The whole of government approach: Initial lessons concerning national coordinating structures for the 2030 Agenda and how review can improve their operation

Discussion Paper

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March 2019
About Partners for Review

Partners for Review (P4R) is a transnational multi-stakeholder network for representatives of government, civil society, the private sector and academia involved in the national review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The network was set up on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU), and its objective is to help develop effective global and national review and accountability mechanisms for achieving the SDGs. P4R facilitates dialogue and peer learning on good practice and success factors, provides a safe space to explore challenges and lessons learned, and shares expertise on new and emerging issues related to national monitoring and review. The exchange focuses primarily on three areas related to the review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda: i) institutional coordination (the whole of government approach); ii) stakeholder engagement (the whole-of-society approach); and iii) addressing data challenges.

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Disclaimer

P4R Discussion Papers reflect the views of the author(s).
Acknowledgments

This study would not have been possible without the input from members of the Partners for Review (P4R) network who are personally involved in the coordination of implementation and review processes of the 2030 Agenda.

The author would like to thank the following individuals for their time, generosity in sharing insights, and valuable input (in alphabetical order):

- Victor Eduardo Alegria, Director of Sustainable Development, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, the Environment, Sustainable Development and Immigration (Belize)
- Maureen Bakunzi, Commissioner Uganda, Office of the Prime Minister Assistant (Uganda)
- Rasha Dabbouri, Senior Researcher, Ministry of Planning and International Co-operation (Jordan)
- Jambal Doljinsuren, Director of Development Policy and Planning Department, National Development Agency (Mongolia)
- Diana Lorena Flores Veliz, Analyst in Evaluation of International Cooperation, Secretariat of Planning and Programming of the Presidency (Guatemala)
- Luz Keila Virginia Gramajo Vilchez, Advisor, Superior Office, Secretariat of Planning and Programming of the Presidency (Guatemala) Anna Kvernadze, Senior Advisor, Administration of the Government (Georgia)
- Christoph Lang, Senior Advisor, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (Switzerland)
- Annika Lindblom, Senior Advisor, Ministry for Foreign Affairs & Prime Minister’s Office (Finland)
- Adam Ostry, Senior Project Manager, Public Governance Directorate (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD)

The author would also like to express her gratitude to Joern Geisselmann and Anna–Maria Heisig from the secretariat of Partners for Review for their constructive criticism and support in the writing of this study.
List of abbreviations

CSO  CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATION
ECLAC  ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
ESCAP  ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
GSIDS  GROWTH AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY
HLPF  HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM
MDG  MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL
NDP  NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN
NSO  NATIONAL STATISTICAL OFFICE
OECD  ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT
P4R  PARTNERS FOR REVIEW
SDG  SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL
SEGEPLAN  SECRETARIAT OF PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING OF THE PRESIDENCY IN GUATEMALA
UNDESA  UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
UNDP  UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME
VNR  VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The creation of a coordinating structure to incorporate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the actions of all areas of government and to bring various government institutions together to develop and implement integrated policies is one of the most formal mechanisms for adopting the whole of government approach (UNDESA, 2018a). However, to sustain impetus for implementation of the 2030 Agenda, efforts need to go beyond merely creating an institutional framework. They need to create new dynamics for collaboration throughout policy cycles, across sectors and between levels of government (UNDESA, 2018a).

Based on feedback from members of the Partners for Review (P4R) network, this paper aims to investigate specific experiences of implementing the whole of government approach as part of the 2030 Agenda and to explore how the review process can help countries to improve policy coherence and the operation of the coordinating structures they have put in place.

The paper defines ‘review’ as a process in which different stakeholders are engaged in a joint assessment of progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. If carried out on regular basis, review can create space for dialogue, creation of knowledge and joint work. It can promote cross-sectoral and vertical collaboration and help countries to raise awareness both within and outside government.

The study analyses a range of coordinating structures. It looks at new and adapted structures for implementing the SDGs and their leadership approach, membership, organisation and main functions.

The majority of respondents reported that countries have adapted pre-existing structures to implement and review the 2030 Agenda. Adaptation has often involved reformulating roles and/or giving a more prominent role to a specific ministry to better address the multidisciplinary nature and ‘Leave no one behind’ principle of the 2030 Agenda.

The leadership approach of the coordinating body often determines the level of power it has to involve the whole of government and influence decision-making. It also influences whether priority is given to short-term or long-term issues and whether favouring particular policy areas is directly influenced by the leadership approach.

Participation by different stakeholders varies greatly between countries. Some structures form part of governmental and non-governmental arrangements at the national and sub-national levels, others only at the national level. Yet others involve only government representatives; these often include non-governmental stakeholders in review through consultation processes designed to identify national priorities and review results.

More inclusive structures can contribute to enhancing transparency and accountability and help to build trust between stakeholders. However, these potential benefits may be hampered if non-governmental stakeholders are not very representative. Having wider participation also often slows down coordination between stakeholders.

Most national governments have yet to establish standing committees to improve coordination capacity at the national level. In some countries, involvement of sub-national and local actors depends on the level of independence local government has. Where local government enjoys substantial autonomy, government cannot create new rules or advise how local agendas should be implemented. Most national governments agree on the need to raise awareness at the sub-national level as a tool for improving vertical integration of government.
Despite the variety of functions, organisation and scope for action represented by coordinating structures, the study notes some general trends. It identifies three coordinating units within every structure. Every coordinating structure has one high-level committee mainly involving only government representatives. This committee leads the implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. It should be noted, however, that while this finding relates to the cases included in this study, it will not necessarily be true of others.

Structures have also a national committee. In some cases, this national committee involves government and non-governmental stakeholders; in others, only government representatives are involved. The committee coordinates the participation of a range of stakeholders and, within the review process, coordinates and conducts the identification and alignment of national priorities, coordinates monitoring, and oversees identification of inputs for follow-up. The third coordinating unit is the technical committee. This committee is the operational body responsible for coordinating delivery. Within the review process, it often measures progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Based on analysis of these coordinating structures, the study identifies structural and functional limitations that may hamper continuous and coherent implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda.

