UNITED NATIONS

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With the support of the International
Organization for Migration – Regional
Office for the Middle East and North Africa

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Report

Eighth Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region
Beirut and online, 17 March 2023

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the League of Arab States, and with the support of the International Organization for Migration – Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, organized the eighth Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region, held at the United Nations House in Beirut and virtually on 17 March 2023.

The workshop focused on migration issues and their relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and discussions were held on ways to integrate migration issues into voluntary national reviews. The workshop also included a session on the preparations of Arab countries that will present their voluntary national reviews in 2023, and on preparations for the 2023 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and the 2023 SDG Summit. The present report provides a summary of key topics covered at the workshop sessions and the outcomes of the workshop.

Contents

Introduction

1.   The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the League of Arab States, and with the support of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, organized the eighth Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region, held at the United Nations House in Beirut and virtually on 17 March 2023.[1]

2.   The workshop focused on migration issues and their links to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Participants exchanged experiences on dealing with migration, benefiting from its positive impact on development, and addressing its negative aspects. The workshop included working groups that discussed practical measures which could be undertaken by national teams responsible for voluntary national reviews (VNRs) to integrate migration issues into the VNR process, promote its content, and follow up on its results.

3.   The workshop also included a session on the preparations of Arab countries that will present their voluntary national reviews in 2023, and on preparations for the 2023 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and the 2023 SDG Summit.

I. Outcomes of the workshop

4.   The following is a summary of the key messages emanating from the workshop:

        (a) Adopt an inclusive development approach to migration that takes into account the close interlinkages – both direct and indirect – between migration issues and most, if not all, of the SDGs;

        (b) Adopt a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to migration issues, involving all relevant ministries, the non-governmental sector, civil society organizations, academia, research institutions and migrant associations;

        (c) Include male and female migrants, like any other social group, in the VNRs to prevent their marginalization, identify their needs, and recognize their rights and societal and economic role;

        (d) Consider migrants of all types and legal statuses in VNRs, despite the emergence of negative aspects to migration in some Arab countries, as a way to facilitate dialogue on ways to address the negative aspects of migration, mitigating its repercussions, and benefiting from its positive aspects;

        (e) Define national priorities regarding migration issues, integrate those priorities in relevant national policies, and make relevant data available as a prerequisite for effective follow-up and implementation of national sustainable development plans;

        (f) Address migration issues as a shared responsibility between States, exert concerted efforts to end conflicts and improve the economic conditions that force some groups to migrate, and tackle the long-term effects of brain drain on the development processes of countries of origin;

        (g) Harmonize the reporting tracks of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration to achieve complementarity between them wherever possible; and make use of the national voluntary reports of the Global Compact for Migration as a key source of data and information on migration issues when preparing VNRs;

        (h) Benefit from the integrated support provided by United Nations national networks for migration in 17 Arab countries, and from their pivotal role in providing information and technical advice and mobilizing supportive partnerships to deal with migration issues and linking them to development.

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[1] Regional workshops on voluntary national reviews have been organized periodically since 2019 to provide a platform for dialogue, knowledge sharing and peer learning, at the request of ESCWA member States. For more information on the workshops organized to date, see www.unescwa.org/events/voluntary-national-reviews-regional-workshops-series.

5.   The presentation and discussion of national experiences revealed the following good practices:

(a)   Addressing migration challenges in VNRs promotes synergy between national and international actors in tackling those challenges, and helps shape national policies and action plans to enhance migrants' involvement in development (the case of Timor-Leste);

(b)   Establishing an inter-ministerial migration information system to improve understanding of migration issues, formulate evidence-based policies, and strengthen coordination, tracking and implementation (the case of Morocco);

(c)   Protecting migrants' cultural rights, such as the right to education in their mother tongue, contributes to their social integration (the case of Oman) and supports sustainable development efforts in the host country;

(d)   Conducting quantitative measurements of the contributions of civil society and the private sector to achieving sustainable development (the case of the Syrian Arab Republic), and using case studies to document the contributions of various stakeholders (the case of Saudi Arabia);

(e)   Benefiting from unpublished raw data stock (the case of the Syrian Arab Republic) and from sectoral assessments and studies of the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (the case of the Comoros) to compensate for gaps in SDG data;

(f)   Ensuring transparency and openness in VNR consultative workshops, particularly with the private sector, contributes to a constructive exchange of views and stronger partnerships (the case of Bahrain);

(g)   Conducting a parliamentary review of laws enacted since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, and classifying them according to the SDGs (the case of the Syrian Arab Republic).

