



Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/CL5.SDGS/2023/WG.2/Report
23 October 2023
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: ARABIC

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Report

Ninth Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region Cairo, 2–3 October 2023

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the League of Arab States and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, organized the ninth Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region, held at the headquarters of the League of Arab States in Cairo on 2 and 3 October 2023.

The workshop included interventions on the experiences of Arab countries that conducted voluntary national reviews in 2023, and on the preparations of those working on their reviews for 2024. The thematic sessions of the workshop focused on the outcomes of the 2023 SDG Summit, on technology as a means of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, and on the importance of integrating technology in the review process and in voluntary national reviews.

Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1–3	3
<i>Chapter</i>		
I. Outcomes of the workshop	4–5	3
II. Summary of the sessions	6–43	4
A. Session 1: Peer exchange between 2023 and 2024 VNR countries	6–20	4
B. Session 2: Technology as means of implementing the SDGs: challenges and opportunities.....	21–27	7
C. Session 3: Halfway to 2030: the SDG Summit and way forward	28–34	8
D. Session 4: Raising the visibility of technology in VNRs and engaging technology stakeholders	35–42	9
E. Session 5: Going forward: utilizing VNRs to drive the adoption of technology for the SDGs	43	11
III. Organization of work	44–49	11
A. Date and venue of the workshop.....	44	11
B. Opening.....	45–46	11
C. Participants.....	47	12
D. Agenda	48	12
E. Documents	49	12
<i>Annex.</i> List of participants.....		13

Introduction

1. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the League of Arab States and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), organized the ninth Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews at the headquarters of the League of Arab States in Cairo on 2 and 3 October 2023.¹
2. The workshop focused on the role of technology as a means of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and methods to include technology in the voluntary national review (VNR) preparation process and VNR reports. Participants shared their experiences on using technology in various fields, such as data and statistics, digital governance, and green economy. The workshop also included an open session on concrete measures to promote the use of technology in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to engage relevant stakeholders in VNRs.
3. The workshop highlighted the outcomes of the 2023 SDG Summit and the expectations for the remaining seven years, in addition to upcoming international forums, especially the 2024 Summit of the Future. Arab countries also presented their national commitments.

I. Outcomes of the workshop

4. The following is a summary of the workshop's key messages:
 - (a) Technology is a crosscutting topic that can accelerate the achievement of all SDGs, therefore all Arab countries, whatever their level of technological advancement, are called upon to include technology in their VNRs;
 - (b) Many technology indicators, available at the national level and on international platforms, surpass those included in the adopted global indicator framework for SDGs. It is thus recommended to make use of those indicators to shed light on specific technology-related challenges and gaps, depending on the context of each country and in a way that serves national priorities;
 - (c) It is important to engage all technology stakeholders in the preparation process of VNRs, including the private sector, the academic and research sector, the non-governmental organizations sector, civil society, and volunteers;
 - (d) VNRs are an opportunity to develop technology-related policies that closely serve the SDGs. They also provide the chance to forge needed partnerships, so as to establish a strong technology sector;
 - (e) There was a suggestion to consider conducting a voluntary regional review for the Arab region, similar to the one submitted by the European Union for the first time in 2023;
 - (f) Conflict-affected countries may focus on specific themes in their VNRs in line with priorities related to emerging from crises or to building back. Analyses included in VNRs can be supported by examples of community solutions developed to respond to local needs in the context of inadequate government services or difficulty in accessing them;
 - (g) National commitments submitted by Arab countries at the 2023 SDG Summit are a reaffirmation of the centrality of the 2030 Agenda, and a means of defining priorities for action in the next phase. It is important to monitor those commitments and follow up on their implementation through VNRs.

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 workshops that have been organized thus far, please visit www.unescwa.org/events/voluntary-national-reviews-regional-workshops-series.

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

(a) Preparing an annual internal report to monitor progress on the implementation of the SDGs on a regular basis (as in the case of Oman and Saudi Arabia);

(b) Building on data disaggregated at the subnational level to analyse policies and challenges, especially in conflict-affected countries (as in the case of the Syrian Arab Republic);

(c) Using aerial and satellite images to produce accurate spatial data to support in planning, follow-up and evaluation (as in the case of Egypt);

(d) Automating the collection of VNR inputs from various stakeholders by using a digital platform (as in the case of Switzerland);

(e) Framing transition efforts towards establishing digital government by adopting a national policy for digital transformation (as in the case of the State of Palestine).

