



Report

5th Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region Online, 20-21 October 2021

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the League of Arab States, organized the 5th Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region, held online on 20 and 21 October 2021.

In line with previous editions, the workshop aimed to promote dialogue and peer learning to improve the preparation of voluntary national reviews (VNRs) in Arab States. The workshop provided a space to share the experiences of the Arab States that submitted their reviews in 2021 and an opportunity to learn about the preparatory process for States preparing to submit their reviews in 2022. The workshop dealt with three topics: (a) improving data on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), (b) adopting evaluation mechanisms and tools to increase the effectiveness of VNRs and (c) the role of supreme audit institutions (SAIs) in VNRs.

Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1-2	3
<i>Chapter</i>		
I. Outcomes of the workshop	3	3
II. Summary of the sessions	4-41	4
A. Session 1: In-depth review of the 2021 Arab State VNRs: Challenges and lessons learned.....	4-11	4
B. Session 2: Preparations for the 2022 Arab State VNRs: Content and process	12-19	5
C. Session 3: Enhancing SDG data.....	20-26	7
D. Session 4: Towards more effective VNRs: Evaluation as a complement to monitoring	27-33	8
E. Session 5: Ensuring accountability: Role of National Supreme Audit Institutions in VNRs	34-41	10
III. Organization of work	42-46	11
A. Date and venue.....	42	11
B. Opening.....	43	11
C. Participants.....	44	12
D. Agenda	45	12
E. Documents	46	12
<i>Annex: List of participants</i>		13

Introduction

1. Since 2019, ESCWA has been organizing periodic workshops on voluntary national reviews (VNRs) to provide space for dialogue, knowledge-sharing and peer learning, at the request of its member States.^{1,2}
2. The fifth workshop was held online on 20 and 21 October 2021, during which Arab States that submitted their VNRs in 2021 shared their experiences and the States preparing to submit their reviews in 2022 presented their preparatory processes. The workshop dealt with three topics: (a) improving SDG data, (b) adopting evaluation mechanisms and tools to increase the effectiveness of VNRs, and (c) the role of supreme audit institutions in VNRs.

I. Outcomes of the workshop

3. The workshop included five main sessions as well as an opening session to introduce the workshop's objectives and expected results and provide an overview of the outcomes of the 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The main sessions were followed by a closing session in which a summary of the discussions and the results of the workshop were presented, the most important of which were the following:

(a) Work at the local level and cooperation with governorates and municipalities in the preparation of VNRs is emerging as a good and promising practice for monitoring local development work, supporting the national review process and developing local plans for implementing the SDGs or local priority goals. Additionally, monitoring at the local level allows for approaches to reduce inequality within a country and promotes bottom-up development work. A number of Arab States have taken innovative approaches in this regard, and it is important to share them with other Arab States so they can benefit from them;

(b) Arab States continue to expand stakeholder participation in the VNR process. Some innovative country experiences have sought to involve representatives of civil society, the private sector, parliament, local governments, national audit institutions, children, youth, women and people with special needs. They have made use of electronic and non-electronic tools for this purpose;

(c) Given the importance of data in measuring progress, evaluating trends and developing evidence-based policies, it is worth considering the experiences of States that have begun to adopt methodologies for providing data from new sources. The Arab States are invited to develop national monitoring and evaluation indicators that complement the international indicator framework and to facilitate the sharing and dissemination of data by updating the lists of focal points and enhancing coordination at the national, regional and international levels with all data collection and dissemination stakeholders, including United Nations custodian agencies;

(d) Arab States are making great efforts to provide a critical reading of their development status within their VNRs based on data. They are invited to redouble efforts in systematic evaluation linking sustainable development programmes, the performance of institutions and agencies and the use of resources, in order to reach the desired results and effects;

(e) SAIs can play a supporting role as strategic partners in the process of preparing VNRs and following up on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by enhancing efficiency, effectiveness and transparency, and establishing a culture of accountability and evaluation. In addition, all components of national monitoring and evaluation systems need to be linked to ensure consistency and maximum benefit;

¹ For more information regarding workshops on VNRs held so far, visit: <https://www.unescwa.org/2030-vmn>.

² Sixth meeting of the ESCWA Executive Committee (Marrakesh, 15-16 June 2019), <https://www.unescwa.org/events/executive-committee-6th-meeting>.

(f) The Arab region is experiencing significant progress in efforts to integrate the SDGs and their indicators into existing or planned surveys, as well as in reviews of national plans or the preparation of new ones, which represent a serious opportunity to improve the content of VNRs.

II. Summary of the sessions

A. Session 1: In-depth review of the 2021 Arab State VNRs: Challenges and lessons learned

4. The first session dealt with the experiences of States that submitted VNRs in 2021, with presentations focusing on the general approach followed, new challenges compared to previous experiences and how they were dealt with and the most prominent findings of the review, which would be the subject of future follow-up.

5. Mr. Belgacem Ayed, Chair of the Committee on Sectoral and Regional Development at the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Investment Support of Tunisia, presented the Tunisian experience in preparing the second VNR for 2021. The process included a review of priorities, the development of a platform for consultation on the SDGs, the establishment of a statistical database and **enhanced consultation** with civil society, youth representatives, persons with special needs, women entrepreneurs, members of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People of Tunisia, the Children's Parliament and mayors. The emerging challenges were linked to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable development gains, the availability of updated and detailed data and the localization of goals at the local level. Among the most prominent prospects indicated by the 2021 review was the preparation for the 2024 general census, which would take into account some indicators of the 2030 Agenda, and work to shape the directions of the next ten-year strategy, taking into account the SDGs.