II. Summary of sessions

A. Session 1: Interlinkages between the 2030 Agenda and migration

6.   The session highlighted the interlinkages between the 2030 Agenda and migration as a driver of sustainable development. Participants reviewed national experiences, from the region and beyond, on dealing with migration issues from a development perspective. The session was facilitated by Ms. Misato Yuasa, Regional Liaison and Policy Officer, IOM Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa. In her opening statement, she indicated migrants' contributions to development and country efforts in the field of migration, especially since the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration in 2018. She also noted the efforts of the United Nations in support of member States in that field.

7.   The session began with a presentation by Mr. Ayman Zohry, Expert on Population and Migration Studies, who said that migration was indicated in many of the SDGs. He reviewed the key role of migration in achieving development through migrant remittances, the transfer of expertise through returnees, and trade exchange between countries of origin and countries of destination. He emphasized that migrants were a social group that must be included in VNRs, so as to ensure that they are not left behind. He reviewed the linkages between migration and the SDGs, noting that some were direct (Goals 4, 5, 8, 10, 16 and 17) and others indirect (Goals 1, 3, 11 and 13).

8.   Ms. Brigida Soares, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Technical Coordinator at the National Agency for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation in the Cabinet of the Prime-Minister of Timor-Leste, outlined her country's experience in managing migrant remittances, and in using them to diversify the national economy and achieve sustainable development. She said that migrant remittances currently constituted about 9 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), which was double the figure for 2015. She added that the challenge lay in the high cost of remittances, the difficulty of accessing them in rural areas, and their regular use for purposes of consumption rather than for productive purposes. She said that addressing those challenges in VNRs assisted

national and international actors in tackling them, thus resulting in national policies and action plans to strengthen migrant involvement in development for the period 2023–2027.

9.   Mr. Abdeslam Nadah, Director of Planning at the High Commission for Planning of Morocco, presented his country's policy of managing migration as a lever to achieve sustainable development and promote South-South cooperation. He said that Morocco was involved in early United Nations efforts to formulate international agreements, and was committed to implementing those agreements to achieve tangible results on more than one level. He noted that Morocco had implemented 11 programmes under an immigration policy adopted in 2013, which contributed to the settlement of the legal status of many migrants and the improvement of their living conditions and access to education, health, housing and employment. His country had developed a statistical system for international migration, conducted research on migration, and established an information system between ministries to improve understanding of migration, build evidence-based policies, and strengthen coordination, follow-up and implementation. He added that Morocco hosted the African Migration Observatory under the auspices of the African Union, which would contribute to strengthening partnerships in the field of migration.

10.   Ms. Intisar Al Wahaibi, General Manager of Development and Planning at the Ministry of Economy of Oman, presented her country's efforts in the field of migration, noting its commitment to supporting global openness and interaction, promoting communication and trade, and considering migrants as an engine of the national economy who facilitated skills transfer and strengthened cultural diversity. She said that policies and legislation in Oman did not discriminate between a citizen and a migrant before the law or in the right to access all social services, and also guaranteed the cultural rights of migrants. Her country had managed to reduce the cost of remittances to 1 per cent, which was better than the international target of 3 per cent. She noted the Investor Residency Programme, which allowed investors to obtain residency of up to 10 years.