Structural limitations result from the way coordinating structures are designed. This means that there is little, if any, scope for review to drive change. The structural limitations identified are weak regulatory frameworks and the extent of the coordinating structures’ power.

Functional limitations are the result of non-structural aspects, such as a lack of awareness or of incentives for government actors to engage in achieving the 2030 Agenda. The study shows that review can help to tackle such limitations and thereby help to improve the operation and coherence of individual coordinating structures.

Involving government actors in the process of identifying national priorities and aligning them with the 2030 Agenda can help government actors to better understand how their participation in achieving the 2030 Agenda can advance their own sectoral and local agenda.

In other cases, preparation of a review has made government actors aware of the 2030 Agenda and helped to define roles and functions within government for its implementation. Review also creates a space for parliamentarians: often, they play a key role in analysing ongoing achievements by approving inputs for follow-up that will further enhance achievement of the SDGs.
I. INTRODUCTION

Adopting the whole of government approach is an important condition for implementation of the 2030 Agenda (UNDESA, 2018a). The indivisible economic, social and environmental pillars of the 2030 Agenda require various parts of government to work together to facilitate synergies, manage trade-offs, and avoid or minimise negative spill-overs.

The creation of a coordinating structure to incorporate the SDGs into the actions of all parts of government and to bring various government institutions together to develop and implement integrated policies is one of the most formal mechanisms for adopting the whole of government approach (UNDESA, 2018a). However, to sustain impetus for implementation of the 2030 Agenda, efforts need to go beyond merely creating an institutional framework. They need to create new dynamics for collaboration throughout policy cycles, across sectors, and between levels of government (UNDESA, 2018a).

Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs is a relatively new task, and many countries are becoming aware of the limitations of their existing structures in terms of implementing an integrated agenda (compared with their experience of implementing the Millennium Development Goals).

A minimal definition of policy coherence involves the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policies across government departments and agencies, creating synergies that will help achieve a defined objective (OECD DAC, 2001). Policy coherence in the area of sustainable development is defined as an approach and policy tool that integrates the economic, social, and environmental governance dimensions of sustainable development at all stages of domestic and international policy-making (OECD, 2016). Indeed, the 2030 Agenda identifies policy and institutional coherence as one of the tools for strengthening implementation and tackling systemic issues (SDG targets 17.13 to 17.15).

The way in which a coordinating structure is organised can influence the pace and policy coherence of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, policy coherence means increasing capacity to manage the critical linkages between SDGs and address their implications (OECD, 2018).

The review process is an exercise with the potential to continuously drive implementation at the national level and strengthen policy coherence. As a continuous process in which different stakeholders are engaged in a joint assessment of progress, review creates space for dialogue, knowledge creation, and joint work. This can help to improve decision-making and a more efficient use of resources and thereby accelerate implementation.

An integrated involvement of the whole of government in review can help to create and/or improve national capacity for policy coherence. Engaging actors across policy domains to promote cross-sectoral and vertical collaboration enables complex interlinkages to be considered systematically – at best, with a view to exploiting synergies and at worst, to avoid trade-offs – and cross-border and intergenerational impacts to be assessed. Likewise, involving sub-national and local stakeholders can help to raise awareness at the sub-national level and motivate stakeholders at this level to become engaged in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

This work offers an insight into the actual implementation experiences of a range of coordinating structure approaches and tries to provide an initial answer to the question of whether the review pro-
cess can be a driver of change at the national level. The study aims to investigate specific experiences of implementing the whole of government approach as part of the 2030 Agenda and to explore how the review process can help countries to improve the operation and policy coherence of their coordinating structures.

Based on the experiences of P4R network members, this study identifies the different characteristics and the underlying advantages and challenges of the coordinating structures that countries have put in place to implement the 2030 Agenda. It explores who within the coordinating structure leads and conducts the review process and identifies entry points for parliamentarians, sub-national government representatives and non-governmental stakeholders to participate in review. It illustrates how some of the underlying challenges are being addressed and how review contributes to changing working dynamics and improving coordination at the national level.

This paper has been produced on behalf of the secretariat of P4R, a transnational multi-stakeholder network set up with the support of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) to contribute to developing effective global and national review and accountability mechanisms for achieving the SDGs.
This study investigates the existing structures that countries have set up to coordinate implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. It describes who in these structures leads and conducts the different stages of the review process. It identifies some of the key challenges involved in coordination across individual governments and illustrates how these challenges are being addressed. And last but not least, it investigates how the voluntary national review (VNR) process can influence working and coordination dynamics at the national level.

The study is based mainly on interviews with members of the P4R network. Additional sources were used in some cases, however, to provide further information. These will be specified.

Ten members of the P4R network from eight countries and one international organisation were interviewed: Belize, Finland, Georgia, Guatemala, Jordan, Mongolia, Switzerland, Uganda and the OECD. Most contributed their experiences at the national level, while one respondent (OECD) contributed from a global perspective and from a basis of expertise in government coordination.

The selection of participants from different countries was based on the experiences they had shared in one or more P4R network meetings and on how these experiences related to coordination of the whole of government approach. Further criteria for selection were presentation of at least one VNR, geographical diversity, and the diversity of coordinating structures.

To complement the different national experiences, a global expert was selected on the basis of knowledge and expertise in government coordination at the national level as part of the 2030 Agenda.

The interview questions aimed to establish the following aspects:

- Main characteristics of the coordinating structure
- Main challenges in vertical and horizontal coordination and how countries are addressing these challenges
- Which unit(s) from the coordinating body lead and conduct the review process and who is involved in it
- Whether the VNR motivates countries to make changes at the national level, and whether those changes could help them to address some of the challenges

The information obtained from these interviews is certainly not exhaustive, nor is the selection of representatives of the countries working to implement, review and follow-up the 2030 Agenda. The study is an initial snapshot of the range of coordinating structures that countries are putting in place to implement and review the 2030 Agenda at the national level.

