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Second Generation Voluntary National Reviews

Renewing the commitment



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Glossary

LAC ● Latin America and the Caribbean

SusDev ● Sustainable Development

HLPF ● United Nations High-Level Political Forum

SDGs ● Sustainable Development Goals

SG ● United Nations Secretary General

VNRs ● Voluntary National Reviews



Main Findings

- 1** — The number of second and subsequent Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda presented by countries to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) has dramatically increased over time.
- 2** — A second review that only accounts for the current situation, as a first review would do, is not the same as a “**second generation review**”, which reports processes and cycles.
- 3** — The “Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews at the High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development”, prepared by the Secretary General of the United Nations must be adapted to the logic of successive reports.
- 4** — The lessons learned from the presentations of the second and third VNRs made by the States at the HLPF between 2016 and 2018 allowed to identify areas in which it is necessary to work to strengthen the elaboration of second generation VNRs, such as: Cycle perspective; Process analysis; Identification of vulnerable groups; Coherence of information on progress, blockages and setbacks in the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda; Work outside watertight compartments; Opportunity to make presentations of reports and their democratization.



Introduction: Why do we write this work? Why now?

2015 was key in building global consensus. That year the [Sendai Framework for Action for Disaster Reduction](#), the [Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development](#), the [Paris Agreement on Climate Change](#) and the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) were adopted. Due to its integral approach of the economic, social and environmental spheres, the 2030 Agenda functions as a catalyst of all these agreements.

The 2030 Agenda is a political commitment that does not generate legally binding obligations, therefore the system created by the countries for its review and follow-up is of fundamental relevance as a tool to boost its effective compliance. VNRs are the cornerstone of that scheme.

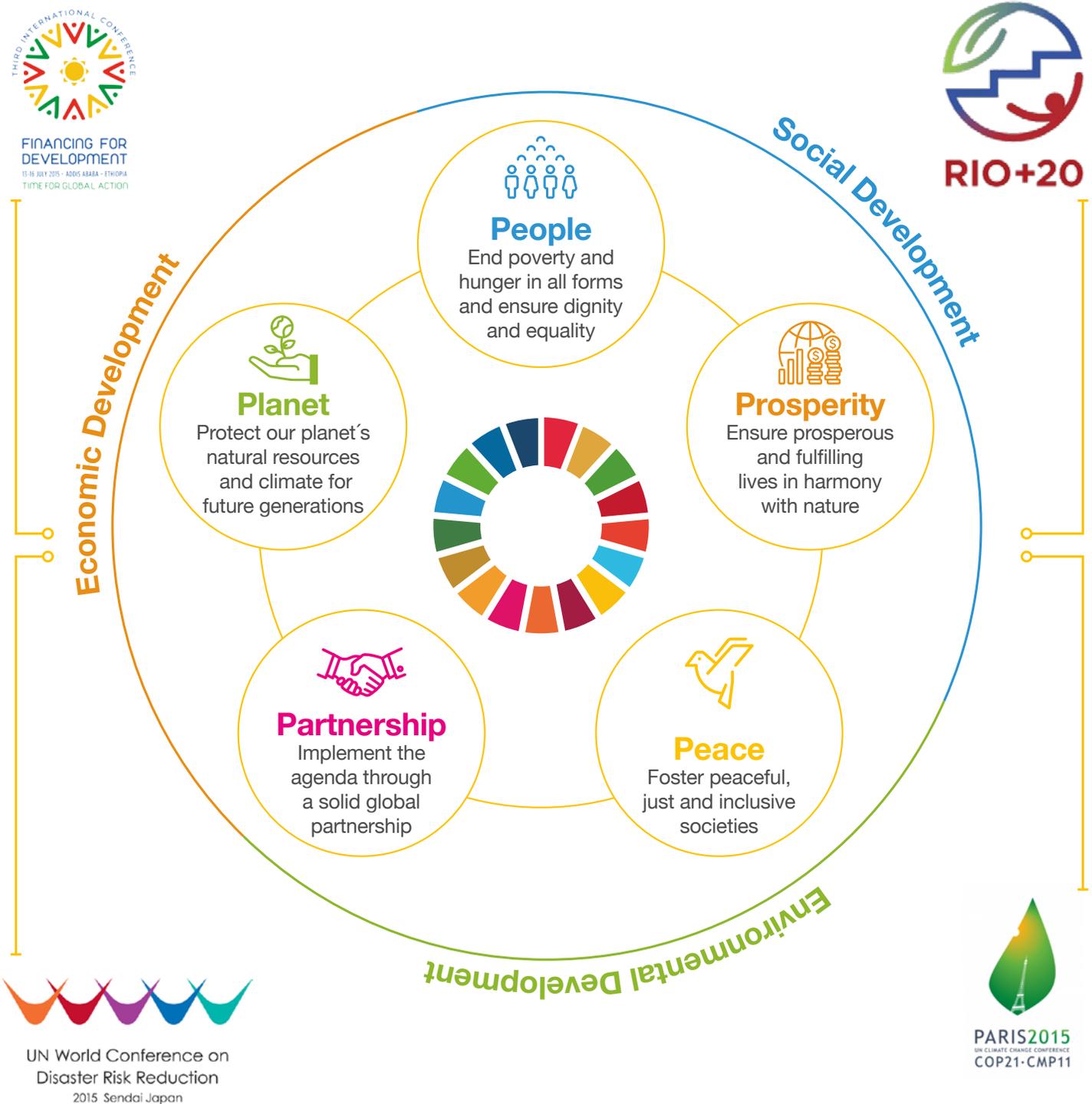
142 of the 193 members of the United Nations (74%) have submitted at least one VNR, so the exposure of second and third national reports¹ will grow in the upcoming years. For the HLPF of 2020 the submission of 52 reports has been committed, of which 24 will be second reports and only 2 third reports, managing to reach 50% in the presentations².