11.   Mr. Seung Jin Baek, Economist at the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office in Kuwait, highlighted the vital role played by the United Nations country team in Kuwait with regard to migrant workers, who made up nearly two thirds of the Kuwaiti population. He said that the country team provided information and mobilized partnerships, particularly through the United Nations Network on Migration, which helped, for example, to improve migrants' access to quality health-care services and essential medicines during the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted that the United Nations country team provided policy support to the Public Authority for Manpower, which contributed to the establishment of an integrated data system for workers in the private sector, which implemented regulatory measures and legislation to facilitate related actions and protect migrant workers. He also outlined the support provided by the country team in setting up a special department for domestic workers and an electronic mechanism for filing complaints about labour violations. He also noted efforts to generate and use national data effectively in monitoring the SDGs.

12.   The ensuing discussion focused on the following items:

       (a)   Emphasizing the importance of standardizing migration concepts and defining national priorities in the field, according to country specificities;

       (b)   Dealing with irregular migration, which constitutes a burden on the Government and on development in some Arab countries, and emphasizing the importance of data collection as an input for formulating policies and measures to alleviate those burdens;

       (c)   Stressing the importance of concerted efforts to end conflicts and improve the economic conditions that drive some groups to forced migration, and addressing the long-term effects of brain drain on countries of origin;

       (d)   Emphasizing that integrating migration issues in countries' sustainable development policies is an essential entry point for benefiting from the positive effects of migration and reducing the negative ones (when they exist), as is the integration of such issues in VNRs;

(e)   Recognizing that the availability of migration data is a prerequisite for a scientific approach to migration in VNRs;

(f)   Advocating the inclusion of non-citizens of all categories and legal status in VNRs, as an opportunity to benefit from the positive aspects of migration and to develop plans that mitigate any negative aspects;

(g)   Emphasizing the need to coordinate United Nations support in the field of migration at the global, regional and country levels;

(h)   Benefiting from the integrated support provided by the United Nations national networks for migration in 17 Arab countries, which also constitute an important source of information and data on migration.

B.   Session 2: Integrating migration issues in VNRs: practical guidance

13.   The session was organized into working groups and included practical exercises facilitated by Ms. Sarah Salman, Population Affairs Officer at ESCWA. She set the stage for the session by reviewing the "Guidelines on integrating migration in voluntary national reviews", the first draft of which was prepared by ESCWA in collaboration with IOM. She listed the main steps required for that purpose, as follows:

(a)   Identifying national priorities in terms of the types of migration that need to be addressed, and which migration issues are a priority for action;

(b)   Involving relevant governmental and non-governmental stakeholders at all stages of VNR preparation and determining the best mechanism for their participation;

(c)   Benefiting from national voluntary reports of the Global Compact for Migration, if they exist;

(d)   Collecting quantitative and qualitative migration data from additional sources;

(e)   Integrating available data on migration in relevant chapters of VNRs;

(f)   Acknowledging the limitations and shortfalls of integrating migration in VNRs, and developing steps to address them in the future;

(g)   Formulating immigration policy following the VNR process.

14.   In the first practical exercise, the working groups were asked to collectively reflect on a number of questions that addressed the following: development priorities related to migration and migrants in each country; and stakeholders who could provide: information on migration and development, mechanisms for consultation with them, and available sources of information on migration and migrants.

15.   In the second practical exercise, the working groups were asked to read an Arab country's VNR of the Global Compact for Migration (Egypt and Morocco) or extracts from it (Qatar and Tunisia). The groups then identified the information contained in the review that could be used in preparing a VNR to measure progress towards an SDG. Participants identified some common thematic areas from which they could draw information, including regulating labour migration, combating irregular migration, and improving migration governance frameworks.

C.   Session 3: Preparations for the 2023 VNRs

16.   The session provided an opportunity for Arab States that would be presenting a VNR in 2023 to inform participants of the ongoing preparations of the review process, the new approaches and tools being pursued, the challenges they faced, and the next steps they intended to take. The session also provided an overview of preparations for the 2023 High-level Political Forum and for the 2023 SDG Summit. The session was facilitated by Ms. Jana El Baba, Sustainable Development Officer at ESCWA.