6. Ms. Maha AlRawi, Director General of the Human Development Division at the Ministry of Planning of Iraq, presented the experience of Iraq in preparing the second VNR for 2021. The second review relied on monitoring at the national and local levels, while the first review for 2019 had been conducted at the national level only. That process had contributed to the promotion of sustainable development at the local level, administrative decentralization and prospects for transition to fiscal decentralization. **The review addressed the performance of the governorates through two indices**, the first of which measured development achievement and the second the level of development perseverance. The most prominent challenges were related to data availability and stakeholder engagement, which were addressed through the establishment of focus groups, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, which had affected the consultation process and which had been addressed through the use of electronic platforms. The most important results of the review included highlighting the performance of the governorates, stimulating positive competition between them, and promoting the preparation of local plans. There was also a focus on the role of youth in change and policymaking, the importance of international cooperation, especially in the face of the pandemic, and the joint responsibility of development partners.

7. Mr. Jamal Alyafei, Assistant Director at the Department of Strategic Planning of the Planning and Statistics Authority of Qatar, discussed the experience of Qatar in preparing the third VNR for 2021. Prior to preparing the VNR, the Authority had performed a number of activities including a review of the Economic and Social Council guidance and the DESA handbook for the preparation of VNRs, the identification of good practices (such as Australia and Finland), participation in regional capacity-building workshops, and the review of regional and international reports. Additionally, a road map and action plan had been developed to implement the review.

8. To promote partnership at the Authority level, an integrated working group had been established, including representatives from the Departments of Strategic Planning, Statistics and Public Relations, to facilitate communication within different working groups distributed according to objectives, tasks and responsibilities, while continuing cooperation with the various departments of the Authority. In order to

involve the various agencies, a form was sent to more than 30 parties to request data on progress in implementing their respective objectives, as well as in achieving a sustainable and robust recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, while identifying relevant plans, policies, programmes, projects and initiatives. Coordination and cooperation also took place with the Advisory Statistics Committee, which included actors from the Government, the private sector, civil society and academia, and the first draft had been presented to them for their feedback and guidance.

9. Activities undertaken after the review included the development of a draft road map and action plan for activities to be implemented, building on the development phase of the third National Development Strategy (2023-2027), which would take into account existing challenges and opportunities and align the strategy with the SDGs. A new council of ministers had been formed and new ministries had been established which were expected to play an important role in following up on the implementation of the goals. The major challenges were related to the lack of data in administrative records or the need to update them. Additionally, cooperation and coordination with the relevant agencies continued to provide and update data, and specialized surveys were needed to extract indicators such as the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey. Among the achievements that would contribute to the establishment of a high-quality national statistical system were the adoption of the National Framework of Statistical Data Quality (NFSHQ), which constitutes a unified standard for all agencies, and the establishment of a platform (monitor) that electronically connects data producers to facilitate the process of collecting and completing the required data electronically by authorized persons in the concerned parties.

10. Ms. Mona Issam Fayed, Director of the Sustainable Development Unit at the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development of Egypt, presented the experience of Egypt in preparing the third VNR for 2021. In nationalizing the SDGs, Egypt sought to address geographical disparities by adopting a bottom-up approach. **Efforts were being made to issue 27 reports on local development in the governorates** with the aim of following up on performance, providing data, monitoring gaps and reaching appropriate recommendations, in addition to issuing a competitiveness index in the governorates. The most important challenges in this regard included those related to data, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as communication and consultation difficulties caused by the pandemic. To address these challenges, online consultations were conducted, an input model was developed to monitor results and link them to the SDGs and an online platform was established to facilitate continuous communication and collect stakeholder input. The statistics collection process relied on studies on the pandemic's impact on the SDGs and data issued by State actors and the Central Statistical Organization. One good practice was the establishment of an observatory to monitor responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and their linkage to the SDGs.

11. The discussions addressed the issue of cooperation with various stakeholders, in particular the experience of Tunisia with the Children's Parliament, as well as the experience in Iraq of cooperation with the private sector, which was an active partner in the 2021 report, despite the prevailing impression that sustainable development was the sole responsibility of the Government whereas in fact it was a multi-stakeholder responsibility. Participants asked questions about the experience of Qatar in using surveys to collect additional information and data. The discussion also turned to the experience of Egypt in bridging the digital divide, as it was considered an accelerator for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The governorate competitiveness index under development in Egypt was discussed, and the data used to calculate it were still under consideration. This index aimed to improve productivity and develop evidence-based policies. The participants also discussed the observatory developed by the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development of Egypt to track the policies and actions by the Government to confront the COVID-19 pandemic.

B. Session 2: Preparations for the 2022 Arab State VNRs: Content and process

12. The second session was devoted to presenting the preparations of the Arab States that intended to submit their VNRs in 2022 and the main issues that would be focused on in the review.

13. Mr. Joop Theunissen, Deputy Chief of the Intergovernmental Policy and Review Branch of the Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination of DESA, made a presentation in which he indicated that globally, most States had already submitted at least one VNR. Forty-six States, including six Arab States, were expected to submit their reviews in July 2022, bringing the total number of submitted reviews to 186, some for the first time and others for the second or third time. According to Mr. Theunissen, the HLPF had been scheduled for 5-15 July 2022, and the mechanism for holding it (online or in-person) had not yet been determined. The States that would present their review for the first time would be given 30 minutes to do so, while States that were doing so for the second or third time would be given a limit of 25 minutes. May 2022 was also set as the date for the submission of key messages from the reviews and June 2022 as the date for the submission of full reports. In conclusion, Mr. Theunissen recalled the handbook for the preparation of VNRs issued each year by DESA, which was translated and published by ESCWA in Arabic, and encouraged States to use it as a guide in the preparation of national reviews.

