



UN Environment / FLEDGE

Voluntary National Reviews: The Environmental Dimension

Policy Brief

The policy brief has been co-authored by UN Environment and the Forum for Law, Environment, Development and Governance (FLEDGE). Written by Dr. Balakrishna Pisupati, (Founder and Chairperson, FLEDGE), Anjana Varma (Programme Officer, Law Division, UN Environment) and Mercelline Olage (Research Assistant, Law Division, UN Environment), the authors would like to thank and specially acknowledge Elizabeth Maruma Mrema (Director, Law Division, UN Environment) for overall guidance and feedback.

This brief was reviewed by Mamadou Alpha Kane, Head of International Governance Unit, Law Division, UN Environment and Hyun Sung, Programme Officer, Law Division, UN Environment. With acknowledgment and thanks to Francisco Rilla, Programme Management Officer, Law Division, UN Environment, and Raphaelle Vignol, Associate Programme Management Officer, Law Division, UN Environment for the analysis provided on voluntary national reviews in the Spanish and French languages, respectively, and Niamh Brannigan, Information Management Officer, Law Division, UN Environment for language editing.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Principles for the VNRs.....	4
3. Preparing VNRs.....	5
4. Methodology for the assessment of the environmental dimension in the VNRs	6
5. Observations on the 2016 and 2017 VNRs	7
6. Trends on the environmental dimension in 2016 & 2017 VNRs.....	10
7. Conclusion (recommendations and way forward).....	14

Executive Summary:

By focusing on the extent to which the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been addressed in the voluntary national reviews (VNRs) submitted by countries to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in 2016 and 2017, the policy brief uses a set methodology to review all the voluntary national reviews submitted by 64 countries in 2016 and 2017. Though early in the timeline, the two cycles of reviews indicate the growing interest of member states to focus on actions related to environmental dimension of achieving the SDGs. The brief also provides an overall assessment of the VNRs as a review mechanism and suggests recommendations to strengthen the reporting of the environmental dimension moving forward.

1. Introduction

The SDGs place sustainability at the heart of the development agenda, a major departure from the Millennium Development Goals. Recognizing the need to address the complex links between development and environment, the SDGs fundamentally endorse the thinking that meeting environmental objectives is as vital to sustainable development as meeting social and economic objectives. The SDGs recognize that sustainable socio-economic development is deeply intertwined with the responsible management of natural resources, mitigation of climate change and the promotion of resilience and disaster risk reduction.

For the purposes of this paper, we define the ‘environmental dimension’ as the range of pressures, causality, relationships, and dynamics related to natural resources and nature that potentially influence the achievement of the SDGs.

With about three years since the adoption of the SDGs the time has come to review how countries are progressing in achieving the SDGs. Such a review is now possible through the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process, which is the primary follow-up and review mechanism on the implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Each year, member states opt to present their progress

through a report and a presentation at the annual High Level Political Forum (HLPF), convened under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

This policy brief will provide an overview of the principles guiding the VNRs and their preparation process. This will be followed by general observations on the 2016 and 2017 VNRs, an analysis of the key trends on the environmental dimension as seen in the VNRs and will conclude with recommendations for the way forward.

2. Principles for the VNRs

Below are the principles laid out for the VNRs in the 2030 Agenda¹:

a.	They will be voluntary and country-led, and will take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and will respect policy space and priorities. As national ownership is key to achieving sustainable development, the outcome from national level processes will be the foundation for reviews at regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on national official data sources.
b.	They will track progress in implementing the universal Goals and targets, including the means of implementation, in all countries in a manner which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development.
c.	They will maintain a longer-term orientation, identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices. They will help mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships, support the identification of solutions and best practices and promote coordination and effectiveness of the international development system.
d.	They will be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support the reporting by all relevant stakeholders.