17.   Ms. Fay Al-Najadah, Researcher at the National Observatory for Sustainable Development and Future Foresight of the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council of Planning and Development of Kuwait, presented her country's preparations for the 2023 VNR, referring to efforts made in the past years to harmonize the development plans of Kuwait with the 2030 Agenda, and to the establishment of the National Permanent Steering Committee for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda that comprised representatives of governmental, non-governmental and international agencies. Regarding VNR preparations, she said that an action plan had been developed that set out the required activities and outputs, and mechanisms had been adopted to involve stakeholders and to identify, make available and ensure the accuracy of required data, stressing that the data gap remained a challenge as did the shortage of cadres and competencies specialized in sustainable development. She concluded with an overview of the achievements of Kuwait in several SDGs.

18.   Mr. Faisal Hammad, Assistant Under-Secretary of Competitiveness and Economic Indicators at the Ministry of Finance and National Economy of Bahrain, presented the aspects covered by his country's second VNR, including the Government's achievements in the period 2019–2022; dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic; updated sustainable development indicators; and aligning the government programme 2023–2026 with the SDGs. He focused on the wide-ranging consultative VNR process supervised by the Ministry of Sustainable Development, which included seven workshops with various sectors, including the private sector, stressing that the workshops had been completely transparent and had contributed to a constructive exchange of views and the strengthening of partnerships.

19.   Mr. Refaat Hejazi, Adviser at the Planning and International Cooperation Commission of the Syrian Arab Republic, gave an overview of key steps taken to prepare the 2023 VNR. He said that 2023 was an important year, and that it was necessary to pause and evaluate what has been accomplished during the first half of the 2030 Agenda timeline. The VNR steps included amending the institutional framework to ensure broader participation of the private sector, civil society and vulnerable groups; establishing local committees for sustainable development in five governorates, which prepared local reports; and conducting quantitative measurements of contributions by civil society and the private sector to achieving sustainable development. He noted that the Parliament had contributed to the VNR by reviewing 85 pieces of legislation issued since 2015, which were now categorized by SDG. He added that the 2023 VNR would be rich in data compared with its predecessor, indicating efforts to benefit from raw data, thus increasing data availability to 70 per cent. He concluded by referring to the external challenges that continued to hinder his country's efforts to achieve the SDGs.

20.   Mr. Abdulrahman Alarifi, Specialist at the Ministry of Economy and Planning of Saudi Arabia, reviewed the key steps in preparing the 2023 VNR. He noted the formation of a steering committee comprising representatives of 20 government agencies, which branched out into several working groups, including a group concerned with preparing the VNR that included 150 stakeholders. He referred to a large-scale awareness-raising campaign that accompanied the review process to enhance national ownership of the SDGs. He said that case studies had been used to collect information on the contribution of all sectors to sustainable development. The VNR would highlight key reforms that complemented the country's Vision 2030, and various other achievements, especially in the field of economic diversification, expanding the scope of social services, involving women, and technological development in key areas such as clean hydrogen and carbon sequestration.

21.   Mr. Youssouf Ali Mmadi, Macroeconomic Programmes Officer at the General Planning Commission of the Comoros, affirmed his country's intention to involve all stakeholders in the 2023 VNR. A first workshop had been held to launch the process, bringing together over 160 governmental and non-governmental agencies. He said that the 2023 VNR was expected to be better than its predecessor in terms of data and analyses, given that sectoral assessments and studies of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have been conducted, resulting in important data that would be used in the current VNR. Moreover, statistical capacity had been strengthened, and training on SDG data analysis had been conducted. Regarding sustainable development policies, he referred to the recently launched post-pandemic recovery blueprint, which was in line with 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 of the African Union.