142 of the 193 members of the United Nations (74%) have submitted at least one VNR to the High-Level Political Forum. Half of the 52 reports to be submitted in 2020 are second and third presentations.

1. In fact, thirteen countries (Azerbaijan, Benin, Chile, Colombia, Egypt, the Philippines, Guatemala, Indonesia, Mexico, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Switzerland and Turkey) have already submitted two reports and only one (Togo) three reports.

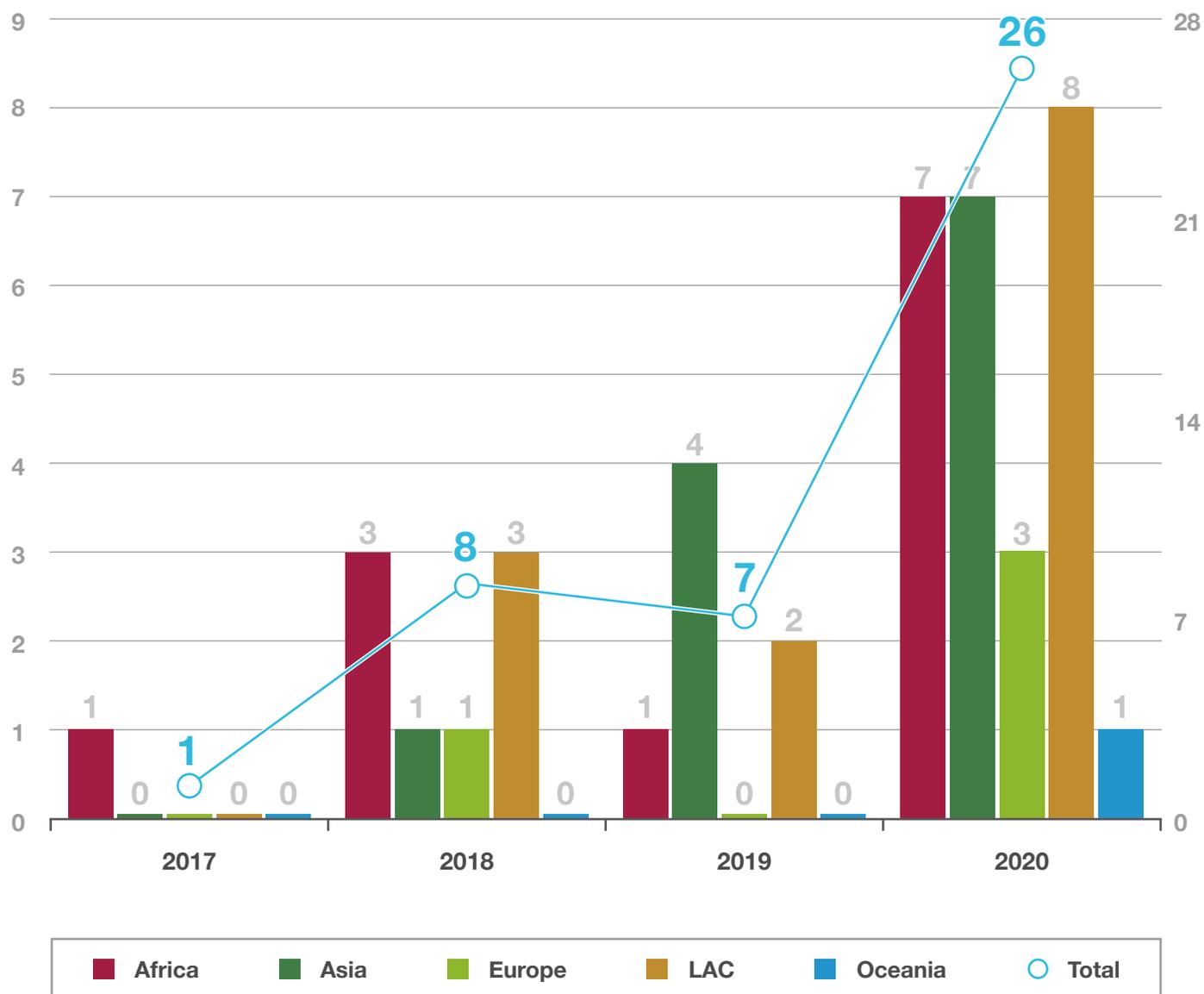
2. Information as of August 30, 2019.

Graphic 1. Processes involved in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development



Source: Own elaboration

Graphic 2. Presentation progress of second and third reports (total, by year and region; 2017-2020)



* References to the year 2020 respond to requests from States that have already been formally accepted by the United Nations as of August 30, 2019.

Source: Own elaboration

This increase in reporting countries shows the urgent need to improve the value and content of the reviews, which is the core issue that this work addresses.