II. Summary of the sessions

A. Session 1: Peer exchange between 2023 and 2024 VNR countries

6. The first session focused on the experiences of Arab countries that submitted their VNRs in 2023, and the preparations of Arab countries planning to submit their VNRs in 2024. The session was moderated by Ms. Nada El Agizy, Director of Sustainable Development and International Cooperation at the League of Arab States.

7. Ms. Dana Hamzah, Assistant Undersecretary for Sustainable Development at the Ministry of Sustainable Development of Bahrain, outlined her country's experience in preparing its second VNR in 2023. The review had contributed to documenting progress made since the first VNR in 2018, identifying challenges and exploring solutions to design policies that would consolidate the principles of sustainability. She noted some development accelerators, such as the launch of economic recovery plans; the commitment to achieve net zero emissions by 2060; the establishment of the Ministry of Sustainable Development in 2022; the integration of the SDGs in the 2023–2026 government plan for development; the scaling up of digital efforts; and the strengthened collaboration with the private sector. She added that preparations for the 2023 review had been based on a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, underlining the coordination efforts of the Ministry of Sustainable Development. She welcomed the support of the United Nations and confirmed that data would constantly be updated and enhanced, even after the submission of the review.

8. Ms. Samah Albukhari, Senior Sustainability Specialist at the Ministry of Economy and Planning of Saudi Arabia, said that the country's Vision 2030 included initiatives and projects that were in line with the 2030 Agenda. She noted specific examples of accelerators, such as development projects financed by the Saudi Public Investment Fund, technological and digital transformation activities of the Saudi Authority for Data and Artificial Intelligence, national efforts in economic diversification through non-oil sectors like tourism and industrialization, the launch of the Saudi Green Initiative, and the creation of a social protection system that includes social insurance. She commended the work of the Ministry of Economy and Planning in coordinating the preparation of the review, in which around 100 entities had participated from the Government, the private sector, the third sector, and international organizations. She said that the VNR report stressed the importance of engaging the private sector and civil society from diverse sectors, including volunteer contributions, in achieving the SDGs. It also included a series of examples on the role carried out by these parties. She added that the Ministry of Economy and Planning would prepare an annual report on SDG progress, shedding light on collaboration between the General Authority for Statistics and the National Center for Performance Management (*Adaa*) in regularly monitoring the implementation of the SDGs.

9. Mr. Mmadi Ali Youssouf, Economic Programmes Officer at the Department of Strategic Planning and Population of the General Planning Commission of the Comoros, presented his country's experience in preparing its second VNR in 2023. He outlined the review process, which was participatory with contributions from the public and private sectors, civil society, young people, women and donors. The review report included an analysis of SDG implementation and challenges. It also focused on the 68 targets that had been classified as a national priority for the Comoros. It adopted the five pillars of the 2030 Agenda as a general framework. It also included a series of steps to be taken in the future, such as accelerating reforms, promoting a favourable work environment for private investment, localizing the SDGs, building capacity, improving data, and mobilizing innovative funding.

10. In the ensuing discussion, participants focused on the global SDG indicator framework. Countries were requested to use the framework indicators that were suited to their national circumstances, and to complement them with other indicators that matched their development needs and priorities, so as to rectify their national development path.

11. In panel 2 on the 2024 VNR countries, Mr. Mohamed Abderrahmane Deddi, General Director for Development Strategies and Policies at the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Mauritania, presented his country's preparations for the 2024 review. He said that the Government had launched national discussions to define priorities and suggest solutions, and that a survey had been conducted with the support of the United Nations, resulting in the publication of a document on SDG implementation in Mauritania. The second VNR would present the outcome of progress made since the first review in 2019, and shed light on the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis. There would be a regional review for the Hodh Ech Chargui region and a local review for Nouakchott. A road map had already been prepared, including a methodology, institutional structure and timetable. A ministerial committee and a special committee to draft the VNR had been established, and focal points had been appointed from various sectors to provide information.

12. Mr. Taher Belhassan, General Director of the Planning Institute, and Head of the Sustainable Development Committee at the Ministry of Planning of Libya, presented his country's preparations for its second VNR in 2024. He said that the review would outline progress made on each of the 17 SDGs, unlike the first review that had only focused on 10 SDGs identified as national priorities. The 2024 review would also identify opportunities, challenges and the next steps. It would focus on achieving the SDGs at the local level, and on irregular migration that had been negatively affecting the country's economy. He noted that the VNR would be drafted on a participatory basis, under the leadership of the Ministry of Planning and in collaboration with the Committee on Sustainable Development. Various sectors and stakeholders from the National Forum for Sustainable Development in Libya would also be participating in the process. He said that efforts would be made to provide data by adopting a monitoring and follow-up system for the SDGs, with the participation of the Bureau of Statistics and Census and the General Information Authority. He added that it was necessary to use technology to accelerate SDG achievement and to implement relevant policies.

