning of the second voluntary national review process will help to ensure that recommendations and next steps are politically informed and workable. It is also important for countries to engage with technical and political officials within a ministry at different levels. Often there is a lead Sustainable Development Goal or voluntary national review focal point in each sector ministry; however, in order to ensure wide buy-in and input, it is useful to proactively engage and consult with staff in different parts and levels of a sector ministry.

16. The second voluntary national review is an opportunity to broaden and deepen stakeholder engagement to ensure that a diverse group of people, especially those who are vulnerable or marginalized, can participate. Assessing how inclusive the engagement with stakeholders was during the first voluntary national review is an important part of the planning process for the second. It is helpful to reflect on how stakeholder engagement went the first time around and whether stakeholders found the process inclusive. Also of importance is the role of feedback, whether voluntary national review teams received useful feedback on the quality of the stakeholder process in the first voluntary national review, and whether stakeholders felt engaged and that their feedback was incorporated into the report. Building trust, dialogue and debate between civil society, other stakeholders and government can be an important part of the voluntary national review process. This can particularly be the case if consultations did not go well the first time around, and significant time may be needed to rebuild trust around the voluntary national review process.

17. It is important that stakeholder engagement is not viewed solely as an isolated event or activity but as an ongoing process – underpinned by clear communication initiatives and a stakeholder engagement plan. For the first voluntary national review, many countries viewed stakeholder engagement as a distinct phase in the process (with a few big consultation events). However, in order to ensure that stakeholders engage at all stages of the voluntary national review, stakeholder engagement and communication should be an integral part of each phase rather than a distinct phase. Different stakeholder engagement processes and activities have diverse purposes, scopes of responsibility and reach. The levels of engagement that are expected from the stakeholders involved differ. It is useful for countries planning a second voluntary national review to reflect on the purpose of stakeholder engagement during the first voluntary national review. Different aspects and stages of stakeholder engagement may have had different purposes (for example, reviewing review report drafts, participating in a gender workshop or commenting on a stakeholder engagement plan). It is likely that the more countries involve, collaborate with and empower stakeholders, the more trust will be built and greater energy, commitment and partnerships for the 2030 Agenda will be generated. A second generation voluntary national review is an excellent opportunity to strengthen and tweak processes and initiatives established during the first voluntary national review in order to create a comprehensive stakeholder engagement and communication plan.

18. In India, following the first voluntary national review, standing committees and civil society organization subgroups were established to facilitate partnerships between civil society, government and other stakeholders and improve reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals. This helped to improve coordination and cooperation among government departments, civil society organizations and United Nations agencies for the second voluntary national review. However, it was felt that it was not enough to just involve civil society in the standing committees, it was necessary to hold dedicated consultations with vulnerable groups. As a result, special subgroups for the voluntary national review were also set up. It was also realized that it was necessary to create an ongoing structure that would permit regular consultations with these groups, as isolated events were not as effective. Standing subgroup meetings have therefore become regular events to ensure continued participation for all. Stakeholder engagement can further be institutionalized by ensuring that these permanent subgroups engage fully in the Sustainable Development Goal process and future voluntary national reviews on an ongoing basis. These subgroup meetings could provide a powerful platform for facilitating genuine collaboration and collecting input and feedback for the voluntary national review.

19. In Georgia, several changes were made to the stakeholder engagement and approval process to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to physical distancing requirements, the Government of Georgia moved a lot of consultations online. The voluntary national review draft was shared online on the Sustainable Development Goal website and written submissions and feedback were requested. Drafts of the voluntary national review report were also shared electronically with the four thematic working groups. Georgia applied a new online voting procedure for making decisions in the Sustainable Development Goals Inter-Agency Council. The new procedure enabled the Council to continue making decisions and avoid delays even when Council members could not meet in person due to physical distancing requirements. It also ensured safe participation and created an inclusive decision-making environment. The Council reviewed and approved the final draft of the report electronically.

#### **D. Tracking trajectories since the first voluntary national review: the role of data collection**

20. The collection and analysis of high-quality disaggregated data is crucial to assess progress and track a country's trajectory between the first and second voluntary national reviews and towards implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, reliable data are vital for determining which evidence-based interventions are needed to address key blockages hindering implementation. Lack of data and the absence of disaggregated data were two key challenges countries encountered during the first voluntary national review. Since the completion of their first voluntary national review, many countries implemented a series of measures to increase data availability and quality and to strengthen national statistical systems. Governments recognize that collecting better and more data that is disaggregated is directly connected to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and ensuring no one is left behind. Furthermore, second voluntary national reviews could play an important role in engaging stakeholders in deepening understanding of what the data are really revealing. The reviews could be an opportunity to support stakeholders in their efforts to review data and build an understanding of where the country is, reveal some of the stories behind the data and build awareness of progress towards the Goals.