The monitoring and review scheme of the 2030 Agenda

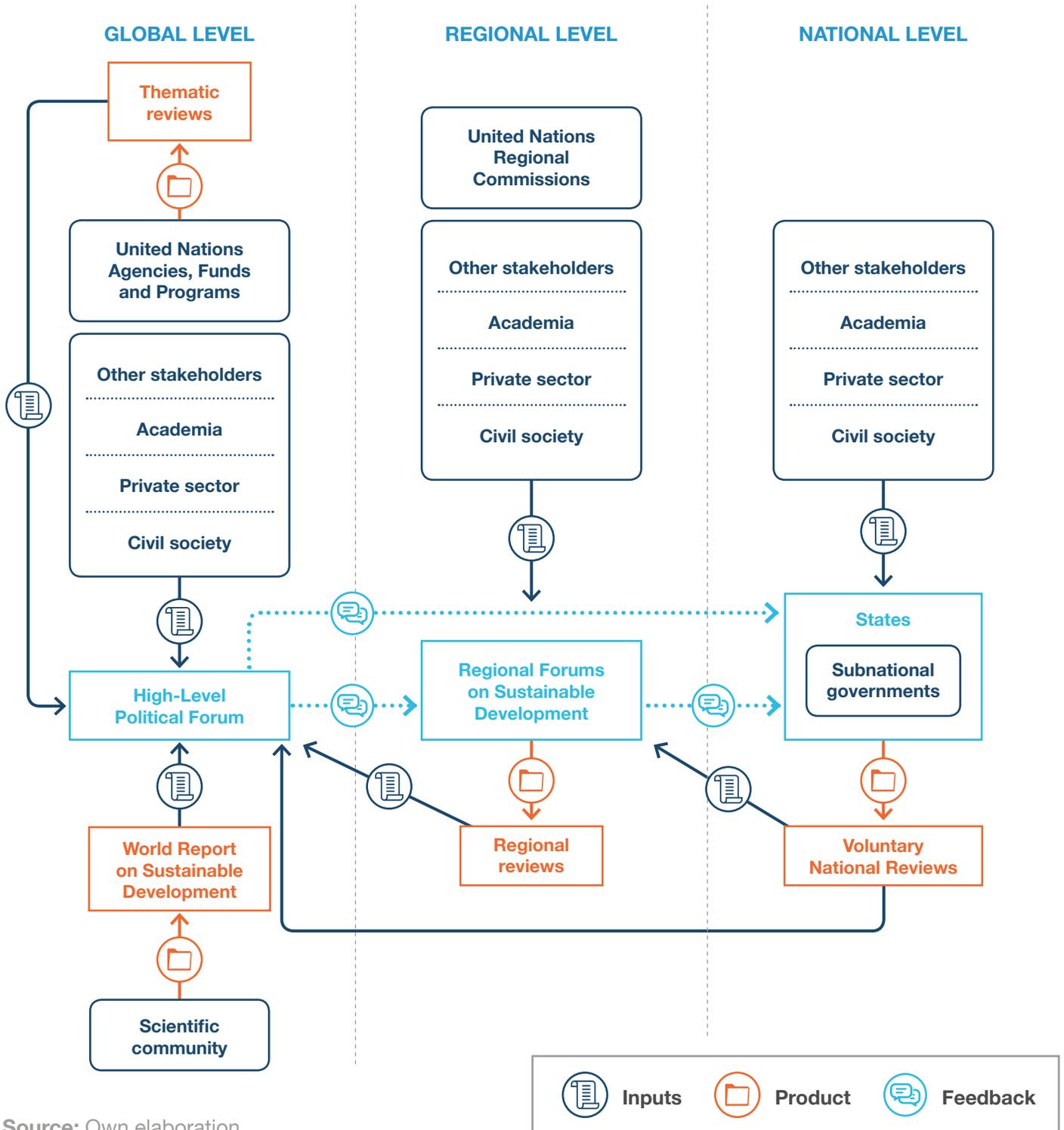
To understand the mechanism adopted by States to monitor progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, we must consider the following:

- 1 **Practical objective:** It seeks to help “countries maximize and monitor progress” in order to “ensure that no one is left behind” (paragraph 72). It should be understood as a framework for promoting accountability to citizenship, and support for effective international cooperation that encourages the exchange of best practices and mutual learning (paragraph 73).
- 2 **Perspective:** It is long-term and people-centered (paragraphs 74.c and 74.e).
- 3 **Extension:** It is “a systematic process for monitoring and reviewing the implementation of this Agenda”. It avoids duplication of efforts, and it is based on data (2030 Agenda, paragraphs 72, 74.f and 74.h), implying that it considers all the elements of the Agenda and not only the SDGs.

- 4 **Participants:** Multi-stakeholder participation.
- 5 **Level of analysis:** National (including subnational), regional and global levels”. The mechanism used to perform the evaluation is the Voluntary National Review (VNRs), which assess progress in the implementation, identifying problems and making recommendations for monitoring at various levels (paragraph 77).

The monitoring and review scheme established in the 2030 Agenda should be understood as a framework for the promotion of accountability, exchange of good practices and peer learning.

Graphic 3. Governance of the 2030 Agenda monitoring and review system



Source: Own elaboration



VNRs, more than a reporting tool

In 2016, the SG published the “Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews at the High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF)”, which were updated in 2017. UNDESA (2019, p. 10) states about these that “they provide a framework for certain common elements within the exams, allowing flexibility so that countries can adapt to their own circumstances. The guidelines serve to promote consistency between exams and comparability over time”.