Given the limited number of interviews and the different backgrounds of the interviewees, which may influence their perspectives, the findings of this study are not representative but, rather, contribute to an analysis of different coordinating structures and investigate how review can help to improve their operation.
III. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COORDINATING STRUCTURES: CONSTRUCTION, LEADERSHIP, MEMBERSHIP, ORGANISATION AND MAIN FUNCTIONS

This section describes the main characteristics of some of the existing coordinating structures involved in implementing and reviewing the 2030 Agenda, and shows examples of the experiences gained so far with these structures. In doing so, it attempts to identify the main strengths and challenges of different coordinating structures and common features in the organisation of these structures.

There is no universal blueprint or model for implementing, reviewing and following-up the 2030 Agenda. However, existing information and analyses on the VNRs presented in 2016, 2017 and 2018, together with the experiences from reviewing implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), allow certain general characteristics to be identified.

Adapting the existing institutional framework or creating a new one

Evidence from the VNRs presented in 2016, 2017 and 2018 suggests that countries seem to be either using existing structures or creating new ones (UN-DESA 2018a; P4R 2018b; P4R 2018c).

In some cases, existing structures are based on a traditional ‘silo’ approach to development, which can be counterproductive and may undermine the integrated approach necessary to achieving sustainable development (UNDP, 2017). In such cases, achieving cross-sectoral synergies by coordinating across ministries may require the creation of a new coordinating body. When new institutions are created, they often bring together stakeholders from outside government.

Results from the interviews conducted by P4R found that only few countries have created new coordination mechanisms. Existing ministries or the Center of Government typically coordinate these new mechanisms, and only their mandates and functions were adapted to implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. For example, the government of Switzerland created a National Working Group for the 2030 Agenda. Two existing ministries coordinate the group and no additional budget has been allocated to it.

The majority of respondents reported that their countries had adapted a pre-existing coordinating structure. The government of Uganda chose to implement the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs using existing structures. In line with the existing Government Institutional Coordination framework, which is used for coordinating the National Development Plan (NDP), the government has put in place a multi-sectoral coordination structure for implementing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Guatemala also opted to use an existing structure, which was already operating under a multi-stakeholder approach. Similarly, Belize and Jordan built their coordinating structures on the bases of the existing architecture from the MDGs. In other cases, structures are already institutionalised platforms for sustainable development and have been operating for a longer period. For example, the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development was established in 1993 after the Rio Conference. Since then, the
commission has operated without interruption and has been part of ten different governments and seven prime ministers leading the work.

The process of adapting existing structures often involves reformulating roles in order better to address the implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda and its ‘Leave no one behind’ principle. This might, for example, involve opening up space for previously unconsidered stakeholders to participate.

In other cases, adaptation has involved strengthening the environmental pillar within the existing structure. This may imply giving a more prominent role to the Ministry of Environment and/or other ministries with an important part to play in addressing environmental concerns. For example, in Belize the Ministry of Economic Development cooperates with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry, the Environment, Sustainable Development and Immigration to monitor the implementation of the Agenda.

Some respondents reported that their countries found it difficult to reconcile the contradiction between traditional ‘silo’ approaches by Ministries and the universality paradigm reflected by the interconnected SDGs underpinning the 2030 Agenda. In such cases, adaptation might imply reorganising the existing structure to enable different ministries to work together towards achieving sustainable development.

Adapting a pre-existing structure can prevent duplication of mechanisms and, in some cases, pave the way for institutionalising the coordinating structure, which in turn could allow continuity of operation over time and under different government administrations.

However, even when coordinating institutions exist, participation of relevant government actors is sporadic in many cases. There are two main reasons for this. First, there is often a lack of a regulatory framework strong enough to require relevant government actors to participate in meetings. Second, there is often a lack of awareness across government. For example, when an invitation to participate in SDGs comes to a Ministry, some ministries might not know what is involved or why it is relevant for their work to engage with SDGs and may therefore be reluctant to participate because of lack of time. Beyond the institutional set-up, there is a need for sustained strategic communication across the government system on the importance of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Communication to raise awareness about what the government is doing towards achieving the SDGs, and why this is important. Government actors need to know how their sectoral agendas can benefit from engaging in the implementation and review process of the 2030 Agenda. Enabling an effective coordination requires incentives to participate and a clear institutional framework for actors across government.

Leadership approach

Countries choose a leadership approach based on what is most appropriate and logical for their governmental system. There is no single approach that fits all cases: it all depends on the political culture of the country and its historical traditions.

The study has identified three different approaches: first, leadership by the Office of the Prime Minister/Presidency; second, leadership by a specific ministry, usually the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Economy/Planning or Finance; and third, leadership by both government and ministries working together to co-lead the coordinating structure (UNDESA 2018a; P4R 2018b; OECD 2017).

A) LEADERSHIP UNDER THE OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER/PRESIDENCY

Siting leadership of the coordinating structure at the highest level brings particular advantages. It gives the power to manage operations by the government through directives and executive orders. It provides a space for decision-making and can make coordination seamless.
Coordinating structures led by the Office of the Prime Minister or the Office of the Presidency, such as in the case of Guatemala, Finland, Jordan and Uganda, have the legitimacy and convening power necessary to bring actors from different ministries around the table and influence the decision-making process. Leaders at the highest level can also more clearly see the trade-offs that need to be made, because – unlike ministries – they are not defending their own portfolio (OECD, 2017).

However, since the leader of the coordinating body is also the head of government at any specific time, in some cases discussions and decisions might tend to prioritise short-term issues over the long-term aspects of the national agenda.

B) MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP APPROACH

According to some respondents, coordinating structures led by ministries tend to offer a more stable structure that is resilient to political cycles. Having ministries as lead institutions brings high levels of technical knowledge, particularly when the existing structure was lacking knowledge and expertise in the area of one of the pillars for sustainable development. This is particularly often true of the environmental area.

Other advantages depend on which ministry leads the structure. For instance, having the Ministry of Planning and/or the Ministry of Finance in that role, as in the case of Belize, can facilitate the process of linking planning and budget. This might constitute a lever for coordinating other ministries and making them accountable.