14. Mr. Dini Daoud, Director at the Ministry of Finance and Economy of Djibouti, explained the general framework of preparations for Djibouti's first VNR. Djibouti had relevant experience in "Djibouti Vision 2035", which was adopted in 2014 as a new long-term development strategy whose first phase had been activated in 2015-2019 and which had focused on accelerating growth and creating job opportunities.

15. The VNR process was being carried out in four stages: (a) raising stakeholder awareness and strengthening the national leadership of the plan, conducting campaigns and seminars on the SDGs at various levels, particularly at the level of ministries and regions, (b) aligning national goals with the SDGs, where the responsibility of each ministry or entity for one or more SDGs was determined based on its competence, outreach, implementation, monitoring and evaluation programmes, (c) adoption of a results framework for the monitoring and evaluation of SDG progress, to be integrated into the overall results framework of the national plan and (d) strengthening the statistical and integrated monitoring and evaluation capabilities of the national plan as well as the SDGs. As VNR coordinator, the Ministry of Finance and Economy was working to mobilize resources to finance the implementation of the SDGs and promote the participation of civil society and the private sector. Overall, the VNR would review the progress in the implementation of all the SDGs, in particular goals 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17, which were the focus of the 2022 HLPF.

16. Mr. Abdirahman Mohamed Sheikh Abdi, SDG Coordinator at the National Bureau of Statistics of Somalia, reviewed the Bureau's activities as the coordinating body for the first VNR process. The Bureau was **organizing national workshops for all stakeholders** for consultation and discussion. The technical cooperation between the Bureau and ESCWA was to be commended for establishing a statistical platform for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the SDGs at the national level. The main challenges facing the review process, as well as sustainable development in general, were the lack of technical resources. The VNR would focus on themes related to poverty reduction and social protection programmes.

17. Ms. Rasha Dabbouri, head of the Sustainable Development Division of the Development Plans and Programs Department at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation of Jordan, discussed her country's preparations for the second VNR in 2022. She stressed that Jordan remained committed to the 2030 Agenda and the principle of leaving no one behind, and that the results of the first report and an analysis of progress since 2017 would be the basis for the second review. The **launch of the national database** with technical assistance from ESCWA contributed to providing data for 60 per cent of indicators. Jordan continued to implement the road map to achieve the 2030 Agenda in coordination with all State actors, and among the ongoing steps was the integration of the SDGs into the Indicative Executive Plan 2021-2024 and a series of consultations with all concerned parties. The principal challenges were those relating to data, activating the principle of partnership and the COVID-19 crisis, given the need to address its repercussions even with limited resources. However, notable efforts had been made to activate partnerships with the private sector. The second VNR was expected to address the axes of the Indicative Executive Plan, including structural reforms, the fight against corruption, the transition to the digital and green economy and the improvement of social services.

18. Ms. Suhair Furh, Assistant Inspector of Poverty and Sustainable Development at the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning of Sudan, discussed her country's preparations for the second VNR for 2022, on behalf of Mr. Amin Saleh Yassin, Acting Undersecretary for Economic Planning. Structural changes were taking place in the management of the 2030 Agenda and the follow-up and review that were now the responsibility of the Ministry of Finance and Planning, having formerly been under entrusted to the National Population Council. The current institutional structure included horizontal cooperation between ministries and vertical partnership with local governments (States) and non-governmental parties. The Sudan had identified economic growth and peace as priorities for implementation and for the next review. There was consistency between the overall strategy for poverty reduction (2021-2023) and the three-year program for stability and economic development on the one hand and the SDGs on the other. The challenges being addressed notably included the lack of data, weak capacity and the absence of a unified follow-up and evaluation framework. The national context of the 2022 review was more favourable than that of the 2019 review, specifically the democratic, peaceful and economic transformations that the Sudan was witnessing.

19. Arab States were facing common challenges in preparing VNRs, both during the first experience and subsequent experiences. The speakers unanimously agreed that the provision of high-quality data remained the biggest challenge facing all States in the region, in addition to aligning the SDGs with national goals and working to monitor progress in achieving them.

C. Session 3: Enhancing SDG data

20. The third session reviewed the tools and platforms developed by ESCWA and the Arab States with the aim of providing as much high-quality and reliable data as possible and included presentations of the experiences of a number of Arab national statistical offices.

21. Ms. Neda Jafar, Head of the Statistical Policies and Coordination Unit at ESCWA, made a presentation titled "Improving SDG data dissemination and reporting" in which she addressed the current status of data monitoring, collection, processing and utilization mechanisms. ESCWA served as a link between the Statistical Committee and Arab States to help them measure progress in achieving the national SDGs, use new and innovative data methodologies and sources, implement activities to enhance the ability of member States to produce, use and disseminate official statistics, and provide a regional platform for sharing good statistical expertise and practices. ESCWA also supported States in establishing national reporting platforms, and the Arab **SDG Monitor** aimed to provide updated information on the statistical and institutional capacities of each country and track both the SDGs and their indicators. National statistical offices were directly responsible for publishing the data on the indicators of the 2030 Agenda, and thus providing the VNR with high-quality data. She stressed the need for these offices to coordinate with all relevant data stakeholders and the specific focal points of each indicator in the relevant ministries or institutions and the importance of auditing all data before publishing them.