These guidelines, and the use that States have made of them, have limitations to guide the processes of elaboration and presentation of **second generation VNRs**. This is mainly due to

the fact that the presentation of information must be adjusted according to the type of report: while the first reports have a static logic that indicates the initial situation (the moment: taking the picture to set the stage); the **second generation reports** should work in a dynamic perspective (the process: playing the movie to build cycles reporting exercises). The following table shows the differences between both types of reports:

The logic used by countries to build the first VNRs should not be the same for the following reports submitted.

Table 1. Comparison between first and second generation VNRs: Objectives and expectations

Variable	First generation VNRs	Second Generation VNRs
General objective	To report relevant progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level	To report relevant progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level
Extension	The 2030 Agenda and its SDGs as a whole	The 2030 Agenda and its SDGs as a whole
Practical objective	Present the country's first steps in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs at the national level	Present the continuity of progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs at the national level
Projection of the report	Towards the future	Towards the future and from the past, taking the previous VNR as a reference
Approach perspective	Establishes the baseline from which the work begins and presents its first results	Informs about the evolution of the results
Inputs	It does not include inputs originated in previous presentations	It includes inputs generated as a result of its first VNR, including the results of the socialization of the previous VNR
Accountability	Informs about measures to adopt	It informs about the progress in the adoption of the measures included in the first VNR, and presents new measures to be adopted
Avoid duplication	With other reports	With other reports and with what was reported in the first VNR
Rigurocity and evidence based	Presents a first data set	It presents the evolution of the first data set and the improvements introduced in it

Source: Own elaboration

An analysis of the second and third reports (15 in total) submitted by countries between 2016 and 2019 shows that not all include references to the first presentations and that they repeat the

approaches used in their first VNRs. In those cases in which the States have sought to create links between their different reports, two connection strategies are identified:

1 — **Continuity:** Thought from the moment of the elaboration of the first VNR. The second report takes up the analysis based on the evolution of the commitments made explicit in its previous VNR. These are the ones closest to what we call “**second generation reports**”. The clearest example is Switzerland’s second report (2018).

2 — **Deeper Analysis:** Takes up the issues raised in the first report along a path of greater analytical depth. An example of this type of approach is **Guatemala’s second VNR (2019)** and its effort to integrate data sources that were not used in the initial presentation of its national situation on the SDGs.

Continuity:
Switzerland presents in its first VNR what it called “transitional phase” of preparation for the implementation of the SDGs. Its second report analyzes that stage and presents a new work strategy.

Deeper Analysis:
The second VNR of Guatemala takes up the issues raised in the first along a path of greater analytical depth, and improves the evidence on which it bases its presentation.



Lessons learned

According to the analysis of the monitoring and review system of the 2030 Agenda and the contents of the second and third reports submitted between 2016 and 2019, we identified some lessons to turn those reviews into **second generation reviews**, and avoid the elaboration of second reviews that follow the logic of the first ones.

A second generation review should:

- Take as a starting point the first review submitted by the country, returning to the elements already presented only to the extent necessary to advance over the new ones.
- Retrieve the “future steps” committed in the previous review and comment on what progress has been made.
- Take up the challenges and requests for support to the international community, made in the first review. The absence of support responses by third countries should be underlined.
- Incorporate the socialization process of the immediately previous report, pointing out the

feedback and contributions of national actors, and the way in which the State has given them consideration.

- Express how the inputs generated at the regional and local levels were incorporated in the analysis of the report made by other stakeholders as a result of the presentation of the first report.

- Cover the 17 SDGs, to ensure the possibility of an analysis that is not limited by presentations that only refer to the thematic SDGs of the HLPF.

- Be clear and specific in the identification of future steps and programs to be implemented, challenges to be faced and external support needs, given that these are the basic lines that allow building continuities between successive reports.

- Presentations should be made only when the reporting State considers that the changes in the results or the information available on progress are sufficient. Second and third reports that do not provide new relevant information should be avoided.