Ministerial leadership can work only if other ministries are willing to participate and if there is concern in the country about achieving the 2030 Agenda. In the absence of collective engagement and accountability, ministerial leadership may not work. For example, if the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Environment leads the process, but other relevant ministries (e.g. Finance, Economy, Agriculture, and Education) are not involved at all, the implementation, review and follow-up processes of the 2030 Agenda may not work.

Not having the highest level of power chairing the coordinating structure implies limitations on power. For example, proposals can be made at the technical level, but the coordinating body will need political support to translate them into commitments. In some cases, the coordinating body may be willing to pursue a more ambitious agenda and may have the capacity to do so but lack the authority to make commitments to doing so. When there is only one line ministry in charge, no matter how important that ministry is, its powers of coordination are limited.

A further problem associated with this leadership approach is partiality. The ministry or ministries in charge may prioritise issues and favour projects related to their particular field. For example, where a Ministry of Economy and/or Finance takes the lead, strategies and actions with economic relevance may be given preference over, say, those with an environmental background.

C) LEADERSHIP UNDER THE OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER/PRESIDENCY CO-CHAIRLED WITH A MINISTRY

Having a co-chaired leadership may combine the advantages of the approaches mentioned above. Co-chairing means the ability to steer a whole of-government approach and to ensure that all ministries are mainstreaming the SDGs in their policies. At the same time, having one ministry as the lead allows both political and technical coordination at the highest level.

Countries might opt for a co-chaired commission because of the need to have technical knowledge of national priorities or concerns at the highest level. For instance, countries in which the coordinating structure was previously led by central government may want the Ministry of Environment to be involved in order to access the technical knowledge and experience necessary in this area.

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1 This is one of the reasons why concern is growing about how to secure achievements across legislatures.

2 While none of the respondents’ countries has adopted such a leadership structure, an example for this type is Costa Rica as described in their first VNR (VNR-CostaRica, 2017)
In this approach, challenges can be a combination of those listed above in sections a) and b). Discussions and decisions may tend to prioritise short-term rather than long-term aspects, while the co-lead ministry may favour the prioritisation of issues and projects related to its particular field.

Membership of the coordinating body

VNR reports from 2016 and 2017 demonstrate the different membership characteristics of the coordinating structures. Membership varies greatly between countries. While some national committees involve government and non-governmental actors, others comprise solely government representatives. And, depending on the characteristics and resources of the countries, some structures include the national and sub-national levels whereas others include only national government (UNDESA 2018a; P4R 2018b; P4R, 2018a).

Given that a coordinating structure may involve government and non-governmental representatives, this section touches on the whole-of-society approach, although the focus of the study is on the whole of government approach.

Based on information from interviews conducted by the author, this section discusses the different characteristics of membership and presents the main advantages and challenges of engaging government actors from different levels and sectors, as well as engaging non-government actors.

A) INVOLVEMENT OF GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL REPRESENTATIVES

These coordinating structures include both government and non-governmental representatives, as for example in Guatemala, Finland, Uganda and Jordan. This type of committee offers more representative participation. This can help to enhance transparency and accountability of both government and non-governmental stakeholders, build trust between these groups, and create space for higher levels of engagement and meaningful participation. Nevertheless, these potential benefits may be hampered by a lack of representativeness, which is often beyond the control of governments. Governments have no scope to ensure that the process by which non-governmental representatives within the coordinating structure are elected is democratic. Generally, these processes tend to be subject to political influence. Some representatives may bring issues to the discussion table that do not necessarily correspond with the priorities of the sector they represent. This may affect the technical quality of the decisions and proposals that the national committee makes.

In addition, having a wider group of stakeholders often complicates the decision-making process: it is harder to achieve consensus, and the process for coordinating implementation review and follow-up may be slowed down.

However, it would be interesting and worthwhile to evaluate whether multi-stakeholder committees produce more coherent policy-making, are more efficient and are able to harness the different capacities of different stakeholders and use them in the process.

B) INVOLVEMENT SOLELY OF GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES

Some coordinating bodies, as for example in the case of Belize and Switzerland, involve only government representatives. This means that non-governmental actors can have an advisory role and be consulted by government but do not necessarily work with the government within the coordinating structure.

How non-governmental actors are involved, and the level of their engagement with government, varies from country to country. In Switzerland, the government has established an advisory group independent of the coordinating structure in order to involve a range of stakeholders from the private
sector, academia and civil society. In Belize, the national committee has a list of the focal points of diverse stakeholder groups, and when consultation and/or assistance from non-governmental actors is required, the committee invites relevant non-governmental actors to engage with the government. Frequently, non-governmental actors have a consultative role and, depending on how open government is, some influence on some of the stages of achieving the 2030 Agenda. For example, they may influence the review process by helping to draft the VNR and/or being part of the national delegation to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).

Excluding non-governmental actors from the coordinating structure helps to speed up the process of implementation. In a bigger and broader committee, effective decisions tend to be more difficult to reach.

On the other hand, this approach may prevent a stronger level of trust and engagement emerging between government and non-governmental actors.

C) INVOLVEMENT OF SUB-NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

Including actors from the local up to the national level offers a variety of advantages. It allows representative participation in the coordinating structure. It is an effective way for national government to observe actual delivery of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs from the local up to the national level. Additionally, it helps to build trust between different actors and different levels of government.

The way different countries involve sub-national representatives often depends on the independence enjoyed by sub-national government.

For example in Guatemala, vertical integration (sub-national level) of the coordinating structure is stipulated by law. The structure is organised at different territorial levels according to the administrative division of the country, with each level including a representative from a lower territorial level. For example, community committees have one representative in the municipal committee, and municipal committees have one representative in the national committee.

Other respondents reported that sub-national participation in their countries is less structural. Actors from the sub-national level are invited to participate in discussions at the national level and work together with national government in identifying the country priorities and implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but the structure is not laid down by law.

For example in countries like Finland and Switzerland, regions and municipalities are more independent and national government cannot create new rules and/or advise on implementation of local agendas. This means that achieving the 2030 Agenda has to take place within the confines of the existing rules and responsibilities. In such cases, the initiative for participation must be bottom up. National government can work only through different incentives for partnerships through participatory platforms.

