

PFD workshop on the EU Voluntary Review of SDG implementation

22 November 2022

I. Introduction and methodology

The Policy Forum on Development, in coordination with the European Commission Directorate General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs, hosted an online session with civil society organisations (CSOs) and associations of local authorities (ALAs). It aimed to provide participants with information on the EU voluntary review (EUVR) process and its political importance. CSOs and ALAs had the opportunity to ask questions and make contributions in the plenary discussion, where further information and clarifications were provided by Commission staff.

Main points of information

II. Opening remarks

Marlene Holzner, Head of LAs, CSOs and Foundations Unit at DG INTPA, welcomed participants, emphasising that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)s and EUVR are at the heart of CSO and LA analysis and discussions with the EU. She explained the aim of the workshop to meet CSO and LA needs while recognising that the Commission cannot give free access to the draft report due to procedural limitations.

III. Implementing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through Voluntary Reviews (see [powerpoint slides](#))

Camilla Brückner, Director of the UN Office in Brussels and UN Representative in the EU, thanked the Commission for the timely consultation with stakeholders to prepare the EUVR. The review presents a unique opportunity to put SDGs at the centre of EU political and policy priorities in the context of current global crises.

The voluntary review process can help policy coherence. The EU should provide a balanced review of all three dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic and environmental) and reflect their interconnected nature. The EUVR should also indicate where there are insufficiencies and lack of progress. This process can build trust and send a clear message to other countries about common challenges. The VRs should be people-centred, gender sensitive, respect human rights, and have particular focus on those furthest behind. The external dimension of the EUVR also presents an opportunity to show how the Global Gateway (GG) contributes to the SDGs.

A UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) will take place in July and September 2023 (latterly as the SDG Summit under the auspices of the General Assembly). A special meeting (“Summit of the Future”) in September 2024 will look at how the world community can accelerate and scale up SDG implementation.

IV. The political importance of the EUVR in the global/multilateral setting

Daniel McCormack, EEAS Policy Officer, emphasised the importance of an inclusive approach to the EUVR that will take stock of progress so far and look ahead to 2030. The EUVR is politically important given setbacks on SDG progress in a global context of food, energy, and finance crises exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine, and an increasingly competitive global environment.

In this context, continued EU commitment and communication on the 2030 Agenda are important. Preparations for the UN SDG summits are opportunities to strengthen the multilateral system, and the EU supports the UN Secretary General's recommendations in the Our Common Agenda (OCA) report.

V. Implementation of the SDGs and preparation of the EU Voluntary Review ([see powerpoint slides](#))

Carlos Berrozpe García, Senior Expert, Head of Sector on SDG Implementation, DG INTPA, explained that this first EUVR is under coordination of the Secretary General and direct authority of Commission President von der Leyen. A positive aspect of the EUVR is raising visibility of the SDGs at the global level and within the EU (the 2023 Commission Work Programme reaffirms the central role of SDGs).

Stakeholder engagement is integral to this complex but important exercise. The Commission is looking at good practices from other countries who have conducted VNRs. The main channels for consultation go beyond normal institutional procedures for this type of Commission document. They consist of written input through Have Your Say¹ and a consultation process run by the Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to gather the collective views of stakeholders. CSOs and ALAs are encouraged to publicise these consultation channels via their networks. Sectoral discussions are also taking place. The PFD is a space to discuss the EUVR with stakeholders engaged in international partnership, and the report of this meeting will complement the main channels for input.

The EUVR's "form follows function". This means that, given its purposes, the review must be concise, to be read and understood by citizens and policymakers, so there is a need to be selective. The EUVR aims to be clear and honest on SDG trends and challenges. It will look at each SDG in turn and aims to show interlinkages with an innovative methodology that addresses risks of double counting. The EUVR is also an important opportunity, for the first time, to provide an overview of how EU has commitments and targets contributing to the SDGs, linking systematically policy and trends. This is a clear outcome which follows meaningful consultation with stakeholders on this objective. The review will balance internal and external aspects, to show how the EU supports partners, including through the Global Gateway. Stakeholders in the meeting were requested to submit examples of good practices, as the EUVR will present a selection of partnerships that include civil society and local authorities.

VI. Proposals and clarifications from the discussion

1. Content of the EUVR

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13600-EU-Voluntary-Review-on-the-implementation-of-the-2030-Agenda-for-Sustainable-Development_en

Examples of good practices are important, both internal and external to the EU. The emphasis will be on partnerships that do not duplicate national VRs, while the EUVR aims to be a portal to national and local VRs.

Interlinkages and cross-cutting SDGs: Some participants asked how SDGs on cross-cutting issues such as gender, rights and climate/environment would be integrated, including through selective examples where there is good work being done by the EU and member states. There will be some mainstreaming within the report parameters: examples will be linked to specific SDGs, but there will also be examples of interlinkages. SDG 16 and promoting human rights, governance, rule of law, and security, including the role of CS, will be an important aspect of the VR. So too will SDG 17 (strengthening means of implementation and revitalising the Global Partnership), including capacity-building and strengthening analytical instruments as part of EU partnerships.

Spillovers, trade offs and challenges in policy impact: Some participants called for honest stocktaking and balance in the EUVR, specifically mentioning debt (as a percentage of national budgets), foreign investment, and subsidies for fossil fuels. Again, selective examples can convey what can be done in response to challenges. On debt, the EU is very much aware and is active in international fora to address the issue. A central principle of the Global Gateway (GG) is not to engage with partners in projects that could lead to further indebtedness.

2. Stakeholder involvement

Transparency: Some participants asked about the possibility of seeing a draft or reconvening before the EUVR is published. The Commission will continue to engage with CS and LAs within the boundaries of institutional procedures. The Commission Secretariat-General will determine the process ahead based on consultation inputs. The Commission is also open to bilateral meetings with stakeholders.

CS engagement and networks: Some participants emphasised the need for parliaments and governments to use people's language and localise SDGs, and that community inclusion in policymaking and implementation is crucial. Existing networks are already active in SDG processes and can share effective practices.

At the **UN HLPF** civil society will be able to express their views through the plenary and in principle at a high-level side event, but it is not planned that they will officially co-present the VR due to complexity of EU representation.

LA engagement: Some participants emphasised the importance of the local level and multi-level government cooperation in preparing VRs; some good practice examples were mentioned, including from other regions such as Asia Pacific. The EUVR will address the multi-level approach to implementing the SDGs, with examples. The Joint Research Centre (JRC) is working with LAs on local reviews.

Parliamentary engagement: The Commission is briefing the European Parliament (EP) on the EUVR. EP publishes its own initiative reports on SDGs and EP members are part of the EU delegation to the HLPF. SDGs are discussed by the EP through, for example, a joint Environment (ENVI) and Development (DEVE) committee, but not as part of a systemic cycle.

Multi-stakeholder platform (expert group) on SDGs: Reinstating the platform is not currently envisaged but the EUVR consultations could be a means of suggesting it, if stakeholders so wish. The previous expert group was replaced by engagement with a wider group of stakeholders in various formats.

3. Relation to other EU processes

Multi-annual financial framework (MFF): Some participants asked how the EUVR will feed into the planned mid-term review of the MFF. The EUVR will look at several EU financial instruments, each of which must explain annually how they support SDGs.

Policy coherence for development (PCD): The EUVR will incorporate the annual report on policy coherence for development. The success of the EUVR process will affect decisions about the future of PCD reporting; it is not yet possible to say whether this will continue to be in the form of standalone reports.

EU delegations provide inputs into the EUVR, including chapters on horizontal issues, through day-to-day work with the EEAS and line DGs, and structured regular reporting.