¹ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, “*Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*”, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

e.	They will be people-centered, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind.
f.	They will build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist, avoid duplication and respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities. They will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.
g.	They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.
h.	They will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programs, particularly in African countries, LDCs, SIDS and LLDCs and middle-income countries.
i.	They will benefit from the active support of the UN system and other multilateral institutions.

3. Preparing VNRs

The UN Secretary-General issued a set of voluntary guidelines in 2016 to help countries prepare the VNRs². The suggested structure of the VNRs consists of: an opening statement with key messages; a synthesis of the process and findings; an introduction that sets the context describes and the objectives of the review; the methodology and process used; the policy and enabling environment; critical initiatives taken by the governments to achieve the SDGs; means of implementation; steps that are being taken

² Proposal for Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF as Presented in the Annex of the Secretary-General’s Report on Critical Milestones towards Coherent, Efficient and Inclusive Follow-up and Review at the Global Level. Issue brief. Accessed April 2018. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>.

to enhance implementation; and a concluding analysis. The guidelines also suggest that countries include a statistical annex with data using the global SDG indicators³. Though these guidelines are available for countries to use, not all countries have used the guidelines in preparing the VNRs.

In 2017, in a majority of VNRs, countries included SDG-specific analysis and reviews. About a third of countries addressed all the SDGs. A similar number of countries covered SDG 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 5 (gender equality), 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), 14 (life below water) and 17 (partnerships for the Goals) that were subject to in-depth review at the 2017 HLPF. Other countries included a set of goals of their own choosing, based on national priorities.

“No uniform way of reporting on SDG-specific implementation in the VNRs exists, and countries chose numerous different methods depending on their national circumstances.”⁴ - UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017

4. Methodology for the assessment of the environmental dimension in the VNRs

To understand the level of integration or recognition of the environmental dimension in the implementation and review process, we analyzed the 2016 and 2017 VNRs using the following criteria:

- a) Countries that did not mention or indicate actions related to the environmental dimension;
- b) countries that broadly recognized the environmental dimension though do not mention specific actions;
- c) countries that undertook or are undertaking specific actions to realize the environmental dimension; and
- d)

³ Proposal for Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF as Presented in the Annex of the Secretary-General’s Report on Critical Milestones towards Coherent, Efficient and Inclusive Follow-up and Review at the Global Level. Issue brief. Accessed April 2018. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>.

⁴ *Synthesis of Voluntary National Reviews 2017*. Report. February 2018.

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17109Synthesis_Report_VNRs_2017.pdf.

countries have demonstrated integration of the environmental dimension into national and local actions.

With a total of 64 countries⁵ that finalized and submitted their VNRs during the HLPF 2016 and 2017 sessions, this assessment of the environmental dimension provides an overview of how countries have addressed the environmental dimension of the SDGs in their VNRs. For those countries that are currently finalizing the VNRs, this assessment may help to further strengthen the environmental issues related to SDGs.

5. Observations on the 2016 and 2017 VNRs

A total of 22 countries presented VNRs at the forum in 2016 and a total of 43 countries presented their VNRs in 2017.⁶ In 2016, the HLPF theme, “*Ensuring that no one is left behind,*” emphasized stakeholder engagement through collaborative partnerships, technology use as well as resource mobilization for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In 2017, the HLPF theme, “*Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world*”, reviewed the following Goals in depth: 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 5 (gender equality), 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), 14 (life below water) along with Goal 17 (partnership for the Goals), which is reviewed annually.

Thirteen out of 22 (or 59%) of the countries that reported to the forum in 2016 can be classified as developing countries. In 2017, this percentage rose to 67%⁷, indicative of a positive trend of developing countries taking a proactive role in the review mechanism.

⁵ Without double accounting for Togo, which presented the VNR in both 2016 and 2017, the total country VNR contributions were 64.

⁶ In 2016, the following countries presented their VNRs: China, Colombia, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Madagascar, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, Norway, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Togo, Turkey, Uganda and Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela presented VNR reports.