This autonomy may allow local governments to move more rapidly than national government in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Local governments can use the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs as a reference framework. Some local governments express interest in engaging because they see it as an opportunity for global benchmarking.

Where sub-national governments are more independent, national governments have identified raising awareness as a necessary condition for sub-national participation. However, for some respondents, it is still not clear how sub-national governments will in this case play more than a purely consultative role.

Even when the structure for sub-national participation is available, sub-national participation still
faces challenges. Participation requires availability of time, monetary resources, administrative capacity and human capital with knowledge of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Sub-national governments often lack some or all of these necessary resources, and many municipalities are only now starting to train their staff on the SDGs.

Furthermore, capacity for coordination between levels of government in many countries is still very embryonic. Most national governments recognise the importance of involving and coordinating sub-national representatives but have yet to establish standing committees to improve coordination capacity.

Involvement of sub-national representatives also encompasses engagement of non-governmental actors. There is often a tendency to involve larger non-governmental organisations rather than smaller community-based organisations and individuals. Such trends may limit representative participation.

Organisation and functions

The functions of a coordinating structure and the way the structure is organised may vary according to countries’ needs and context. In general terms, the structure comprises: a unit responsible for coordination with different stakeholders; a unit responsible for horizontal and, in some cases, also vertical coordination; and a further unit responsible for coordinating the delivery of service and sectoral agencies (UNDP, 2017).

A broad set of functions includes the following activities: providing technical advice to government on the SDGs; developing or coordinating SDG implementation strategies; engaging with key stakeholders; developing a national monitoring framework and a set of national indicators; and recommending financing measures for implementing, following-up and reviewing the SDGs and their targets (UNDP, 2017).

Despite the variety of functions, organisation and scope of actions of different coordinating structures, this section attempts to find general trends and/or common characteristics among different coordinating structures. This can contribute to a better understanding of how coordinating structures work and why they are relevant for the review and follow-up processes of the 2030 Agenda.

The main characteristics and functions of these three units that are regularly to be found in coordinating structures are described below. For practical reasons, each of the three units has a generic name: the high-level committee; the national committee; and the technical committee. All these three types of committee are present in one form or another in every coordinating structure.

A) HIGH-LEVEL COMMITTEE

This committee occupies a high level in the coordinating structure and is chaired by the lead entity. This lead entity may comprise either one or more Ministries or the Office of the Prime Minister/Presidency. In most cases, it involves only government representatives.

In some countries, this high-level committee has a small Secretariat, whereas in others, it brings together different high-level bodies. In Finland, for example, the Secretariat of the National Commission is co-chaired by the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Environment and functions as a coordination desk for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Whereas in Jordan, the Higher Planning Committee, headed by the Prime Minister, includes relevant ministries and where necessary the whole cabinet.

The high-level committee is responsible for coordinating the different committees on the coordinating structure and has a key role in the decision-making process relating to implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
The case of Georgia is somewhat unusual as its SDG Council gathers 150 representatives from government, civil society, academia, and the private sector. The Council was set up in 2017 and meets once a year during an Annual Forum. Its working groups meet on a more regular basis. The role of the Council and its working groups is to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the SDGs. It has, however, no decision-making powers. This structure is currently being reviewed by the Government. One new feature that is being considered is an Advisory Body that could advise the Government on policy issues.

**B) NATIONAL COMMITTEE**

The national committee forms the core of the coordinating structure. It is frequently supervised by the high-level committee. The national committee involves government and non-governmental representatives or solely government representatives, depending on the country. Also depending on the country, these representatives might be solely from the national level, as in the case of Jordan, or from both national and sub-national levels, as in the case of Uganda.

National committees coordinate the participation of different stakeholders in prioritising the needs of the country and directly or indirectly influence the decision-making that feeds into the processes of implementing and reviewing the national agenda. This is where horizontal and vertical coordination can emerge. Horizontal coordination may result from participation by government actors from different sectors and ministries, while vertical coordination may result from participation by sub-national representatives.

Some national committees, as in the case of Guatemala, have decision-making powers and the ability directly to affect the process of implementing the Agenda. Others, as in the case of Finland, provide a discussion platform where government and non-governmental actors interact and, as a result, the Agenda can be moved forward. The impact of these interactions on the final decision-making often depends on whether all members have an equal voice.

Some national committees coordinate both the political and the technical dimensions. This is for example the case in Belize, where the Technical Governance Committee (national committee) directly coordinates the technical inter-ministerial committees in charge of implementation of the Agenda. Others coordinate only one dimension (the political or the technical). For example, the Higher National Committee for Sustainable Development, the national committee from Jordan, coordinates the discussion of the political dimension. The committee is designated to act as a reference for all national endeavours related to sustainable development. It provides guidance and follows up on all decisions, priorities and recommendations related to the 2030 Agenda.

The political dimension is where issues are discussed and decisions are made. In some countries, the national committee coordinates both discussion and decision-making, whereas in some others it coordinates only discussion, with decision-making the preserve of the high level committee.

Coordination of the political dimension aims to facilitate the organisation and effective participation of the different actors to achieve consensus in prioritising the country’s most urgent needs. It provides guidance and follows up on all decisions and recommendations related to the 2030 Agenda at country level. And, depending on its membership, it can provide a space for strengthening local coordination and enhancing decentralisation.

On the other hand, coordination of the technical dimension focuses on translating country priorities into public policy as part of national development agendas. Technical coordination involves organising all the related strategies, plans, programmes and actions to ensure progress by the national agenda.
C) TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

The hierarchical level of this committee varies from country to country. It can be coordinated by the national committee, as in the case of Finland and Uganda; by an internal coordination entity within the technical committee, as in Jordan; or, as in the case of Belize, directly by the high-level committee. Generally, the technical committee involves actors from different ministries and sectors with technical knowledge and a background in different fields. Some technical committees include non-governmental actors, while others consult non-governmental actors for advisory purposes on specific situations.