13. Mr. Refaat Hejazi, Advisor at the Planning and International Cooperation Commission of the Syrian Arab Republic, said that his country had prepared its second VNR in 2023, but postponed its submission until 2024. During the next phase, the review would be amended and published as a shorter version. Local reports prepared at the governorate level would also be published. He noted some of the lessons learned, stating that traditional development plans, put in place before the onset of wars and natural catastrophes, were no longer viable; and that the consideration of indicators at the national level was not sufficient and needed to be complemented with action to address prevailing challenges at the subnational level. He indicated the impact of crises and the solutions that had emerged as a result, like the use of solar energy in the absence of electricity and the provision of bank cards and e-services in times of crises, stressing the importance of investing in technology. He referred to the large SDG financing gap, especially given that the Syrian Arab Republic was no longer benefiting from development aid as it had only been receiving humanitarian assistance.

14. Mr. Talal Al Saadi, Director of the Development Plans Department of the Ministry of Economy of Oman, presented his country's preparations for its second VNR in 2024. He said that the national committee

for SDG follow-up, chaired by the Minister of Economy and comprising members such as senior officials from the public and private sectors, civil society and parliament, had played a key role. The committee had overseen the drafting of national reports on the SDGs, in line with national priorities and the 2024–2040 vision. He noted that the SDGs Dashboard had been updated and that the National Centre for Statistics and Information had verified the calculations of available indicators and recalculated unavailable indicators. He also noted the need for information connectivity for monitoring and measuring the achievement of SDG targets and indicators at the national and governorate levels, and for focusing on forging partnerships and promoting digital transformation to achieve the SDGs.

15. Mohamed Al-Hawari, Deputy Minister of Planning and International Cooperation of Yemen, presented his country's preparations for its first VNR in 2024. He said that an oversight committee had been formed, including representatives from relevant ministries and international organizations. The following four areas of work had been identified: review of the status quo; progress made since adopting the 2030 Agenda; the main challenges impeding progress; and projects and programmes that Yemen could adopt to move forward in achieving sustainable development. A primary evaluation had been conducted for the 17 SDGs, based on a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study. The VNR would go through four stages (initialization, preparation of the first draft, launching consultations, and government endorsement) before submission to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2024.

16. Mr. Mahmoud Ataya, Director General of the Prime Minister's Office in the State of Palestine, presented his country's preparations for its second VNR in 2024. He said that an implementation plan had been developed for undertaking the review based on the lessons learned from the experience of preparing the previous VNR and from the regional workshops on VNRs. He added that the work was still in its early stages, and that there would be a call for technical support as required.

17. The second half of the first session was moderated by Ms. Jana El Baba, Sustainable Development Officer at the 2030 Agenda and SDG Coordination Cluster of ESCWA. She presented two activities proposed by ESCWA to optimize support to VNRs: the first activity documented country experiences in conducting reviews as part of a series of good practices; and the second activity aimed to maximize the benefits of peer-learning opportunities through bilateral exchange/twinning, based on the success of the first twinning experience facilitated by ESCWA in 2023.

18. Ms. Hania Sabbidin Dimassi, Associate Programme Management Officer at the 2030 Agenda and SDG Coordination Cluster of ESCWA, made a presentation on good practices for VNRs in Arab countries. She stressed that the 35 VNRs conducted by Arab States since 2016 represented a crucial body of knowledge, which ESCWA was working on documenting through research. The documentation would be specific to the Arab region, unlike international documentation, and would also serve as a useful reference material for reviews in future cycles. She explained that the adopted research methodology was primarily based on discussions at regional VNR workshops, meetings of the Community of Practice, and VNR reports. It was also based on criteria, such as conformity with the principles of the 2030 Agenda, impact and effectiveness. She gave examples of good practices and explained the next steps, notably communicating with countries to provide ESCWA with feedback on the collected practices and to suggest additional practices.

19. Mr. Eyad Ali, Director of Macro Economics at the Planning and International Cooperation Commission of the Syrian Arab Republic, presented the bilateral exchange/twinning experience conducted with Oman under ESCWA coordination. During this experience, virtual meetings were held between ESCWA and the two countries to agree on a workplan for implementation. The following three action pillars were identified: data; how to engage the private sector and civil society in the development process; and monitoring and follow-up at the local level. A team from the Planning and International Cooperation Commission had undertaken a study visit to Oman to learn more about the mechanisms adopted in preparing VNRs. During the visit, meetings were held with relevant parties from the Ministry of Economy, and from the National Centre for Statistics and Information. A visit had also been organized to a non-governmental organization for persons with disabilities.