In 2017, the following countries presented their VNRs: Afghanistan, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Brazil, Botswana, Chile, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Luxemburg, Malaysia, Maldives, Monaco, Nepal, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Portugal, Qatar, Slovenia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Thailand, Togo, Uruguay and Zimbabwe. Togo presented VNR reports in 2016 and 2017

⁷ Based on World Bank country classifications

In 2017, 18 out of the total 43 VNR countries (or 42%) provided inputs on 'goals of own choice', meaning that the countries focused on national priority goals in the 2030 Agenda. Some also decided to report on priority goals.⁸ This is arguably indicative of the extent to which countries are engaging or accommodating the SDGs, according to their national contexts.

Overall, three typical steps of SDG implementation have been identified in VNRs at the initial SDG mainstreaming stage. These include:

1. Reviewing of existing strategies and plans and identifying areas for change:
 - at this stage, there is a mapping of existing strategies and plans at the national, sub-national and local levels against the global SDGs and targets to identify gaps, and provide the basis for areas for change;
2. Setting of nationally-relevant targets: This stage ensures targets set are for nationally-adapted and inclusive SDGs that are achievable, yet ambitious, and are relevant to the national realities at hand.
3. Strategy and plans formulation, using integrated systems thinking: at this stage recommendations and the insights from the above steps are incorporated into strategies and plans to match ambition and commitments with resources and capacities. The process may also include SDGs nationalization through legislative process.

Key issues highlighted from our examination of the VNRs are as follows⁹:

- 1) The VNRs largely consist of reports of summaries of actions undertaken under reported SDGs but this summary is not a review. The VNRs are not evaluative in nature and hence do not contribute to the knowledge base of good and sustainable

⁸ *Synthesis of Voluntary National Reviews 2017*. Report. February 2018.

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17109Synthesis_Report_VNRs_2017.pdf.

⁹ Balakrishna Pisupati 2018 *Supporting Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs): Options for Informed Reviews*. FLEDGE, India.

practices. The same can be said of the 2016 and 2017 VNR synthesis prepared by the UN Department of Economic Social Affairs.

In reporting activities or programs undertaken under a particular Goal, most countries have only addressed a selected few targets. With each country having their prerogative to design their own unique path to the attainment of the SDGs, it is not necessary that the program(s) undertaken and reported by a government to accomplish a particular Goal match all the targets stated in the SDGs or reflect a government's urgent priorities. It is also not a given that all targets in a stated Goal are relevant to a particular country. This can be a challenge since this approach overlooks the multi-dimensional and interlinked nature of the SDGs.

- 2) The underlying theme of the SDGs, "Ensuring that no one is left behind", has a human centered approach, which though extremely crucial can forsake the needs of the environment, ecology and biodiversity are not addressed satisfactorily if we need to be inclusive.
- 3) Though many institutions, ranging from those belonging to the UN system to local community-based organizations, have significant activities related to implementation of actions on SDGs at national level, the VNRs are silent on their contributions and do not necessarily include such actions and their impacts, making the VNRs incomplete both in content, detail and impact.
- 4) Amongst the three dimensions of sustainable development - economic, social and environment - the social dimension has been addressed largely in terms of demographic equality, ignoring many other aspects such as culture. The 'social' dimension also involves challenging normative ideas of modernity compared to traditional practices.

6. Trends on the environmental dimension in 2016 & 2017 VNRs

Country categories in terms of progress towards SDG implementation is tabulated in the Annex Table. In addition to categorizing countries, the Table highlights implementation strategies, plans, and initiatives, as well as national legislations regarding the environmental dimension.

Both 2016 and 2017 VNRs indicate a trend in aligning SDGs into already existing national plans as opposed to developing up new strategies. For example, Indonesia's long-term Development Plan 2015-2019 takes into account the three dimensions of development namely; social development, economic development and environmental development. Italy has nationalized SDGs into its National Sustainable Development Strategy 2017/2030. The strategy captures a new vision towards a circular, low-emission economy resilient to climate impacts. It also prioritizes the fight against biodiversity loss and alteration of fundamental biogeochemical cycles (carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus and land use change).