Recommendations for second generation VNRs

To profit from all the possibilities offered by the 2030 Agenda review and monitoring system, we suggest that the following recommendations be taken into account in the preparation of **second generation reviews**:

Recommendation 1: The cycle perspective. It implies not only assuming that the review must be presented as a continuity of the previous one, tracing all the bridges that this expressly requires, but that it will be the starting point for future reports. The implementation commitments that the Governments assume and the variables that will be used to measure their success should be clearly expressed.

Recommendation 2: VNRs should inform processes. Very linked to the previous recommendation, it proposes to break the work done in watertight compartments. If the initial reviews fulfill their objective by showing the existing situation, the **second generation reviews** must present **advances, stagnations and setbacks with respect to the initial situation**.

Recommendation 3: Contexts change, vulnerable groups change. The work carried out by the States to achieve Sustainable Development within the framework of the 2030 Agenda produces changes

in their societies. These changes could be in turn generating modifications with respect to the most vulnerable groups or those that are being left behind. **Second generation VNRs** should pay special attention and identify whether the processes that are carried out to achieve the SDGs produce changes in the most vulnerable groups or if as part of the implementation, there are new groups that are at risk of being left behind.

Recommendation 4: Inform, share, request. The examination and monitoring objective of the Voluntary National Reviews should not impede other possibilities. Not only should they function as information and awareness processes for the population itself, but as a tool to inform both the international community, allowing the sharing of successful experiences and failed attempts from which to generate lessons. Likewise, to request from potential partners the cooperation that the reporting country requires to achieve the SDGs. In this sense, **second generation reports** should give greater relevance to the principle of universality set forth in the 2030 Agenda.

Recommendation 5: Identification of progress, stagnations and setbacks. Low or high consideration of poverty reported by a country in the year in which it presents its review, depends on the data reported previously: if it has been reduced, it is encouraging (progress); if it shows a tightening, it requires more attention (stagnation), and if it has increased, new paths must be sought (setback). VNRs should provide traceability on progresses, stagnations or setbacks. If the data available does not allow it, they must at least present the statistical path traveled to identify how the situation of progresses, stagnations, setbacks has been defined for each variable analyzed.

Recommendation 6: Causes of progress, stagnations and setbacks. Finding the paths that must be followed for each of these situations requires knowledge of what causes them. **Second generation VNRs** should devote attention to finding these causes so that they can plan and build evidence-based policies that sustain successes and help overcome unwanted situations.

Recommendation 7: Teach silos to dance³. Niestroy and Meuleman (2019, p. 184) tell us that “A focus on facilitating dialogue, interaction and learning is at the core of opening mental silos”. These are precisely the tasks of a **second generation VNR**: these reports should be clear on the process of integrating silos in favor of an Integrated Approach to Sustainable Development. The progress analysis of the Integrated Approach to Sustainable Development in the national implementation of policies, plans and actions gains greater relevance in these reports than in the initial ones.

Recommendation 8: The timing of the presentation must have empirical justification. A second generation VNR, to be relevant, requires verification of changes and new lessons learned regarding what was reported in previous opportunities. Given the

considerable timeframes required to show changes in the SDG monitoring indicators, presenting VNRs in successive years is discouraged, as it produces an unnecessary “inflation” of the number of reporting countries in each HLPF session not matched by the importance of its contents.

Recommendation 9: Democratization of the VNR. Second-generation VNRs should allow non-state actors to assume the drafting of short chapters in which they express their own opinion on the evolution of the implementation of the SDGs at the national level in the period between reports. It is not necessary for the government to “voice” the social actors, but simply to allow them to use the voice they already have.

3. This expression is taken from the blog post written by Niestroy, I, & Meuleman, L. (2016). “Teaching silos to dance: A condition to implement the SDGs”, IISD SD Policy & Practice, Guest Article, posted on 21 July 2016. Retrieved from <http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/teaching-silos-to-dance-a-condition-to-implement-the-sdgs/>



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