20. The discussion focused on how the selection of countries participating in the bilateral exchange/twinning process was undertaken. The twinning usually occurred between two countries that had common interests, with the aim of providing an opportunity to dive into the details of the review process, which was not feasible in workshops. Countries wishing to take part in the programme had been invited to contact ESCWA, which would seek to provide the necessary support and facilitate the twinning within available resources.

B. Session 2: Technology as means of implementing the SDGs: challenges and opportunities

21. The session focused on technology as a means of accelerating the implementation of the SDGs. It included presentations on the experiences of various Arab countries that had employed digital and green technologies to promote development. The session was moderated by Ms. Sabbidin Dimassi.

22. Mr. Nawar Alawa, Regional Adviser at the ESCWA Statistics, Information Society and Technology Cluster, made a presentation on the development situation of the Arab region. He gave illustrative examples of the impact of technology on achieving the SDGs, and the situation of the Arab region in selected sectors. He focused on the most prominent digital technology issues that the United Nations system was working on. He also discussed the ESCWA pillars of action, notably supporting member States in developing policies and strategies for digital transformation and artificial intelligence (AI), and other emerging technologies. He stressed the importance of including technology in VNRs so as to identify needs and gaps in the field, and of capacity-building requirements and partnerships required to disseminate it.

23. Mr. Ahmed Helmy, Head of the Spatial Data Unit at the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development of Egypt, outlined his country's efforts to establish a comprehensive information system for planning, follow-up and evaluation, by using the latest aerial and satellite imagery techniques to produce integrated and precise base maps for the country. The maps would facilitate monitoring of performance of development activities, and improve resource utilization and allocation of the State's investments towards areas in real need. The maps would also help manage the State's assets. He also presented illustrative examples of the use of the system within the framework of the *Haya Karima* initiative, so as to map the development needs of targeted villages, prepare an intervention plan, and monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions on the population's quality of life.

24. Mr. Khalil Hanshi, Adviser at Petroleum Development Oman, highlighted the efforts of Oman, in collaboration with the private sector, to introduce clean energy technologies to the market and nationalize the production chain of renewable energy systems (solar energy, wind power and hydrogen power), so as to provide green work opportunities for Omani young people and accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. He said that the cost of solar energy and wind power production had become competitive with that of fossil fuel energy production; and that converting green energy into exportable products, such as clean hydrogen, had moved from the experimental research stage to the commercial stage, thus offering big opportunities for the future.

25. Ms. Wasmiah Aldhidah, First Secretary of the Department of International Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, said that her country was witnessing the growth of its technology sector. National efforts were being made to promote digital transformation and training on digital skills in Qatar, and in developing and least-developed countries (LDCs), in collaboration with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). The use of digital and green technologies during the 2022 World Cup, which was held in Qatar, contributed to reducing the carbon footprint of that large event. She commended her country's efforts in holding the Horticultural Expo 2023 Doha, which would focus, among other things, on technology-led solutions to achieve balance between enhanced agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability.

26. Mr. Olaf de Groot, Development Coordination Officer at the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office in Yemen, discussed the current situation in Yemen as a result of the conflict, stating that accessing electricity and the Internet was challenging, which limited possibilities to benefit from digital technology for

development. However, the conflict had offered some opportunities, such as increased use of solar energy systems as an alternative electricity source. Nevertheless, many opportunities had been lost, such as having to import those systems rather than manufacturing them locally. Moreover, misusing renewable energy to excessively withdraw non-renewable groundwater resources was a problem that had not yet been addressed. He noted that initiatives to use technological means to collect basic data were in place, adding that ongoing efforts were being made to build the capacity of the statistics offices in Sanaa and Aden, and to enhance cooperation between them so as to improve the provision of SDG data.

27. The ensuing discussion focused on the following:

- (a) The impact of artificial intelligence on the SDGs, notably the risk of job losses and how to tackle it;
- (b) The potential benefit from aerial and satellite images and spatial data in geographical areas with large population conglomerates, and where uplands exist;
- (c) Sources and means available to Arab countries to finance technology;
- (d) The digital divide within a country, given that several sectors were being fully digitized while others were not, thus preventing the establishment of an integrated national information system;
- (e) Financial and technical challenges related to establishing cybersecurity systems, and opportunities to reduce investment needs through cloud computing;
- (f) The importance of developing an organizational framework and infrastructure and of building capacity as prerequisites to benefit from technology;
- (g) The occupation of the State of Palestine, hindering access to technology.