The 2016 and 2017 VNRs recognize the nexus between the environment and economic growth, with countries highlighting the importance of natural resource management to economic growth. For instance, Botswana recognizes the effects of rapid economic growth on the environment and thus has developed a policy to address the economic-environment conflict – National Resource and Conservation.

In the 2016 VNR reports, countries presented a general view of the measures put in place to address the various aspects of sustainable development. During the 2017 HLPF, under the theme “*Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world*”, the Forum introduced in-depth reviews of specific goals.¹⁰

Interestingly, the majority of the 2017 VNRs had a thematic focus on Goal 14 *Life below Water*, which includes VNRs by Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Cyprus,

¹⁰ Goals reviewed in-depth in 2017: 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14 and 17 (which is to be reviewed annually)

Egypt, Estonia, France, India, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, Togo, Tajikistan and Sweden. These VNRs' environmental dimensions focused on Goal 14 *Life Below Water*. Landlocked countries that presented VNRs, particularly, Afghanistan, Botswana, Nepal, Uganda and Zimbabwe excluded Goal 14 from their analysis or based it on their national realities.

For example, Ethiopia – a landlocked country, that has faced significant famine and water scarcity challenges mentioned their commitment to Goal 14 – Life below water - in the context of securing water resource systems like rivers and dams. Ethiopia's 2015 famine and poor performance in agriculture in that year, is part of the reasons, the country is committed to combatting climate change Goal 13 (a goal not reviewed by the 2017 HPLF).

Other landlocked countries like Botswana mentioned the environmental dimensions as it relates to their national realities. Botswana's VNR report described progress made in implementing SDGs 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 5 (gender equality), 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure) and 17 (partnerships for the Goals) with a focus on poverty, excluding Goal 14 (life below water) from the analysis. Botswana recognizes the vital link between sustainable natural resource management and economic growth, mentioning the environmental dimension - particularly effective management of natural resources - only as it relates to eradication of poverty – Goal 1.

In 2017, countries with marine ecosystems highlighted various initiatives and actions taken to protect marine ecosystems and derive benefits from the blue economy. For example, Bangladesh has developed waste reception facilities at ports and contingency plans to fight oil spillage. It has also identified Marine Ecological Critical Areas, created a Coastal Green Belt, formulated a National Fisheries Policy, created an inventory of marine biological resources, and developed technology to produce seeds for culturing fish, to achieve SDG targets within Goal 14.

Belize finalized an Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan which will ensure sustainable coastal resource use. *Marine Access* which aims to build good stewardship and improve fishing practice was rolled out across its territorial waters in 2016. Costa Rica's *Submarine Life Initiative* has been developed to improve the sustainable management of marine resources.

Interestingly, the focus on mainstreaming and integrating the environmental dimension of SDGs into actions is more prominent in the VNRs that were submitted in 2017. Climate change and its associated extreme weather events were the most often-cited challenges at the 2017 HLPF that undermine efforts to achieve sustainable development. Various countries introduced their efforts to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change through, for example, promoting resilient infrastructure and energy efficiency. Natural resource management and giving women and other marginalized groups equitable access to natural resources were cited as important to realizing SDGs 1 and 2 on poverty and hunger eradication. The positive correlation between a healthy environment, including clean water and air, and SDG 3 on ensuring healthy lives was also recognized. Some countries focused directly on SDG 14 on oceans and emphasized their support for the declaration "Our ocean, our future: call for action" adopted by the high-level UN Ocean Conference held in New York in June 2017.

While some countries made specific mention of actions taken to implement the environmental dimension of SDGs, some do recognize that economic growth hinges on sustainable management of natural resource management.