There are some cases in which the national committee already has a high level of technical expertise and the technical committee is merged with it. For instance, in Belize the national committee comprises a group of technical inter-ministerial committees.

Technical committees are normally divided into different sub-committees. These may be organised thematically according to the central pillars of the national agenda and/or on a cross-cutting basis according to key areas, such as monitoring and evaluation, mobilisation of resources, data, sub-national government etc. For example, in Uganda the technical committee (SDG taskforce) is organized in technical working groups (cross-cutting areas) and sector working groups. Whereas in Jordan, the technical committee is organized in different sectoral working groups only.

This committee functions as the operational body and is responsible for coordinating the work of delivering implementation of the national agenda in a specific country. It ensures that sustainable development is integrated across different sectors and ministries and, in some cases, between different levels of government. It coordinates direct implementation and reviews and follows up on all thematic areas. For some countries, thematic areas dealt with by the technical committee are inter-ministerial. For example, in the case of a thematic issue on human well-being, members of this technical sub-committee represent all the ministries that can influence human well-being, e.g. education, health, urban and rural planning, the environment, etc.

**Issues beyond the coordinating structure**

A coordinating structure may promote greater or lesser integration of the whole of government approach. For instance, the composition of a national committee involving government actors from different sectors and ministries and sub-national government representatives promotes the whole of government approach. However, coordinating structures are only one part of the coordination puzzle.

A key issue for policy coherence for sustainable development is coordination between the government institutions that lead the strategy for implementing the SDGs and the Ministry of Finance and budget offices. Coordination between these entities must ensure that the SDG strategy is linked to result areas in results-based budgeting.

Often, budget result areas, e.g. better health, education, etc., are not linked to the SDGs. There is a need to adapt the result areas in the budget and everything that is linked to them (such as indicators, targets and national priorities) so that countries can begin to track SDGs properly. For example, to overcome this challenge Guatemala is developing sectoral plans on each of their strategic targets of the 2030 Agenda. The intention is to incorporate these sectoral plans in the ministries’ institutional plans and then link them to the budget. This process will enable Guatemala to better track the SDGs.

Other key issue is the creation of incentives. There is a need for a sustained government communication strategy to raise awareness. The leading institutions should ensure that they communicate to all
government actors why it is in each actor’s best interest to cooperate on implementing, reviewing and following-up the 2030 Agenda. Ministries and different levels of government need to know how they can better advance their own sectoral and local agendas by working collaboratively with other ministries and government actors.

The Government of Georgia has introduced a number of innovations to coordinate its work concerning policies and statistics for the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. For example, all national strategies and action plans are being reviewed by the Prime Minister’s Office with the help of a tool (‘Sustainability Check’) to check their consistency with the 2030 Agenda and identify potential synergies and trade-offs with other policy areas. In addition, an electronic monitoring system has been set up where Ministries upload their SDG data that is, after being cleared by the National Statistics Office, used for reporting on nationally relevant SDG indicators.
IV. DISENTANGLING THE REVIEW PROCESS AND THE ROLE OF ITS DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS

As specified in the 2030 Agenda (A/RES/70/1, §§47-48, 72-77), review should be designed to enable multi-stakeholder engagement, dialogue, mutual learning, cooperation, ownership, and guidance on follow-up and implementation.

Review is a process in which a range of stakeholders is engaged in a joint assessment of progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. This can help to improve decision-making and make use of resources more efficient, thereby accelerating and driving implementation. Integrated participation by the whole of government in review can help to create and/or improve national capacities for policy coherence.

This section aims to investigate who in the coordinating structure leads and conducts the review process and to identify the entry points for participation in the review process by parliamentarians, sub-national government representatives and non-governmental actors.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the review process often comprises a continuum of stages: identification of the participating national institutions and stake-

3 A more detailed explanation of every step of review can be found in the Appendix.
holders; identification and alignment of national priorities with the 2030 Agenda; measurement of progress; analysis of ongoing achievements; identification of inputs for follow-up; and, last but not least, communication of the results obtained from the review exercise.

In most cases, the review process is led by the high-level committee and coordinated by the national committee with support from the technical committee.

The high-level committee often coordinates the initial stage of the review and identifies the national institutions and stakeholders participating in the review process.

Normally, the national committee coordinates the identification and alignment of national priorities with the 2030 Agenda. When national committees involve only government representatives, non-governmental actors are integrated into this process through an advisory or consultation group. All respondents confirmed that their countries have included non-governmental actors in this stage of the review process.

It is also at this stage that some respondents report strategies for involving sub-national government representatives by aligning sub-national development agendas with the national agenda.

In some cases, the alignment process encompasses the external dimension of the 2030 Agenda. This external dimension covers measures contributing to implementation of the 2030 Agenda within a country. In such cases, the national committee works together with the unit in charge of development cooperation to ensure coherence between the internal and external priorities and dimensions of the 2030 Agenda. However, only few respondents reported existing coordination in this regard.

The next step in the review process is measurement of progress, including creation of the national indicator framework, the evaluation of available data to measure progress, and coordination between different official data producers and users to overcome data gaps. Monitoring is often coordinated by the national committee, but conducted by the technical committee with support from the national statistical office (NSO).

In most cases, the NSO supports the national committee in identifying indicators and data to measure progress on the national priorities. In some other cases, the NSO chairs sub-technical committees and ensures that high-quality harmonised data is used to measure progress.

In some cases, every (thematic) technical sub-committee is responsible for monitoring progress in its own fields of work, while in others, one of the (cross-cutting) technical sub-committees is responsible for monitoring progress across sectors and ministries.

In most cases, the national committee coordinates the following stages of review, measures progress and decides on inputs for follow-up. Often, when national committees involve solely government representatives, non-governmental actors are invited to participate in the discussions at this stage.

It is common for the high-level committee to have responsibility for communicating the results of the review exercise. Some respondents reported that their countries had established an auxiliary unit to support the high-level committee in this area.