C. Session 3: Halfway to 2030: the SDG Summit and way forward

28. The session focused on international forums addressing the 2030 Agenda that were organized by the United Nations in 2023, their outcomes and the preparations for next year's events. Participants also discussed the commitments countries had made at the 2023 SDG Summit. The session was moderated by Ms. Jana El Baba.

29. Mr. Eric Olson, Senior Economic Affairs Officer of the Intergovernmental Policy and Review Branch at the DESA Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development, summarized the proceedings of the 2023 High-level Political Forum, which had been attended by more than 110 high-level officials, and at which 38 VNRs had been submitted. He reviewed the recommendations on VNRs, stating that close collaboration was needed between parliaments and civil society. Reviews must be considered at the local level, disaggregated data needs to be developed, and VNRs should be supported through independent fact-checking. He also noted the outcomes of the 2023 SDG Summit, namely a political declaration reaffirming the commitment to accelerate work on the 2030 Agenda, and implement financial reforms as an important step forward. Regarding preparations for the upcoming 2024 SDG Summit, he said that it would have an outcome, the Pact for the Future, including a global digital compact and a declaration on future generations.

30. The presentation was followed by an interactive panel, where countries presented the commitments they had made at the 2023 SDG Summit. Ms. Dana Hamzah presented the themes underpinning the commitments of Bahrain, including financial sector innovation with the support of the Central Bank, and promoting data collection and monitoring. The fact that Bahrain had submitted its review in conjunction with the 2023 SDG Summit had helped define those commitments.

31. Ms. Mona Esam Fayed, Assistant Minister for Sustainable Development at the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development of Egypt, explained the adopted methodology to determine priorities when drafting commitments, which had resulted in the identification as priorities of human development, of women's participation in the labour force, and of supporting the private sector. She noted the participatory approach

followed in drafting the commitments and its positive impact on institutional arrangements, including planning to establish a development platform for Egypt, issuing a funding plan, and working on localizing the SDGs.

32. Ms. Lamia Alzoubi, Director of the Development Plans and Programs Department at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation of Jordan, presented her country's commitments, which were drafted on the basis of the 2022 VNR recommendations. In the commitment-selecting process, certain standards had been adopted, such as aligning with national priorities and avoiding new financial commitments. Consultations had been held with stakeholders, during which national commitments had been identified in the following fields: food and agriculture, education, climate change, employment opportunities for women and young people, and SDG data. Commitments would be supported through national initiatives, a clear institutional framework, timetabled projects, and a financing framework.

33. Mr. Ataya presented the commitments of the State of Palestine, which were based on a consultative process with national teams and had been submitted at the 2023 SDG Summit. The following areas for policy action were agreed upon: achieving sustainable economic growth through the production base; promoting citizen resilience to crises, especially marginalized groups; enhancing the quality of basic services such as education, health and social protection, and strengthening access to them; and enhancing the effectiveness of public institutions. He also stressed the importance of improving the responsiveness of planning processes to priorities and commitments.

34. The session moderator referred to commitments submitted by non-governmental actors at the 2023 SDG Summit, including a commitment by the Union of Arab Banks to mobilize \$1 trillion by 2030 to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs, developed in collaboration with ESCWA. The ensuing discussion focused on the financing challenge, especially amid global inflation, and the need to reconsider funding frameworks. The importance of providing guarantees to access funding through a guarantor was also discussed. Participants emphasized that the commitments reaffirmed the importance of the 2030 Agenda, and the identification of priorities for action in the next phase was not an abridgement of the SDGs, nor did it constitute a new framework separate from current sustainable development efforts.

D. Session 4: Raising the visibility of technology in VNRs and engaging technology stakeholders

35. The session focused on technology indicators, and included presentations on the experiences of Arab States and of countries from other regions that had benefited from technology in the preparation of VNRs. It also highlighted the role of stakeholders in maximizing the effect of technology on sustainable development. The session was moderated by Ms. Sabbidin Dimassi.

36. Mr. Alawa made a presentation on basic and composite digital technology indicators in the Arab region. Regarding basic indicators, he said that a global partnership, including various stakeholders, had been established since 2004 to improve the availability and quality of information and communications technology data and indicators, especially in developing countries. Thanks to that partnership, data was being collected for 69 indicators on technological infrastructure, household and company use of technology, and the technology sector as an economic sector. Data for indicators on technology use in education and governance, and indicators on the environmental impact of technology were also being collected. With regard to all basic indicators, the performance of the Arab region was close to the global average, despite considerable disparities between Arab countries.