For example, Afghanistan has mentioned its plans for improved food production which includes: short-term plans for establishing and conserving forests, pastures and orchards, rehabilitation and conservation of natural resources management and watersheds to improve agriculture production, as well as long-term plans of restoring, protecting forests, pastures, production of non-fruit saplings and establishment of green belts in 34 provinces worth US\$324 million. Though aimed at improving food production, the plans depict Afghanistan's recognition of the importance of the environmental dimension of the SDGs.

Georgia on the other hand, recognizes how economic growth could put considerable pressure on natural resources and the environment. Therefore, it focuses on sustainable economic development as important for the country from the perspective of environmental protection and rational use of natural resources¹¹. Georgia expressed commitment to obligations under international environmental agreements.

Some countries have taken specific action to implement the environmental dimension of the SDGs by setting nationally relevant environmental targets and formulating national environmental strategies and plans.

For example, Azerbaijan has adopted policies that minimize pollution and improve environmental protection to ensure environmental safety, promote efficient and sustainable use of natural resources, utilize alternative energy sources and achieve energy efficiency, identify solutions to global environmental problems at the national level, and expand relations with international organizations for the implementation of environmental dimension of SDGs.

The Czech Republic has adopted an ambitious national Climate Protection Policy aimed at ensuring a gradual transition to a low emission economy by 2050. Colombia formulated a Green Growth plan which aims for sustainable consumption and production, climate change mitigation, ecosystem protection and sustainable use of marine and terrestrial natural capital and provides concrete actions for the SDGs. In May 2016, the Starting (Norwegian parliament) adopted a Norwegian Action Plan for Biodiversity, aimed at achieving the Aichi targets, and debated a new white paper on securing an efficient and climate-friendly energy supply.

In addition to the above, some countries have reported to be making significant progress in integrating the environmental dimensions of SDGs into their national policies and

¹¹ *First Voluntary National Review on Implementation of the Sustainable Development*. Report. March 2018. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10680SDG_Voluntary_National_Review_Georgia-.pdf.

development plans. In addition to the creation of enabling policies, these countries are actively implementing environmental dimensions of SDGs through projects, initiatives and laws and financing mechanisms.

Egypt, Kenya and Portugal have introduced environmental issues into their educational and learning curricula at school and University levels. Portugal has also set up financial instruments and mechanisms to strengthen the environmental dimension. The Environmental Fund is Portugal's financial instrument to support environmental policies to achieve the SDGs and fulfil the commitments on climate change, water, waste and nature conservation and biodiversity.

Belize's new plan is historical for the nation, as it is the first time that the subject of development has been treated as a comprehensive process involving social and environmental dimensions¹². Egypt is committed to taking the necessary measures to preserve the environment, rationing its use of natural resources, and guarantee the rights of future generations thereto. Sierra Leone has been mindful of SDG interconnectedness, as confirmed in its current poverty reduction strategy paper, the Agenda for Prosperity, which can be broadly divided into economic, social, environmental and political governance dimensions.

7. Conclusion (recommendations and way forward)

It is pertinent to recognize that countries are currently streamlining and consolidating the preparation of VNRs with a few of them preparing annual consecutive VNRs (such as Togo). Though there is general guidance available for countries on VNRs, there is no structured format for presenting information. This is also true of countries' usage of agreed indicators since the VNRs do not necessarily inform clearly how and when the indicators have been used.

¹² Belize's First Voluntary National Review for the Sustainable Development Goals 2017. Report. March 2018. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/16389Belize.pdf>.

In this context, this brief provides an overview of how countries have reviewed implementation of actions with regard to the environmental dimension of the SDGs. The brief provides a quick review of actions and programmes initiated and implemented by countries with regard to environmental issues.

United Nations Division for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Synthesis Report for the 2017 VNRs recognizes that “the deep commitment to the integrated nature and indivisibility of the Goals is evident from all the reports.”¹³ This may be so but the levels of integration of the environmental dimension vary across the board and its significance is strongly based on the national contexts.