Often, the national committees present and debate with parliamentarians the results of the review process. In some cases, discussions take the form of a workshop; in others, conventional meetings are held. The frequency of such discussions depends on how often countries review their plans: while some countries report to their parliament every six months, others do so every year.
In most cases, parliamentarians participate in analysing the ongoing achievements of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs and in approving new strategies and management changes with a view to further improving achievement of the goals. For example, based on results from the review process, parliaments may appropriate resources to finance sustainable development and ensure that their national budget is aligned with the NDP.
V. INTEGRATING THE WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT APPROACH: COUNTRY EXPERIENCES

Belize: A strategy for strengthening cross-sectoral coordination

Belize aligned the 2030 Agenda to its long-term NDP, Horizon 2030. To implement this plan, Belize developed the Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS), which is a five-year development plan. The strategy links economic, social and environmental policies at the national and sub-national level. To operationalize the GSDS, the Ministry of Economic Development in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry, the Environment, Sustainable Development and Immigration of the Government developed a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. The structure of the framework comprises Critical Success Factors (objectives), Necessary Conditions (targets) and a set of indicators organized in a matrix. This matrix served as a guide to form the different technical committees. It allowed the identification of the ministries which needed to work together in order to achieve the Critical Success Factors of the GSDS.

Georgia: An evolving institutional landscape to implement and review the 2030 Agenda

Georgia belongs to the relatively small number of 22 “early moving” countries that conducted their first VNR immediately after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and presented its results at the HLPF in July 2016. At the time, it had not been possible to already set-up the necessary institutional mechanisms to coordinate the implementation of the Agenda. By 2017, the Government of Georgia had introduced its SDG architecture: a multi-stakeholder SDG Council, four thematic groups on democratic governance and the economic, environmental and social dimension of sustainable development, an Annual Forum where the members of the SDG Council come together to share and debate experiences related to SDG implementation, and a Secretariat for the day-to-day coordination work based at the Administration of the Government under the Prime Minister’s Office. The State Audit Office of Georgia is currently assessing the experiences with this institutional set-up. Based on its results, the institutional mechanisms will be further refined. Following this assessment, Georgia will start preparing for its second VNR, to be presented at the HLPF in 2020.

Guatemala: A strategy for coordinating different levels of government

Guatemala developed a methodological guide for helping municipalities to formulate their development plans and align them to the NDP (SEGEPLAN, 2018). The guide contains a legal and a conceptual framework to help local government to adapt the municipal targets to the 2030 Agenda. The legal framework guides the planning process. It describes the laws, key institutions and their roles in the planning process of a municipal development plan. The methodological framework is a roadmap that guides the development of the plan through a series of activities organized in four phases:

1. Set-up conditions: in this phase, subnational government actors establish the terms, forms and mechanisms for technical and social participation. This implies setting commitments, identifying and analysing key stakeholders, and forming a technical working group to lead and coordinate the formulation of the municipal plan; identifying the indicators for monitoring the implementation process; and identifying municipal strategic priorities.
2. Territorial analysis: the objective of this phase is to identify the critical aspects for driving change at the municipal level. Municipalities analyse geographical and statistical data to identify vulnerabilities and threats that affect the population, as well as conflicts over land use.

3. Planning and territorial management: this phase aims to develop a municipal development model, which determines the projections of new dynamics of the municipality. Here, municipalities should decide their territorial and planning ordering and define their expected results and normative guidelines.

4. Management and follow up: in this phase, roles and responsibilities of the working groups and instruments for the management and follow-up of the municipal plan are established.

Mongolia: Aligning policies to the 2030 Agenda and strengthening policy coherence

Soon after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the Mongolian parliament passed the Mongolia Sustainable Development Vision 2030 (SDV) and efforts to align national policies with the Agenda began. A technical cross-sectoral working group was set up, which is currently reviewing the coherence of all valid national policy documents, in total 195, as well as their alignment with SDV objectives and the SDGs. The National Development Agency of Mongolia has developed guidelines for this exercise, making use of a 7-point scale by the Stockholm Environment Institute to assess the level of interaction between various SDGs. These guidelines were tested for all sectors through cross-sectoral consultations involving sector experts including from CSOs, professional associations and academia. Following this, training on their use was organized for public institutions at the national and local level. The first results of the review are expected to come out in the second half of 2019. The multi-stakeholder SDG Council chaired by the Prime Minister of Mongolia will then determine which policies need to be adapted to be in line with the 2030 Agenda and to ensure coherence between the different policies and strategies.
VI. HAS THE VNR CHANGED WORKING DYNAMICS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL?

The presentation of VNRs at the HLPF is part of the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNDESA, 2018b). This section aims to investigate whether the VNR process has changed working and coordination dynamics at the national level.

The reasons why governments decide to volunteer to present their VNR vary from country to country and are not limited to those presented here. The reasons explored below are limited to the experiences shared by interviewees and aim at creating an understanding of what may motivate countries to participate.

Some countries, for example Switzerland and Uganda, were closely involved in the process of negotiating the 2030 Agenda and volunteering to present a VNR report was a natural outcome of this involvement. In other cases, such as Guatemala and Finland, governments saw the VNR as an opportunity to accelerate implementation at the national level. This helped them to make the whole of government and the whole of society aware of the country’s strengths and weaknesses in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

All respondents reported observing changes at the national level after presenting their VNR. In most cases, the VNR process created a space for participation by non-governmental actors. For example, Guatemala changed its previous model from the MDG era where only government institutions contributed to the review. For their VNR in 2017 Guatemala consulted with civil society and the private sector, and included their actions that contribute to achieving the SDGs in the report.

The VNR consultative process enabled some governments to identify the scale of the need to raise awareness, both within and outside government, and the kind of capacity that needs to be strengthened and developed to boost implementation. For example, during its VNR Finland realized that involvement of youth was a weak area and decided to create a space for them. It created a sub-group in its national committee called the ‘2030 Agenda Youth Group’. Twenty young people from different parts of Finland serve as members of the group. Tasks of the youth group include challenging the work of the national committee and the government as well as conveying the SDGs in their own regions, schools and work places.