37. He said that composite indicators also played a major role, since they showcased progress towards the desired digital transformation. He presented the Government Electronic and Mobile Services Maturity Index that was annually monitored by ESCWA, which indicated that Arab countries had been progressing at different speeds. He added that there were opportunities to leap forward through regional cooperation. The situation was similar for other composite indicators, including the Global Cybersecurity Index and the Digital Accessibility and Inclusion Index. Other important indicators included the Government AI Readiness Index,

which clearly showed how most Arab countries needed to develop their capacity in that regard. He noted that digital technology data was available in national reports for digital development, and in other reports submitted by States through national focal points. Data was also available through platforms managed by ESCWA, ITU, UNESCO and other specialized agencies.

38. Ms. Henrike Beckmann, Scientific Advisor to the Delegate of the Federal Council for the 2030 Agenda of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, who participated virtually, shared her country's experience in establishing the "SDGital2030" digital platform, which had greatly contributed to simplifying and organizing the 2022 VNR preparations. It also facilitated the participation of stakeholders and all concerned parties from the Government. The platform allowed all stakeholders to input information and data related to each SDG and related targets. It also enabled them to analyse and review data in a simultaneous and collaborative manner. Information stored on the platform had been used to produce a focused report, and it was also possible to access all information through the platform. She added that Switzerland was planning to provide the tool to countries interested in using it.

39. Mr. Amr Farouk, Assistant President for Technological Development at the Academy of Scientific Research and Technology in Egypt, summarized key initiatives implemented by the Academy in collaboration with partners, including utilizing digital technology in agriculture, creating a knowledge bank, supporting youth entrepreneurship and innovation through the AI incubator and the e-learning incubator, and supporting financial technology projects. He said that those initiatives had been designed under the national digital policy framework, and that the VNR included information about them.

40. Mr. Fadi Marjaneh, Head of e-Government at the Ministry of Telecom and IT of the State of Palestine, outlined his country's efforts to develop e-Government services, noting that the efforts were in line with the national development plan for 2021–2023. The State of Palestine has established regulatory frameworks for e-government, including rules, infrastructure and frameworks for information exchange and security. An integrated registration system has also been developed, along with an integrated platform for online e-government services, a mobile application, and a portal for e-payments. He added that the Council of Ministers had ratified the national policy for digital transformation, which had been prepared in collaboration with ESCWA, and was considered a reference document that would guide future action so that digital transformation would include all sectors and aspects of life.

41. Ms. Amal Khaled, representative of the Sustainable Development and International Cooperation Department at the League of Arab States, made a presentation on the Arab Digital Platform for Sustainable Development that had been launched during the fourth edition of the 2022 Arab Sustainable Development Week. The platform aimed to enhance the flexibility and capacity of Arab countries to achieve the SDGs through technology and digital transformation, and to promote and strengthen innovation. Four regional working groups had been formed on the following themes: science, technology and innovation; digital transformation; digital skills-development; and AI. Many specialized workshops had been held in 2023. It was expected that technical work programmes would be prepared during the next phase to build capacity, develop needed resources and skills in the fields of technology, digital transformation and AI, exchange experiences and best practices in these fields, and provide non-traditional funding resources for relevant projects and initiatives.

42. The ensuing discussion focused on the following:

(a) The importance of using technology indicators that showcased both qualitative and quantitative aspects;

(b) The importance of collecting data on the added value of technology in vital sectors, such as industry and agriculture;

(c) The challenge of verifying user ID as a fundamental prerequisite to providing e-government services, and the difficulty of doing so in LDCs and conflict-affected countries;

- (d) The need to simplify government processes before transforming them into e-services;
- (e) The challenge of reaching various stakeholders and incentivizing them to contribute to VNRs, by using technological means and digital platforms;
- (f) The use of national technology monitoring and follow-up pathways to provide data and identify important issues that should be highlighted in VNRs, without it being an additional burden for the team preparing the review.

E. Session 5: Going forward: utilizing VNRs to drive the adoption of technology for the SDGs

43. The session was organized in the form of an open dialogue, led by Ms. Baba and Ms. El Agizy. Participants discussed the following questions:

- How does technology help achieve sustainable development and accelerate the implementation of the SDGs in your country? How does technology support the principles of inclusion and leaving no one behind? What are some examples of that? How do you address related risks and challenges?
- Are technology stakeholders engaged in the national institutional structure of the 2030 Agenda? Who are they (governmental and non-governmental entities)? How do you plan on better engaging them in VNRs?
- What are the data gaps related to technology?
- What are the technology tools or platforms that you think could be useful for the preparation of VNRs in the future?