Although the HLPF as a platform provides an opportunity for inputs from intergovernmental bodies, regional processes, major groups and other stakeholders, it is an important caveat that there is no formal space in which civil society and major groups and stakeholders directly contribute to the VNR reporting. Major civil society actors may be or are engaging in the environmental dimension of the SDGs but if this is not duly noted in the VNR through the state-led mechanism of coordination and reporting, it would not be accounted for. This brings to question the extent to which the VNRs are an accurate reflection of ground reality as civil society stakeholders can be instrumental in SDG-related processes in certain countries.

Looking ahead, at the 2018 HLPF, 47 countries will present their national reviews. Four of these will be conducting their second review at the HLPF (Colombia, Egypt, Mexico, and Switzerland) and one country its third (Togo).¹⁴ The more that countries commit to reporting each cycle of HLPF, the more data and information can foster effective accounting of the progress towards SDGs.

¹³ *Synthesis of Voluntary National Reviews 2017*. Report. February 2018.
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17109Synthesis_Report_VNRs_2017.pdf. Page XI

¹⁴ *Synthesis of Voluntary National Reviews 2017*. Report. February 2018.
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17109Synthesis_Report_VNRs_2017.pdf.

Considering the above, the following recommendations are suggested for consideration by member states to further strengthen the environmental dimension in the VNRs.

1. Considering that environment is a cross-cutting issue that is relevant to all the SDGs, countries could identify specific actions across SDGs that relate to the environment besides addressing specific environmental dimension of each SDG. This means making the environmental dimension across all SDGs well-known, with potentially a road map or a concrete action framework. This, in fact, is in line with the discussions during the Open Working Group that negotiated the SDGs.
2. While national policies and strategies related to environmental dimension of SDGs are widely quoted in the VNRs, it will be helpful if the VNRs could address specific actions as well as introduce a mechanism to evaluate and report on the actions on the ground. For this the reporting frameworks should be flexible and inclusive. In addition, countries need to focus on specific actions related to the environmental dimension while undertaking the reviews.
3. With minimal information on how countries are using the globally agreed indicators, it is appropriate to conclude that it may be recommended that additional guidance is provided to countries to focus on using the environmental indicators in preparing the VNRs. In addition to UN Environment, other relevant UN agencies with mandate on the environment should prepare joint programmes to help countries mainstream the environment dimension into SDGs more effectively. The role of UN Environment Management Group in this process should also be considered.
4. The discussions and outcomes of United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) relate to dimensions of SDGs in all its forms. Currently, there is no formal platform being provided during the HLPF to discuss the outcomes, making the outcomes of UNEA not fully reflected in the SDG related in-depth discussions at HLPF. Although in 2018, a speaking role is expected to be given to the President of the Environment Assembly at HLPF, this would be more of a politically symbolic act rather than substantive deliberation of environmental issues at HLPF. The written inputs from UNEA submitted annually by UNEA President to ECOSOC President are also compiled into the "Report of the Secretary-General on synthesis of

voluntary submissions by functional commissions of the ECOSOC and other intergovernmental bodies” but the importance of this synthesis compared to other official reports for HLPF remains questionable. In this context, it will be pertinent for Member States to consider the agenda of UNEA that could potentially align itself with the discussions anticipated at HLPF so that the outcomes and actions align themselves. Members of the Bureau of the UNEA should also play a more active role in delivering key messages from UNEA at HLPF.

5. Countries should also be encouraged to involve stakeholders when preparing their VNRs so that more grounds level realities can be captured in the official government reports (this is to respond to the observation made above regarding lack of civil society participation in the VNRs).
6. If VNRs are to be used as a barometer for assessing progress towards realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs, then it is time for countries to prepare or seek specific inputs in dealing with the environmental dimension across the SDGs, considering the science-policy-practice links.

The environmental dimension can certainly be further strengthened within the VNRs though the trends seen in submissions made by member states in 2016 and 2017 indicate some progress. If one considers environment as a critical and key pillar of sustainable development, there is a need for countries to strengthen the environmental dimension of SDGs both in action and reporting through the VNRs.