22. Ms. Fatema Ahmed Ebrahim Salem, Statistician in the SDGs Section at the Population and Demographic Statistics Directorate of the Information and e-Government Authority of Bahrain, presented her country's experience in improving SDG data, praising the close cooperation between the Authority and ESCWA since the beginning of 2021, as periodic meetings had contributed to verifying the data source for each indicator, the calculation method and the measurement unit. One of the most important outcomes of this cooperation was increased quality of the data posted on the Bahraini platform, which would also be published on the United Nations SDGs platform. Work was underway to compare the indicators available nationally with those available at the United Nations, in order to unify the data on the two platforms. As for **survey-based indicators**, a list of surveys required for inclusion in the national survey plan had been prepared.

23. Cooperation with ESCWA had increased data flow between February 2020 and October 2021 by 32.6 per cent. Also notable was the national SDGs website, which had been created to monitor various sustainable development indicators and other relevant indicators and to be a reference site for all members of society and international organizations. Regarding coordination frameworks, the National Information and Population

Committee, which included representatives from all State actors, was responsible for monitoring the implementation of the SDGs and linking them to the Government's Action Plan and Bahrain Vision 2030. The Information and e-Government Authority coordinated with State actors to monitor progress in the implementation of the SDGs and to provide statistics and information to international organizations.

24. Ms. Magda Aljouli, Head of the SDG Section at the Central Bureau of Statistics of Sudan, noted the two reports prepared by the State to analyse the data gap (one in 2017 and the other in 2019) and indicated that the third report was under preparation. She stressed that the reports identified the **responsibility of stakeholders** to provide data for each SDG indicator and pointed to the significant progress in the data provision percentage between the two reports (from 39 per cent in 2017 to 45 per cent in 2019). ESCWA had provided valuable support to the Sudan since October 2020, particularly in establishing an official electronic data platform for the SDGs. Existing coordination mechanisms between the Central Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning were also reviewed, as they were the national focal point of the 2030 Agenda, together with national statistical system partners that provided data from administrative records. Ms. Aljouli concluded her presentation by referring to the road map drawn up by the Central Bureau of Statistics to provide updated data that would help decision makers develop evidence-based plans and policies.

25. Mr. Sharmarke Mohamed Farah, Director General of the National Bureau of Statistics of Somalia, presented the Bureau's efforts with the support of ESCWA in providing the data required for the preparation of the first VNR in 2022, noting data availability for at least one indicator for each of the SDGs. Somalia was committed to aligning the National Development Plan with the SDGs and bridging statistical gaps **through assistive surveys**. Mr. Farah referred to efforts to involve various stakeholders in the VNR preparation process, particularly civil society and the private sector. With regard to the challenges, Mr. Farah drew attention to the limited national statistical capacity and financial resources, in addition to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had hampered the implementation of planned initiatives. As for good practices and lessons learned to address these challenges, Somalia had enjoyed close cooperation with United Nations agencies and other country-level organizations in data collection, joint planning to maximize available resources and the use of electronic meetings during the pandemic.

26. The discussion addressed the issue of existing cooperation protocols between statistical agencies and international organizations, as well as initiatives aimed at strengthening States' capacity to manage and share data collection, which was a major challenge at the national level and must be addressed to prepare effective VNRs and formulate evidence-based and reliable data policies in order to implement the SDGs.

D. Session 4: Towards more effective VNRs: Evaluation as a complement to monitoring

27. The fourth session discussed evaluation as a complement to monitoring and its importance in increasing the usefulness of VNRs. A number of successful international experiences in this field were presented.

28. Ms. Aranzazu Guillan Montero, Senior Governance and Public Administration Officer at DESA, made a presentation on using evaluation as a tool to support the implementation of the SDGs and ensure accountability, highlighting some of the good practices identified in the 2021 World Public Sector Report. Drawing on examples from different States outside the Arab region, Ms. Montero touched on the significant challenges in **linking the follow-up and review of the implementation of the SDGs to other national monitoring and accountability processes**, and how they could be used to guide policymaking and provide opportunities for stakeholder engagement. Parliaments, SAIs and non-State actors all had important roles in **providing independent evaluations on the implementation of the SDGs and in holding Governments accountable** in this regard.

29. Regular reporting to parliaments was generally limited and parliaments had adopted different institutional frameworks for legislative oversight of the SDGs. In most States, SAIs had not been formally integrated into the SDG monitoring and review systems, but through their audits they had provided valuable

information about the institutional mechanisms of the SDGs and the performance of monitoring and review systems. Non-State actors varied in the degree to which they participated in providing independent evaluations on the implementation of the SDGs, in addition to preparing parallel reports (shadow reports) in some States or contributing to the preparation of VNRs. A cumulative approach must be adopted that included monitoring and evaluating the SDGs, linking the monitoring and evaluation systems for the SDGs with national monitoring and evaluation systems, setting clear implementation schedules and providing the necessary resources, developing a mechanism to involve audit institutions and State-actors in evaluation processes and promoting the systematic use of results in policymaking processes by aligning monitoring and evaluation processes with different planning cycles to ensure the timely availability of information.