Participating in the VNR opened up opportunities for cooperation. In some cases, governments realised that not all civil society organisations (CSOs) were aware that they could collaborate with the government in implementing the agenda. This helped governments to focus their awareness-raising efforts and show civil society how the work they are already doing could help achieve the 2030 Agenda. A further common outcome of the VNR preparation process is identification of a baseline. In most cases, respondents reported that the VNR process helped their countries to identify the existing data for monitoring the SDGs as well as gaps in their data and their need for statistical capacity. In the case of Finland, the national statistical office realized through the VNR that they have a role to play in the 2030 Agenda, and that they need to collaborate with the national committee and commit resources to this process.

In the case of Switzerland, preparation of the VNR helped to improve coordination within government. It made government actors aware of the 2030 Agenda and helped to define who should do what towards implementing it. The process prompted different ministries and other government institu-
The whole of government approach

Respondents reported that the review mechanisms for the SDGs and for the NDP are independent processes. However, in some cases, such as in Switzerland and Belize, synchronization of both is being considered. Since results from one process could feed into the other, synchronization could contribute to make both processes more efficient and motivate countries to present a SDG report on a regular basis.

Most respondents reported having communication and dissemination strategies for sharing their VNR results and HLPF experience at the country level following the presentation in New York. Normally, the National Committee organises debriefing sessions for senior government officials and communicates with other stakeholders the results of the country’s participation at the HLPF, through meetings and/or through online media.

An innovative feature of the Mongolian VNR is that, besides looking at all 17 SDGs, it has identified one particular focus area – air pollution – that is being reviewed and analysed from a cross-sectoral perspective4. One of the expected outcomes of the VNR process is that the review will lead to a set of concrete policy recommendations how to tackle the causes and consequences of air pollution that can be implemented in an integrated manner after the VNR has been completed.

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4 The review was still ongoing at the time of the interview for this publication.
VII. CONCLUSION

The integrated character of the SDGs requires governments to work across policy domains, stakeholders and governance levels to address complex interlinkages between the SDGs as well as to assess cross-border and intergenerational policy effects and to create synergies for sustainability.

Analysis of the coordinating structures for national implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda shows that there are structural and functional aspects that may promote or prevent continuous and coherent implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda at the national level.

Structural aspects are those derived from the way the coordinating mechanism is structured. These tend to be correlated with the power conferred by the leadership approach of the coordinating structure. Strong mandates may secure broad governmental engagement and commitment to transformational change. On the other hand, mandates within a weak regulatory framework may not be strong enough to require relevant government actors to participate and commit to achieving the 2030 Agenda. Given that these limitations derive from the way the coordinating mechanism is structured, there is little, if any, scope for review to drive change.

Functional aspects are those resulting from effects beyond the structure. The study identifies the following obstacles: lack of awareness and inadequate incentives on the part of government actors to engage in achieving the 2030 Agenda; and inadequate coordination between government actors. The study shows that review can help to tackle such obstacles.

In involving government actors in identifying and aligning national priorities with the 2030 Agenda as part of the review process can help government actors to better understand how, by participating in achieving the 2030 Agenda, they can advance their own sectoral and local agendas.

In some cases, review has helped to improve coordination within government. Preparation of the VNR has made government actors aware of the 2030 Agenda and helped to define roles and functions for implementing it. At the same time, preparing the VNR prompted different ministries and other government institutions to work together and agree on how to prepare and present the VNR report.

In most cases, countries observed that review provided a space for engaging parliamentarians in achieving the 2030 Agenda. Parliamentarians play a key role in the analysis of the ongoing achievements and often approve new strategies and management changes that will further improve achievement of the SDGs, including in alignment of national budgets for implementing the SDGs.

Furthermore, the study establishes that, in some cases, policy coherence encompasses the involvement of government actors across sectors (horizontal) and from the sub-national and local level (vertical) but also integration of an external dimension (implementation of the 2030 Agenda outside the country). This implies coordination efforts to ensure coherence between internal and external priorities of the 2030 Agenda through development cooperation.
The whole of government approach

References

A/RES/70/1, §§47-48, 72-77. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015. s.l., UNGA.


P4R, 2018c. A comparative analysis of 46 VNRs submitted to the 2018 HLPF.


Appendix
Stages of the review process

1. **Institutional Set-up**: is where actors are identified, and mandates and functions defined. This step is relevant for both national implementation and review. It includes identification of national institutions and government actors to lead and coordinate the review process at national and sub-national levels as well as a cross different sectors. This stage also includes identification of the multiple stakeholders that will participate and contribute to the national review.

2. **National Priorities**: bringing the SDGs into the national context. While the 2030 Agenda is applicable to all countries, countries have different national realities, capacities and levels of development (UNDESA, 2017). It is here where the exercise of aligning national priorities to the 2030 Agenda takes place. This exercise helps to create a sense of ownership favorable for implementation, review and follow-up.

3. **Monitoring**: implies measurement of progress. This part of the review has to do with defining and selecting the set of indicators that best captures the policy and program priorities to achieve the SDGs and assures that no one is left behind. It implies identification of data sources; institutional arrangements for data collection; and production of usable and accessible information to feed into the review process (ESCAP, 2016).

4. **Progress Assessment**: this step is where results from monitoring are analyzed. The analysis of the ongoing achievements should be along value-based criteria of the 2030 Agenda, e.g. transformation, integration, inclusiveness and leaving no one behind. Results from monitoring should be presented in a way that allows for sufficient dialogue and discussion on whether those who are most in danger are not left behind; on whether the picture of progress presented in the monitoring step represents reality; on what are the underlying forces and drivers, and emerging issues; and whether these results are understood by all stakeholders involved (ESCAP, 2016).

5. **Inputs for follow up**: Identification of strategies and management changes to further improve goal attainment. This includes identification of adjustments and/or corrections in implementation and resources allocation strategies, as well as mobilization of the means of implementation (ESCAP, 2016).

6. **Results Communication**: Compilation and presentation of results and most relevant information obtained from the review. Communication of results can be done through a website and/or a film or any other mean that countries find suitable, and it should be available for everyone who is interested.