III. Organization of work

A. Date and venue of the workshop

44. The ninth Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region was held at the headquarters of the League of Arab States in Cairo and virtually on 2 and 3 October 2023.

B. Opening

45. Ms. El Agizy made an opening statement in which she welcomed participants, and praised the ongoing collaboration between ESCWA and the League of Arab States in various sustainable development fields. She said that the main objective of the workshop was the exchange of experiences in preparing VNRs in Arab countries. The main theme of the workshop was technology as a means of implementing the 2030 Agenda, and as a tool for accelerating the achievement of all the SDGs. Technology had also been a key theme of the SDG Summit (New York, 18–19 September 2023), in which the League of Arab States had participated. She noted Arab efforts to coordinate activities linked to science and technology regionally, recalling that the Arab Follow-up Committee on Implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region had approved the creation of the Arab Network for Science and Technology for Sustainable Development. The Network aimed to create an e-portal for knowledge and information exchange, proposing projects, promoting partnerships and mobilizing resources for collective work, so as to disseminate science, knowledge and technology with the purpose of achieving the SDGs.

46. Ms. El Baba also welcomed participants, and thanked the League of Arab States for kindly hosting the workshop at its headquarters in Cairo. She said that having reached the halfway point to achieve the 2030 Agenda, Arab countries had only managed to complete 15 per cent of the desired objectives. However, the momentum and level of participation at the 2023 SDG Summit, organized by the United Nations, were proof of the commitment to the 2030 Agenda as the perfect road map to achieve sustainable and inclusive

development. She also mentioned the possibilities offered by technology, in general, and digital technology, in particular, in achieving the SDGs, especially if they were made available to all social groups. Such technologies would also contribute to bridging the digital divide in all its aspects. She expressed her hope that the workshop would result in practical steps to strengthen technology policies in Arab countries, and better link them to the national development path of the 2030 Agenda, in particular by adopting VNRs as an inclusive national follow-up mechanism that brought together all stakeholders and as a catalyst for action and partnerships.

C. Participants

47. The workshop was attended by 49 participants in person and virtually, including representatives from 16 Arab countries, namely Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. The workshop was also attended by participants from United Nations country teams and by the organizing parties, namely ESCWA, DESA and the League of Arab States (see list of participants in the annex). Women accounted for 47 per cent of participants.

D. Agenda

48. The Workshop included five main sessions, in addition to the opening session and closing remarks. The following is a summary of the agenda:

- (a) Opening statements;
- (b) Session 1: Peer exchange between 2023 and 2024 VNR countries;
- (c) Session 2: Technology as means of implementing the SDGs: challenges and opportunities;
- (d) Session 3: Halfway to 2030: the SDG Summit and way forward;
- (e) Session 4: Raising the visibility of technology in VNRs and engaging technology stakeholders;
- (f) Session 5: Going forward: utilizing the VNRs to drive the adoption of technology for the SDGs;
- (g) Closing remarks.

E. Documents

49. To access the list of documents, please visit the workshop's page on the ESCWA website at www.unescwa.org/events/9th-workshop-voluntary-national-reviews.

Annex*

List of participants

A. Arab countries

Algeria

Mr. Sami Boukelia
Deputy Director of Sustainable Development
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National
Community Abroad

Bahrain (online)

Ms. Dana Hamzah
Assistant Undersecretary for Sustainable
Development
Ministry of Sustainable Development

Ms. Joanne Elgood
Ministry of Sustainable Development

Mr. Saud Yusuf Tulefat
Ministry of Sustainable Development

Ms. Wesal Al Jalahma
Sustainable Development Specialist
Ministry of Sustainable Development

Comoros (online)

Mr. Mmadi Ali Youssouf
Chargé des programmes économiques
Direction de la planification stratégique et de la
population au sein du Commissariat Général au
plan (CGP)

Djibouti

Mr. Dini Ali Daoud
Chef de Service
Ministry of Finance

Egypt

Ms. Mona Esam Fayed
Assistant Minister for Sustainable Development
Ministry of Planning and Economic Development

Mr. Ahmed Helmy
Head of Spatial Data Unit
Ministry of Planning and Economic Development

Ms. Alia Khaled
Senior Policy Analyst, Sustainable
Development Unit
Ministry of Planning and Economic Development

Mr. Amr Farouk
Assistant President for Technological
Development
Academy of Scientific Research and Technology