30. Mr. Adrián Moreira Muñoz, Advisor to the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy, Costa Rica, presented his country's experience in evaluating development programmes and their contribution to achieving the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. It was important to have clear indicators and good administrative information for monitoring and evaluation, and development plans needed to be aligned with national indicators to assess progress in achieving the SDGs. Evaluation was an essential element to help determine whether development programmes were achieving the transformational change sought in the 2030 Agenda. Among the **different types of evaluations**, Costa Rica had experience with assessing the design of development programmes, timelines, implementation processes, results and impacts. It had also assessed the extent to which these programmes had succeeded in achieving specific targets and objectives of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda related to policy coherence and leaving no one behind. It had also strengthened the participatory approach to evaluations to ensure that different stakeholders and not only public institutions contributed to the delivery and receipt of services.

31. Mr. Sami Pirkkala, Secretary General of the National Sustainable Development Commission of Finland, presented his country's experience in preparing an independent evaluation of the implementation of the SDGs. Finland was committed to the 2030 Agenda and the evaluation was timed in conjunction with the electoral and political cycle, **allowing its results to be used in the preparation of the Government's policy programme**. Sustainability work in Finland was divided between the two pillars of Government and society as a whole, and each side had its own institutional mechanisms. On the topic of the evaluation process, the decision to evaluate the national sustainability policy during 2018-2019 and to publish its results and recommendations in the run-up to the parliamentary elections and the preparation of the Government's programme had been included in the National Agenda 2030 Implementation Plan prepared in 2017, which was the main document in Finland pertaining to the 2030 Agenda. The evaluation, which was prepared on a participatory basis, allowed for ongoing discussions between the evaluation team, ministries and other stakeholders about questions to be asked and evaluation results. The alignment of planning and evaluation processes had also enabled the Government's current programme to include many of the issues recommended by the evaluation and enabled resulting information to be used in preparing the VNR for 2020. Finland had a regular cycle of evaluations on the implementation of the SDGs, with a new evaluation during 2022-2023 included in the National Agenda 2030 Implementation Plan, published in October 2020.

32. Ms. Socorro Prous, Deputy Director of Studies and Analysis at the Secretariat of State for the 2030 Agenda of Spain, gave a presentation on her country's experience. The Government of Spain was committed at the highest level to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and a suitable administrative structure had been established, together with an action plan in 2018, which was included in the first VNR. The action plan was adopted as a transitional plan pending the development of a sustainable development strategy, which was presented in 2021 in the second VNR. The strategy set out the actions required in the medium and long term to achieve the SDGs and ensure that no one was left behind, and included an ambitious framework for monitoring and evaluating progress and identifying the reforms necessary to achieve the national goals and indicators developed in close cooperation with the National Statistical Institute. Entities at the local level and in autonomous regions had participated in formulating the strategy and preparing progress reports on its implementation and were represented in the administrative structure of the 2030 Agenda. The Spanish Parliament was also represented, which was important given its legislative and oversight role. A comprehensive evaluation would be carried out in 2024 to determine the extent of adherence to the strategy

and the adjustments needed to support its implementation. She concluded by noting the efforts made since 2019 to **align the budget with the 2030 Agenda** and the first alignment report issued in 2021.

33. The discussion focused on how to properly manage the evaluation process and balance the expansion of government and non-government stakeholder participation on the one hand and efficiency on the other. Participants noted the importance of **establishing a structure and budget for evaluations** to conduct extensive consultations with stakeholders and agreeing on a composition representing all sectors, as well as the importance of gradually expanding participation and sharing responsibilities in implementing evaluations and using the results from them. Civil society could play a role in pressuring Governments to implement the recommendations issued by the entities in charge of evaluation processes. On the topic of the selection of indicators, national indicators needed to be aligned with international frameworks with synergy between multiple development plans. It may be possible to link evaluations to specific or multiple objectives and indicators of the SDGs and address them at the same time with indicators from other development plans.

E. Session 5: Ensuring accountability: Role of National Supreme Audit Institutions in VNRs

34. The fifth session highlighted the role of the SAIs in the Arab States and their efforts in following up on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and monitoring progress.

35. Mr. Najeeb Al Qattari, Secretary General of the Arab Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (ARABOSAI), presented the organization's role in supporting Arab States in implementing the SDGs by promoting efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability. The organization was eager to present success stories in this area and to examine the most important challenges and difficulties faced by member agencies in overseeing VNRs, which were one of the most prominent means of demonstrating the State's sustainable development achievements. The organization was prioritizing the achievement of the SDGs through their inclusion in its plans and strategies.

36. Mr. Mohammed Ben Hamdan Ben Saeed Ben Hamad Al Jabiri, Audit Expert at the State Audit and Administrative Institution of Oman, discussed the role of SAIs in following up and reviewing the 2030 Agenda, in four key areas identified by the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI): (a) assessing the readiness of governments to achieve the SDGs, (b) monitoring performance in the implementation of these goals, (c) contributing to the achievement of SDG 16 and (d) undertaking an exemplary role in transparency and accountability in the implementation of its tasks.

37. The ARABOSAI Sustainable Development Oversight Committee provided evidence and set standards for auditing SDGs. VNRs needed to include reliable and useful data as a transparent means of expressing the State's commitment to the 2030 Agenda. However, States faced obstacles in implementing the SDGs, but **SAIs could add value** by making recommendations on integrating the goals into national plans, identifying responsibilities and resources and developing national statistical systems. States could consider the possibility of presenting their VNRs to national audit institutions to verify the data before presenting them to the HLPF in New York, and this procedure could be included in the United Nations Handbook for the Preparation of VNRs.

