



CASE STUDY

Bangladesh - Voluntary National Review (VNR)

Background Information

During the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Bangladesh made impressive gains in areas like poverty alleviation, school enrollment, and child health, but as the nation transitioned to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it had fallen short on many of their targets as pockets of poverty lingered, youth unemployment and underemployment persisted, and challenges around educational outcomes remained.

In June 2017, Bangladesh submitted its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) report to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) of the United Nations.

Bangladesh's VNR report shares updates on the country's SDG efforts during the first two years of the goals. Key updates the report provided include (1) the importance of sharing SDG-related adoption and integration experiences, (2) implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting progress, (3) opportunities and challenges with execution, and (4) policy strategies and mechanisms the country is employing to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Approach, Delivery, & Challenges

After Bangladesh gained low-middle-income-country status, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina promised to take the country further. She's aiming to deliver Bangladesh into the category of developed nation status by 2041. To get there, Bangladesh has developed the Perspective Plan (2010–2021) and two successive Five-Year Plans (FYPs). Bangladesh has integrated the 2030 Agenda in its 7th FYP (2016–2020), which placed the country's primary development plans in alignment. It can now pursue the SDGs without mandated internal conflicts between these programs.

Bangladesh's work on the SDGs is led by the SDGs Implementation and Monitoring Committee, which is part of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The committee leads the strategic work around the goals, it is responsible for the country's SDGs Action Plan, and it led the VNR reporting process with support from the General Economics Division (GED) of the country's Planning Commission.



Research efforts for the VNR were assisted by two recently completed reports: “Mapping of Ministries by Targets in the Implementation of SDGs Aligning with the 7th FYP,” and “Data Gap Analysis for SDGs,” which provided, respectively, a responsibility roadmap for the goals and an index of the available data.

Several collaborative exercises went into the creation of the VNR. Stakeholders were meaningfully engaged in the process, and the draft report was shared with all relevant agencies and national statistical organizations, who in turn provided feedback. Inter-ministerial consultations were held to ensure broad and deep collaboration throughout the country’s public sector. Civil society organizations (CSOs), non-government organizations (NGOs), the private sector, development partners, academia, and the media were invited to partake in the review process, providing a diverse set of perspectives. The committee also invited students, youth organizations, and members of marginalized segments of the society to assist the effort. All the SDGs goals, targets, and indicators have been translated to Bengali and posted in public offices throughout the country to increase engagement and awareness. The “Whole of Society” approach used in the VNR process is also being applied to Bangladesh’s SDG implementation efforts.

The six steps laid out in Bangladesh’s SDG implementation plan are also relevant to its VNR reporting efforts. (Steps 1, 2, 3, & 5 cover assessment, mapping, and reporting, whereas steps 4 & 6 relate directly to implementation efforts that will be reported on in the next VNR.)

- 1. Mapping of Ministries:** Lead, co-lead, and associate ministries have been mapped out for all the SDG targets. This is expected to help optimize efforts as it will greatly reduce the chance of efforts being duplicated.
- 2. Data gap analysis:** The Planning Commission found satisfying data for seventy indicators and partial data for another one hundred and eight of them. There are still sixty-three indicators for which data collection has yet to begin.
- 3. National Monitoring & Evaluation Framework:** This will give Bangladesh a central data repository with which to collect, analyze, track, and report on the goals.
- 4. Action Plan to Achieve SDGs:** The plan aligns the SDGs with Bangladesh’s 7th FYP, down to trackable targets via specific projects, programs, and activities.
- 5. Needs Assessment and Financing Strategy:** This provides direction around the country’s financing needs to deliver on the goals.
- 6. Assimilation of SDGs Targets in Performance Agreement:** This performance management system assesses performance across the public sector, while also recording progress at the ministry and agency levels.

Multiple specific concerns around integration of the goals were also raised. Among them were policy integration, structural and institutional reform, financial planning, and the promotion of human capacity development and research.

Benefits & Lessons Learned

Bangladesh’s leaders have uncovered a few specific challenges for the implementation of the SDGs. The VNR found resource mobilization, stakeholder engagement, data availability and management, localization of SDGs, and the incorporation of the three dimensions of sustainability (social, economic, and environmental protection in development activities) as major structural level challenges. They have chosen to continue hosting inclusive dialogue with relevant stakeholders as they look to plot an appropriate path forward.

Much was learned through the completion of the VNR. The picture of the resources needed came into clearer focus and this knowledge will enable Bangladesh’s leaders to devise appropriate plans and work to execute them.



The need for intense stakeholder engagement is another concern, as the country is not yet experiencing the level of collaboration that's necessary. Bangladesh is already working to make these efforts more inclusive, bringing together the private sector, NGOs, CSOs, members of the media, and many others. The SDGs Implementation and Monitoring Committee will need to keep these participants engaged and working together towards the country's common interest of achieving the goals.

Closing the gap between Bangladesh's current ability to track and measure baselines and progress against targets is one of the country's biggest SDG-related challenges. Collaborating at the bilateral, regional, and global levels to develop capabilities and share best practices is a must.

The need to fully localize the SDGs was another priority uncovered by the VNR process. This will enable proper execution, as well as tracking of progress to ensure the right work is completed and that the results are properly verified.

Opportunities & Next Steps

Bangladesh spent significant effort aligning the 7th FYP with the 2030 Agenda. Doing so required a meaningful expenditure of resources, but it gives the country the opportunity to now deliver on plans without having to choose between prioritizing either effort. The delivery of the SDGs is an evolutionary process. As the timeline of the goals aligns with three successive FYPs, this gives the country two built-in opportunities for significant adjustments to their approach, the 8th FYP (2021–2025) and 9th FYP (2026–2030).

The country's leaders admit that they are still at an early development stage with their implementation of the SDGs, but they have developed several important plans to advance these efforts. Many of those will also support the country's ability to provide more accurate, comprehensive VNRs in the future:

- The SDG Action Plans budgets will guide future analysis to verify outcomes and efficiency.
- The Government's bottom-up approach will help uncover shortcomings and opportunities.
- The "Whole of Society Approach" brings diverse perspectives into the process.
- The completed financing needs assessment provides a roadmap for those responsible for seeking funding as well as a template for future VNRs to assess progress.
- The Speaker of Bangladesh's parliament has formed subcommittees for each of the SDGs. These will direct and oversee related efforts and will be an important source of information for future reports.
- Significant efforts are being made to upgrade the nation's capabilities around data collection and analysis. This work, led by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), will improve the country's ability to measure and report on its progress.

The concerted effort demanded by the SDGs requires significant political commitment, and strong support from beyond the public sector. Bangladesh is pairing its 2030 Agenda work with its goal of becoming a developed country. Having integrated the SDGs into its development plans, while also adopting a highly inclusive approach to the goals, Bangladesh has positioned itself well for the challenges ahead and leveraging learnings from this VNR process can help improve future efforts.

Bangladesh's leaders have stated their commitment to the goals, and they're working to build on the lessons they've learned since starting down the path of the MDGs. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government views the goals as aligning well with their push towards developed country status. As such, 2030 Agenda is a stepping stone towards the country's future success.



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