Jordan

Ms. Lamia Alzoubi
Director of the Development Plans and Programs
Department
Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation

Lebanon

Ms. Ola Sidani
Economic Expert, SDG portfolio Lead
Office of the Prime Minister

Libya

Mr. Taher Belhassan
General Director of the Planning Institute
and Head of the Sustainable Development
Committee
Ministry of Planning

Mauritania

Mr. Mohamed Abderrahmane Deddi
Directeur Général adjoint des Stratégies
et Politiques de Développement
Ministry of Economy and Sustainable
Development

Oman

Mr. Talal Al Saadi
Director of the Development Plans Department
Ministry of Economy

* Issued as submitted.

Oman (*continued*)

Ms. Souad Ambusaidi
Planning and Follow-up Specialist
Ministry of Economy

Mr. Khalil Hanshi (*online*)
Adviser
Petroleum Development Oman

State of Palestine (*online*)

Mr. Mahmoud Ataya
Director General
Prime Minister's Office

Mr. Fadi Marjaneh
Head of e-Government
Ministry of Telecom and IT

Qatar

Ms. Wasmiah Aldhidah
First Secretary, Department of International
Cooperation
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ms. Amna Alsulaiti
Second Secretary, Department of Arab Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ms. Noor Alsada
Adviser, Department of African Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Mr. Sultan Al-Hanzab
Third Political Researcher
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Mr. Jamal Alyafei
Assistant Director of Strategic Planning
Planning and Statistics Authority

Ms. Salama Al-Basti
Third Eco-Development Planning Researcher
Planning and Statistics Authority

Saudi Arabia

Ms. Samah Albukhari
Monitoring and Reporting Expert for Sustainable
Development
Ministry of Economy and Planning

Somalia

Mr. Hassan Mohamed Ali
Director of International Organization
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International
Cooperation

Syrian Arab Republic

Mr. Refaat Hejazi
Advisor and SDG Coordinator, Planning
and International Cooperation Commission

Mr. Eyad Ali
Director of Macro Economics
Planning and International Cooperation
Commission

Yemen

Mr. Mohamed Al-Hawri
Deputy Minister
Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation

Mr. Omar Abdul Aziz Abdulghani Al-Aghbari
Deputy Assistant for International Cooperation
Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation

B. United Nations agencies and programmes

Economic and Social Commission for Western
Asia (ESCWA)

Mr. Mohamad Nawar Alawa
Regional Adviser on Technology for Development
Statistics, Information Society and Technology
Cluster

Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator
in Yemen

Mr. Olaf de Groot
Development Coordination Officer

United Nations Volunteers (*online*)

Mr. Juan Marroquin
Regional Integration Specialist
Headquarters in Bonn

United Nations Human Settlements Programme
(*online*)

Mr. Ahmad El-Atrash
Programme Officer for Urban Development

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the
Empowerment of Women (*online*)

Ms. Inas Margieh
Programme Coordinator

United Nations Global Compact (*online*)

Ms. Dana Khairallah
SDG Ambassador
Local network, Lebanon

Department of Economic and Social Affairs
(*online*)

Mr. Eric Olson
Senior Economic Affairs Officer,
Intergovernmental Policy and Review Branch,
Office of Intergovernmental Support and
Coordination for Sustainable Development

Office of the Special Coordinator for the Middle
East Peace Process (*online*)

Ms. Maysoon Jaber
Development Coordination Officer-Partnerships
and Development Finance

The United Nations Industrial Development
Organization (*online*)

Mr. Lassaad Ben Hassine
Country Representative
UNIDO Country Office in Tunisia

C. Participants from non-Arab countries

Switzerland (*online*)

Ms. Henrike Beckmann
Scientific Advisor to the Delegate of the Federal Council for the 2030 Agenda
Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

D. Organizing team

League of Arab States

Ms. Nada El Agizy
Director, Sustainable Development and
International Cooperation

Mr. Mohammad Maksoud Hasan
Legal Researcher
Department of Sustainable Development and
International Cooperation

Ms. Amal Khaled
Lead of the Arab Digital Platform Portfolio
Department of Sustainable Development and
International Cooperation

ESCWA, 2030 Agenda and SDG Coordination
Cluster

Ms. Jana Baba
Sustainable Development Officer

Ms. Hania Sabbidin Dimassi
Associate Programme Management Officer

Ms. Lara El-Khoury (*online*)
Senior Research Assistant

Ms. Sobhie Kabbarah
Administrative Assistant

Ms. Nadera El-Bizri (*online*)
Administrative Assistant