38. Mr. Ali Khodeir Samir, Director of Studies at the Federal Board of Supreme Audit of Iraq, presented the challenges and lessons learned in the audits conducted by the Board in its endeavours to implement the SDGs. One example was the audit of SDG 6 on water led by the Ministry of Water Resources and the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works. As for the recommendations' follow-up mechanism, **a period of 90 days had been set** to respond to the conclusions of the reports issued by SAI, provide the concerned agencies with a practical plan to implement the recommendations, inform the Bureau and move on to the next stages. Among the most prominent difficulties and challenges facing the implementation of the recommendations was the issue of funding, which was hampered by the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, the weak capacities and the delay in issuing legislations. The most important lessons learned were the application of

programme and policy-based auditing methodology, the diagnosis of policies and systems and the management of operations, the detection of negative and positive deviations, the development of proposals to address deviations and over-expenditures, the establishment of sound policies to address any future similar situations and effective and continuous communication with key stakeholders.

39. Mr. Ali Alhazeem, Auditor at the State Audit Bureau of Kuwait, presented the experience of the Bureau, which was participating as an observer in the Steering Committee formed in 2017 to follow up on the SDGs. Four approaches had been identified, the first of which focused on SDG 16. Accordingly, the Audit Bureau had taken several steps, including the preparation of a road map by the training department to track methods and mechanisms for educating and building the capacities of the auditors, and then the formation of a specialized team from the Bureau for effective and comprehensive oversight. The Bureau had **achieved the objectives of raising awareness and professional training in auditing the SDGs**. It engaged in active partnerships with Arab and international organizations, had been awarded the chairmanship of the Oversight Committee on the SDGs of the Asian Organization of SAIs and had participated in the organization's twelfth study, on auditing the SDGs using big data. After submitting the first VNR of Kuwait in 2019, the Audit Bureau had prepared a detailed report with notes on the review, and a database for SDGs had been established through the Bureau's network.

40. Mr. Assem Louka, Head of Sector of the Accountability State Authority of Egypt, presented his country's experience. Egypt had encountered challenges, opportunities and efforts in preparing the 2018 VNR, and a series of workshops had been held with stakeholders to reflect the tremendous efforts made by all parties for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The 2018 VNR identified four challenges in achieving the 2030 Agenda: data, funding, governance and population growth. The Egyptian Government had taken measures to meet these challenges and update Egypt Vision 2030 through a participatory approach, paying great attention to localizing the SDGs at the governorate level to address geographical disparities, achieve inclusive growth and leave no one behind through the "Decent Life" initiative. The Authority played an oversight role in verifying the extent to which programmes achieved their objectives, the levels of achievement reached and the **compliance with relevant regulations and laws**. It also evaluated the challenges to the implementation process, examined opportunities and proposed appropriate solutions and recommendations to get on track towards achieving the SDGs.

41. The discussion addressed the issue of linking audit of preparedness reports with the VNR process. The importance of the role of SAIs and the ARABOSAI in the VNR process was emphasized, not only as an observer, but as a strategic partner that provided guidance and observations to assist those involved in the reporting process and that indirectly reviewed reports for data verification and documentation. It was suggested that the United Nations issue recommendations on strengthening the role of SAIs in the review process, and that oversight be applied to indicators and not only to the VNR preparation process.

III. Organization of work

A. Date and venue

42. The 2030 Agenda and SDG Coordination Cluster at ESCWA, in partnership with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the League of Arab States (LAS), organized the Fifth Workshop on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region, which was held online on 20 and 21 October 2021.

B. Opening

43. The workshop opened in the afternoon of Wednesday, 20 October 2021. Ms. Irena Zubcevic, Chief of the Intergovernmental Policy and Review Branch at the Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development at DESA; Ms. Nada El Agizy, Director of the Sustainable Development and International Cooperation at LAS; Ms. Maisaa Youssef, Officer in Charge of the 2030 Agenda and SDG

Coordination Cluster at ESCWA, delivered welcoming remarks, in which they stressed the commitment to the partnership between the three actors in organizing this series of regional workshops. VNRs provide space for Arab States to share knowledge, learn from peers and give an opportunity to promote dialogue and cooperation between States in order to improve reviews in the Arab region. In her speech, Ms. Zubcevic also provided an overview of the results of the 2021 HLPF on Sustainable Development.

C. Participants

44. The workshop was attended by 180 participants, including representatives from 14 Arab States: Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Somalia, the Sudan and Tunisia. Participants from national audit institutions, ARABOSAI, civil society organizations, the offices of United Nations resident coordinators and some United Nations agencies in a number of Arab States, representatives from Costa Rica, Finland and Spain, as well as co-organizers of the workshop, i.e. ESCWA, DESA and LAS (list of participants), also attended the workshop. Women accounted for 54 per cent of participants.

D. Agenda

45. A summary of the agenda is provided below:

- (a) Opening statements;
- (b) Session 1: In-depth review of the 2021 Arab State VNRs: Challenges and lessons learned;
- (c) Session 2: Preparations for the 2022 Arab State VNRs: Content and process;
- (d) Session 3: Enhancing SDG data;
- (e) Session 4: Beyond monitoring: Evaluation for more effective VNRs;
- (f) Session 5: Ensuring accountability: Role of National Supreme Audit Institutions in VNRs;
- (g) Concluding remarks.

E. Documents

46. To view the list of documents, please visit the ESCWA website, <https://www.unescwa.org/events/5th-workshop-voluntary-national-reviews-arab-region>.