22.   Mr. Joop Theunissen, Deputy Chief of the Intergovernmental Policy and Review Branch at the Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination in the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, reviewed preparations for the 2023 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, to be held in New York from 10 to 19 July. He said that four days (14 and 17–19 July 2023) had been devoted to VNRs, which would be presented by 41 countries and the European Union. Regarding the 2023 SDG Summit, he noted that the aim was to rescue the SDGs and ask member States to recommit to them and take transformative actions and high-impact initiatives. He noted that the Summit would contribute to mobilizing resources through a plan to stimulate the SDGs. He called on Arab States presenting 2023 VNRs to shed light on such measures and initiatives in their countries.

23.   The presentations were followed by questions and answers that focused on developing practices to integrate the private sector and vulnerable groups in the VNR process, establishing mechanisms for providing data, and localizing the SDGs. Several country representatives expressed their countries' intention to prepare a 2024 VNR, including Iraq, Oman, the State of Palestine and Libya.

III. Organization of work

A. Date and venue of the Workshop

24.   The eighth Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region was held at the United Nations House in Beirut and virtually on 17 March 2023.

B. Opening

25.   The representative of ESCWA and of the League of Arab States opened the workshop with welcoming remarks. Ms. Maisaa Youssef, Leader of the ESCWA 2030 Agenda and SDG Coordination Cluster, welcomed participants and partners. She noted the round table held within the framework of the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development 2023, which had provided an opportunity for Bahrain, the Comoros, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Arab Republic to share some of the key messages included in their 2023 VNRs. The interventions clearly revealed that countries were seeking to make the VNRs "national" rather than "governmental", and a tool to accelerate SDG implementation and mobilize partnerships with various stakeholders.

26.   She stressed that the Workshop's focus on migration was important to all Arab countries, despite their differing contexts, challenges and migration policies. She noted that VNRs issued by Arab countries in the past years did not reflect, for the most part, that importance, or outline national efforts in that regard, which was a missed opportunity to harmonize policies and efforts and to implement a development approach to migration issues. She expressed her hope that the VNR guideline prepared by ESCWA, in collaboration with IOM and the current Workshop would contribute to strengthening participation of stakeholders concerned with migration in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda, and to collecting information and data on migration from various sources and integrating them into future VNRs.

27.   Ms. Nada El Agizy, Director of Sustainable Development and International Cooperation at the League of Arab States, made an opening statement in which she praised the effective collaboration and coordination between the partners in organizing a series of VNR workshops. She said that the issue of migration was of increasing importance in the region owing to the high migration rates, both internally and externally, as a result of conflicts, natural disasters and climate change, to the extent that the region now hosted over 40 million migrants and refugees, causing additional burdens on host countries in terms of providing shelter, food, job opportunities, and social protection. She added that migration was positive if it contributed to strengthening production, improving education quality, introducing new skills, and promoting cultural diversity, but it was negative if it put pressure on public services and facilities in host countries. She expressed her hope that the current Workshop would help Arab countries better address migration within VNRs as a multifaceted development issue in the region.

C. Participants

28.   The Workshop was attended by 56 participants, in-person and online, including representatives of 19 Arab countries, namely Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen. The Workshop was also attended by participants from United Nations country teams and the organizers, namely ESCWA, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the League of Arab States and IOM (the list of participants is set out in the annex to the present report). Women accounted for 45 per cent of participants.

D. Agenda

29.   The Workshop comprised three main sessions, in addition to the opening and closing sessions. The following is a summary of the agenda:

   (a)   Opening;
   (b)   Session 1: Interlinkages between the 2030 Agenda and migration;
   (c)   Session 2: Integrating migration issues in VNRs: practical guidance;
   (d)   Session 3: Preparations for the 2023 VNRs;
   (e)   Closing remarks.

E. Documents

30.   For a list of documents, please visit the Workshop page on the ESCWA website at www.unescwa.org/events/8th-workshop-voluntary-national-reviews.

Annex

List of participants

A. Arab States

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Ministry of Planning

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B. United Nations Agencies and Programmes

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UN-Habitat

Ms. Aliaa Al Asaad (*Online*)
Urban Planner

C. Participants from non-Arab countries

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D. Experts

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Expert on Population and Migration Studies
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E. Organizers

League of Arab States

Ms. Nada El Agizy
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