21. Assessing improvements in data collection and mapping the availability of official data are important steps in the process for the second voluntary national review. They will help countries to assess what data they have and identify alternative sources of data they may want to investigate to close the most important gaps. It will help to identify opportunities to implement more advanced and innovative forms of data compilation such as integrating statistical and geospatial data. However, increasing the amount of data is only half the challenge. An important lesson from the first voluntary national reviews is that obtaining, collating and sharing the data are also a challenge. The national statistical office is often the central agency for producing official statistics and coordinates data production and collection across the national statistical system. However, line ministries also play an important role in collecting, organizing and sharing data. Improving data coordination by involving the national statistical office in the voluntary national review team from the outset is crucial to encouraging sector ministries, government bodies and other institutions to share data for the voluntary national review and other national and international reporting needs.

### **III. Lessons from second voluntary national reviews during the coronavirus disease pandemic: physical distancing and online engagement**

22. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increased use of online consultation and drafting tools and the adoption of physical distancing measures. It is likely that these measures will continue for the foreseeable future. This means that online measures will be used during second and third voluntary national review processes where previously countries would have used face-to-face engagement. Online engagement can potentially be a very cost-effective and time efficient way to engage groups that are geographically dispersed. However, it does not always work well where the issues are contentious and have high stakeholder interest. It may be necessary to take time to build up trust among stakeholders and engage in more face-to-face discussions first. However, if designed well, online engagement can be a useful tool to elicit feedback and input in ways that are more structured than face-to-face engagement (e.g., surveys and feedback forms). It is important to recognize that online engagement may also require institutional investment in skilled facilitation and knowledge

management, which can take time to build. However, at a minimum, a dedicated online space should be created for the second voluntary national review process. This online space should be a platform where stakeholders can find information on the process and entry points to engage, identify institutions and individuals to contact, and submit contributions, if invited. With careful planning and adequate resourcing, online engagement for the second voluntary national review can help to address several challenges encountered in the first voluntary national review.

23. Although more people globally now have access to a smartphone, it is important to recognize that online engagement can still pose a challenge for countries or communities where internet usage is low or is cost prohibitive. This can prevent countries from organizing online consultations and can exclude certain groups in society from engagement. Working with civil society partners to conduct outreach and capacity-building for local communities is a key engagement strategy, especially when dealing with communities with low levels of internet penetration, digital literacy or interest. In addition, supporting community centres to provide public access to tablets, computers and charging points can be central in improving the use of online forums, surveys and live events. Ensuring that websites and discussion forums are accessible and holding specific training events for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups can help to break down barriers.

24. It is also important to consider how to address blockages that prevent the increase of online engagement in second voluntary national reviews. Strategies might address how to manage and moderate a large amount of online feedback and how to prepare for, and deal with, negative online feedback. Appointing a specific person to moderate all online forums and comment sections and developing a clear code of conduct that includes guidelines for open and safe feedback can be integral. Anticipating and planning for receiving some critical or negative feedback and preparing guidance for the voluntary national review team that includes examples of how to respond to constructive, political and harmful types of feedback are important. Online engagement takes place across a wide range, from the simple to the complicated and sophisticated. Deciding which online platforms (social media, online forums, live streaming) to use, depends on the purpose of engaging online, institutional capacity and levels of stakeholder interest. This may require considering what type of online feedback and engagement are foremost appropriate and what type of physical distancing may be required to conduct safe consultations. Furthermore, considering which language the online tools will be in and ensuring that there is adequate time and budget to translate and synthesize online input is central.

#### **IV. Conclusions and recommendations**

25. Second generation voluntary national reviews, if designed effectively, can play a fundamental role in assessing progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, identifying problems and blockages, and making specific recommendations for accelerating progress at all levels. A second voluntary national review therefore has the potential to provide a much more in-depth analysis of the root causes of challenges and to track progress, setbacks and successes since the first voluntary national review.

26. The practical guidance tool on developing second generation voluntary national reviews contains helpful tips and planning tools to assist countries in producing their second voluntary national reviews. The tool should help countries to build on lessons learned from their first review and support them in their efforts to connect their first and second voluntary national reviews, ensuring that there is continuity between the reports. Member States may wish

to make use of this tool which contains practical advice on how to ensure that second generation voluntary national reviews take stock of the first review in terms of process, content and impact.

27. As second generation voluntary national reviews should be approached in a way to amplify dialogue and debate about the Sustainable Development Goals and encourage more comprehensive stakeholder engagement and outreach with marginalized groups throughout the entire process, member States may wish to consider assessing the inclusivity and effectiveness of the stakeholder engagement process for the first voluntary national review.

28. Member States may also wish to consider using the second voluntary national review as an opportunity to strengthen the institutional mechanisms for monitoring implementation of the 2030 Agenda and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

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