Annex*

List of participants

A. Arab States

Bahrain

Ms. Fatema Ahmed Ebrahim Salem
Statistician in the SDG Section
Population and Demographic Statistics Directorate
Information and e-Government Authority

Djibouti

Mr. Dini Ali Daoud
Director of the Programming and Evaluation
Department
Ministry of Economy

Egypt

Ms. Mona Issam Fayed
Director of the Sustainable Development Unit
Ministry of Planning and Economic Development

Ms. Lauren Habib
Senior policy analyst, Sustainable Development
Unit
Ministry of Planning and Economic Development

Iraq

Ms. Maha AlRawi
Director General of the Human Development
Division
Ministry of Planning of Iraq

Ms. Baan Alogaili
Expert
Ministry of Planning of Iraq

Ms. Khawla Mohammed
Ministry of Planning of Iraq

Ms. Zainab Tariq
Ministry of Planning of Iraq

Mr. Saher Ogaili
Ministry of Planning of Iraq

Mr. Muhammed Al Sayed
Ministry of Planning of Iraq

Ms. Hala Hadi
Ministry of Planning of Iraq

Ms. Wejdan Al-Shammari
Regional and Local Development Directorate
Ministry of Planning of Iraq

Jordan

Ms. Lamia Al-Zou'bi
Director of the Development Plans and Programs
Department
Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation

Ms. Rasha Dabbouri
Head of the Sustainable Development Division
Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation

Mr. Mohammad Khalaf
Director of the Sustainable Development Unit
Department of Statistics

Mr. Mohammad Ayasrah
Statistician
Department of Statistics

Lebanon

Ms Ola Mohammad Sidani
Economic Expert/SDGs Advisor
Presidency of the Council of Ministers/National
Commission for Sustainable Development Goals

Libya

Mr. Taher Belhassan
Head of the Sustainable Development Committee
Ministry of Planning

Mr. Saber Ghaddoura
Member of the Sustainable Development
Committee
Ministry of Planning

Morocco

Mr. Jamal Ait Mouha
Head of Social Programs Division
High Commission for Planning

Morocco (continued)

Mr. Mohammed Maktit
Chief, Division of Studies and Planning
Environmental sector

Oman

Ms. Intisar bint Abdullah bin Mubarak Al-Wahaibi
Director General of Development Planning
Ministry of Economy

Ms. Muna Al-Jabri
Head of the Directorate of Support and Evaluation
of Economic Sectors
Ministry of Economy

Ms. Hanadi Al Mahdhuri
Economic Affairs Analyst
Ministry of Economy

Ms. Nadia bint Rashid Al Shukaili
Human Development Directorate
Ministry of Economy

Ms. Suuad Ambusaidi
Ministry of Economy

The State of Palestine

Mr. Mustafa Khawaja
General Director of Statistical Monitoring
Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

Qatar

Mr. Jamal Alyafei
Assistant Director
Planning and Statistics Authority

Somalia

Mr. Sharmarke Mohamed Farah
Director General
National Bureau of Statistics

Mr. Abdirahman Sheikh Abdi
SDGs Coordinator
National Bureau of Statistics

Mr. Abdulrazak Karie
Demographic Analyst
National Bureau of Statistics

Mr. Ahmed Ismail
Somalia National Bureau of Statistics

Sudan

Ms. Sameera Ahmed
Assistant Director of Planning
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific
Research

Mr. Omsalama Elamin
Director of Statistics and Educational Planning
Ministry of Education

Ms. Ekhlas Al-Amin
Director
Ministry of Trade and Supply

Ms. Manal Hassan
Director
Ministry of Social Development

Mr. Abdelkhalig Abdellateef Widaatall Malik
Director of the Planning and Policy Unit
Ministry of Federal Government

Ms. Alawia Abdel Hamid
Director of Administrative Development & Quality
Unit
Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources

Mr. Tayseer Fadl Al-Mawla
Engineer
Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources

Ms. Mona Mohamed
Director of Planning and Evaluation Department
Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation

Ms. Amira Ali
Head of Labour Market Database Section
Ministry of Labour and Administrative Reform

Sakina Mohamed Khair
Head of the Social Development Sector
Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning

Mr. Mohammed Abdelaziz Eltaher
Financial Inspector
Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning

Sudan (continued)

Ms. Suhair Furch
Assistant Inspector
Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning

Ms. Ikhlas Abdel Radi
First-class inspector
Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning

Ms. Alaa Abdel Halim Al-Hassan
Senior inspector
Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning

Ms. Intisar Ibrahim Haj Al-Tom
Assistant Director
Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning

Ms. Noha Taha
Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning

Ms. Magda Mohamed Aljouli Hamad
Head of SDG Section and National Focal Point
Central Bureau of Statistics

Ms. Wisal Hussein Abdullah
Secretary General
National Population Council

Mr. Abdelrahman Alkhalifa
Director of the Research and Information
Department
The Higher Council for Environment and Natural
Resources

Ms. Azza Ahmed Al-Tayeb
Environmental Inspector
The Higher Council for Environment and Natural
Resources

Tunisia

Mr. Belgacem Ayed
Chairman of the Committee on Sectoral and
Regional Development
Ministry of Economy, Finance and Investment
Support

Ms. Mbarka Bint Hassan Taleb
Director-General
Ministry of Economy, Finance and Investment
Support

Ms. Ahlem Bouchiba
Deputy Director
Ministry of Economy, Finance and Investment
Support

Mr. Mohamed Maher Meddeb
Deputy Director
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Migration and
Tunisians Abroad

