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## Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Webinar on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region  
Online, 27-28 October 2020

### Information note

#### I. BACKGROUND

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, member States committed to engage in follow-up and review (FUR) of the 2030 Agenda through a robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated framework. Among the various FUR mechanisms that Member States have put in place such as national reports on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are key national-level mechanisms that fulfill several functions. They provide an opportunity to assess and report progress achieved in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They are also a catalyst for operationalizing key principles such as the integrated approach to development and leaving no one behind, and for addressing national priorities, and mobilizing needed resources, capacities and partnerships.

VNRs are closely linked to FUR mechanisms at the regional and global levels. They provide an entry point for learning, knowledge sharing and highlighting achievements and challenges as well as areas where they need more support during the annual regional forums on sustainable development and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

In addition to monitoring progress at the national level and informing the international community of achievements and challenges, VNRs and their related reports have accumulated a wealth of knowledge, practices, and lessons learned. Their increasing number over the years confirms the continued commitment of member States to the global agenda; yet, the impact of this process on implementation and the achievement of SDGs needs to be maximized. **The post-review phase provides an opportunity to use the reports as a baseline for follow-up and as a tool to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.**

Since 2016, 168 States have submitted their VNRs to the HLPF and many have done so two or more times. To date, 19 countries from the Arab region prepared and submitted their VNRs<sup>1</sup>, including three which have carried out a VNR twice. Most recently in 2020, Comoros, Libya, Morocco and the Syrian Arab Republic submitted their VNRs and so far, VNRs from Qatar and Iraq are confirmed for 2021<sup>2</sup>.

2020 was a particularly challenging year with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties it brought on sustainable development efforts. In the global VNR workshop leading to the HLPF, countries reflected on the challenges they faced in proceeding with their VNRs after COVID-19, most particularly difficulties in engaging with stakeholders. The pandemic also resulted in altering modalities of conferencing with the 2020 HLPF, including all VNR presentations, conducted exclusively online.

<sup>1</sup> These are: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>2</sup> Reported online <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/> as of 1 October 2020.

## Regional Meetings on VNRs in Arab States

In view of the importance of the regional dimension, and at the request of Arab States for a space for dialogue, knowledge sharing and peer learning, a series of VNR-focused activities were launched jointly by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), and the League of Arab States (LAS).

During the 2020 VNR cycle, ESCWA, DESA and LAS organized two regional workshops. The first [Workshop on the Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region](#) was organized in Beirut on 10-11 October 2019. The workshop facilitated the exchange of knowledge amongst countries that had previously submitted a VNR once or more and with those countries that had not submitted one at the time. The workshop discussions provided an opportunity for self-evaluation and learning about best practices in various aspects of follow-up and review and VNR process. Through interactive panel discussions, the workshop was an opportunity for peer-learning about experience during and after the VNR process as well as learning about possible solutions for challenges facing this process.

During the first meeting, ESCWA launched the Community of Practice (CoP) on VNRs in the Arab region (COP). The CoP is formed of a core group of government officials and aims to maintain the process of knowledge sharing and experience exchange on various VNR topics. It also provides a medium for updates on relevant regional and global events.

A [Second Workshop on the Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region: Strengthening Partnerships](#) was organized in Cairo on 26 – 27 February 2020. Similar to the first workshop, the second workshop was a platform for knowledge exchange with a focus on how to build effective partnerships and enhance stakeholder engagement in the VNR process.

## II. OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

### A. OBJECTIVES OF THE REGIONAL WORKSHOP

The Webinar on Voluntary National Reviews in the Arab Region (Online, 27-28 October 2020) continues the series of meetings and workshops organized for the Arab region and sustain the focus on dialogue and peer learning to enhance VNR processes in Arab states. As the first in the cycle of regional meetings for 2021, it will take stock of the experiences of Arab countries that presented VNRs in 2020 and inform preparations of countries undertaking such processes to present in 2021. The workshop will also serve as a meeting of the Community of Practice on VNRs in the Arab region where they may highlight priorities and progress.

### B. DISCUSSION TOPICS

The following topics are proposed to be covered during the workshop:

- a. Reminder of the SG guidelines on VNRS and overview of new elements post COVID-19;
- b. In-depth review of the Arab 2020 VNRs; Challenges and lessons learned;
- c. 2021 Arab VNRS: content and process for 2nd and 3rd review;
- d. The CoP: Dynamics and way forward;
- e. The post-VNR phase and sharing experiences from VNRs of previous years to discuss the means to translate the findings of the VNR report into workplans to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and outline policies/solutions to address the challenges and obstacles identified throughout the VNR process.

### III. ORGANIZATIONAL AND LOGISTICAL DETAILS

#### A. DATE AND VENUE

In light of the continued restrictions on travel and holding physical meetings because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the webinar (as 1<sup>st</sup> regional workshop on VNR for 2021 cycle) will be held over the Internet. Connection details will be provided in due time. The webinar will take place over two days with a duration of almost 2 hours each.

#### B. WORKING LANGUAGES

Arabic, English, and French are the working languages of the regional workshop. Simultaneous interpretation for the three languages will be provided.

#### C. DOCUMENTATION

The following is a list of reference documents:

- [General Assembly resolution 70/1](#) – Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- [A/70/684](#) – Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level.
- [Voluntary National Reviews Handbook](#), 2020 edition in Arabic.
- Voluntary National Reviews [global website](#).
- High-level Political Forum (HLPF) [website](#).
- Arab Forum for Sustainable Development [links to 2016-2019](#)

#### D. PARTICIPANTS AND REGISTRATION

The regional workshop targets government officials who are members of the team in charge of preparing the country's VNR as well as those in charge of national development strategies, visions and plans in the Arab region. Participants will also include experts from regional and international organizations as well as the United Nations. To confirm attendance, please complete the online registration form before 22 October 2020 through the following link:

<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=2zWeD09UYE-9zF6kFubccInrr1Ts91NNi4vdxM10R5tUNDICQjRMOERXVFNWWVRIR1dWVvkZDUkdWUC4u>

#### E. CORRESPONDENCE

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