B. Non-Arab States

Costa Rica

Mr. Adrián Moreira Muñoz
Advisor
Ministerial Office

Finland

Mr. Sami Pirkkala
Secretary General
National Commission on Sustainable Development

Spain

Ms. Socorro Prous
Deputy Director of Studies and Analysis
Secretariat of State for the 2030 Agenda

C. Programmes and agencies of the United Nations

International Organization for Migration

Ms. Christina Ostebo
Jordan

Mr. Niklas Emond
Jordan

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA)

Ms. Aranzazu Guillan Montero
Senior Governance and Public Administration
Officer

United Nations Environment Programme

Ms. Sabine Sakr
Regional Development Coordinator
Bahrain

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Mr. Vacih Davalibi
Jordan

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Ms. Neda Jafar
Head of the Statistical Policies and Coordination
Unit

Mr. Joaquin Salido Marcos
Associate Programme Management Officer

Ms. Nadera Bizri
Technical Cooperation Assistant

Ms. Rita Wehbe
Economic Affairs Assistant

Ms. Araz Nachalian
Economic Affairs Assistant

United Nations Population Fund

Mr. Raed Zahrawi
Jordan

United Nations Human Settlements Programme

Mr. Luis Herrera
Mexico

Resident Coordinator Office

Mr. Raidan Al-Saqqaf
United Arab Emirates

Mr. Tawfiq Alnehlawi
Reporting Officer, Data Management and Results
Monitoring
Syrian Arab Republic

Mr. Nicolas Guinard
Team leader
Djibouti

Mr. Danon Gnezale
Economist
Djibouti

Mr. Eric Overfest
Djibouti

Mr. Ahmed Abdi
Reporting Officer, Data Management and Results
Monitoring
Somalia

Mr. Moussa Elimane Sall
Responsible for partnership and mobilization of
development resources
Mauritania

Ms. Nazia Chothia
Mauritania

Ms. Sarah Weihermüller
Germany

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

Ms Hana Uraidi
Jordan

Mr. Vickram Chhetri
Jordan

D. Governmental and non-governmental organizations

Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs)

Mr. Najeeb Al Qattari
Secretary-General of ARABOSAI
Tunisia

Mr. Mongi Hammami
State Undersecretary/General Supervisor
The Court of Accounts of Tunisia

Mr. Hossam El Din El Kazzi
Judge of the Court of Accounts of Tunisia
General Secretariat of ARABOSAI (tasked with)
Tunisia

Ms. Kaouthar Jaafar
Judge
The Court of Accounts of Tunisia

Mr. Ziad Al Kateeb
Assistant Director of Studies
Syrian Arab Republic

Ms. Taghrid Alam
Director of Public Relations, Training and
Rehabilitation
Syrian Arab Republic

Ms. Rajaa Mohammed
Audit Director
National Audit Chamber
Sudan

Ms. Rasha Jubara
Performance Audit
National Audit Chamber
Sudan

Mr. Ali Khodeir Samir
Director-General of the Technical Studies and
Research Unit
Federal Board of Supreme Audit
Iraq

Mr. Mohammed Ben Hamdan Ben Saeed Ben
Hamad Al Jabiri
Audit expert
Oman

Mr. Saleh Musleh
Director-General of Social and Cultural Services
Oversight
State Audit and Administrative Institution
The State of Palestine

Mr. Adel Al-Sarawi
Vice President
State Audit Bureau of Kuwait

Mr. Ali Alhazeem
Senior Auditor
State Audit Bureau of Kuwait

Ms. Aya Owheida
Member of the Oversight Committee on SDGs
State Audit Bureau of Libya

Mr. Mohamed Abouzeid
Director General
Central Bureau of Statistics
Egypt

Mr. Assem Louka
Head of Sector
Accountability State Authority
Egypt

Mr. Khaled Bassuney
Head of Sector
Accountability State Authority
Egypt

Ms. Mai Malek
Accountability State Authority
Egypt

Mr. Ahmed Harmouch
Court of Accounts
Morocco

Ms. Shatha Atta
Deputy Director-General of Administrative Affairs
The Central Organization for Control and Auditing
Yemen

Mr. Mohammed Bouchaib
Central Organization for Control and Auditing
Yemen

National Center for Peace and Development

Mr. Mohanad Orabi
Programme Coordinator
Sudan

Ms. Amal Ali
Director-General of the Department for the Rights
of Persons with Disabilities
Sudan

The National Council for Persons with Disabilities.

Ms. Malaz Abd Elaziz
Director of Training and Institutional Building
Department
Sudan

E. Organizing bodies

League of Arab States

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

Mr. Mohamed Abdel Maksoud Hassan
Sustainable Development Researcher
Sustainable Development Department and
International Cooperation
Egypt

UN-DESA

Ms. Irena Zubcevic
Head of the Intergovernmental Policy and Review
Branch

Mr. Joop Theunissen
Deputy Chief of the Intergovernmental Policy and
Review Branch

Mr. Friedrich Soltau
Senior Sustainable Development Officer

ESCWA/the 2030 Agenda and SDG Coordination
Cluster

Ms. Maisaa Youssef
Officer in Charge

Ms. Jana El Baba
Sustainable Development Officer

Ms. Mona Fattah
Sustainable Development Officer

Ms. Hania Sabbidin Dimassi
Senior Research Assistant

Ms. Lara El Khoury
Senior Research Assistant

Ms. Sara Kaikati
Project Management Assistant

Ms. Sobhieh Kabbarah
Administrative Assistant