

**Governance of SDGs Implementation in the Arab States:
A Critical Reading of Voluntary National Reviews**

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Executive Summary

Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) represent the main vehicle for governments to share experiences and learnt lessons from SDGs implementation efforts. This critical reading of nine voluntary reviews submitted by a selected group of Arab states aims at taking advantage of this opportunity to build a knowledge base regarding the governance of the implementation of the sustainable development agenda in the Arab region. The review covered the following VNRs: Bahrain (2018), Egypt (2018), Iraq (2019), Jordan (2017), Kuwait (2019), Lebanon (2018), Morocco (2020), Qatar (2017/2018), and Sudan (2018). Each review was read carefully for evidence of three dimensions of good governance: effectiveness, accountability, and inclusiveness. Five specific characteristics of the national environment for policymaking and implementation, as portrayed by the reviewed VNRs, are investigated: the institutional structure; stated vision; policy coherence; ownership and participation; and analysis of weakness and challenges. Common issues as well as specific good examples are highlighted under each of these five items.

Main Findings

The Institutional Structure

Good governance of SDGs implementation requires strong, effective, integrative, and inclusive institutional structures incorporating clearly delineated, though interconnected, components. This prerequisite is still largely missing in the region. Existent institutional structures tend to serve reporting purposes more than to help guiding and coordinating the implementation efforts. Although institutional reform is a major component of an enabling environment, little attention to it is apparent in most reviewed VNRs. Breaking from this generalized pattern, the institutional framework in Jordan is exemplary in terms of effectiveness, inclusion, and delineation. Attempts to build an effective institutional framework are also apparent in Iraq.

Stated Vision

Submitting a voluntary national review indicates that the country is embracing the vision of the 2030 agenda, and, hence, a typical VNR does not include a separate vision statement. However, if SDGs implementation is anchored on strongly-held national visions, statements of these visions are expected to find their way to be explicitly stated in VNRs. A minority of reviewed VNRs includes explicit vision statements. And scarcer are those visions that clearly, and verifiably, prioritize the 'leaving no one behind' ethos of SDGs vision. Morocco clearly provides a good example through promoting human rights and equity.

Generally, leaving no one behind remains an add-on to the development vision in most countries in the region and has not yet assumed its hoped-for primacy. Typically, efforts at leaving no one behind stops at providing mitigation and safety net services to vulnerable groups. Addressing structural causes of vulnerability and integrating social justice in all policies are still largely missing from national visions, with the notable exception of Morocco.

Policy Coherence

The 2030 global agenda stresses the connectedness and interdependence of the 17 SDGs and emphasizes the need to treat the whole agenda as an umbrella encompassing all policies rather than an after-thought add-on to sectoral policies. Evidence of policy coherence can be found in the mechanisms employed to align national strategies with the global SDGs agenda. Although some evidence of integration efforts are found in Bahrain, Egypt, and Sudan, discernible emphasis on treating the 2030 agenda holistically and avoiding piecemeal implementation through incorporating SDGs within different policies and national plans are only observed in four countries: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco. The investment by Iraq and Jordan in building strong and effective institutional structures has contributed to avoiding policy fragmentation, while Morocco has benefited from a clear vision.

Ownership and Participation

While the push by the SDGs agenda towards inclusion and participation starts to be felt, participation in many cases remains only nominal, *ad hoc*, and operating just in monitoring activities rather than in policy formulation and implementation. Not all countries include non-governmental representatives in their leading or monitoring bodies; and when they do, sometimes the contribution of non-governmental representatives is limited to consultation. Some good examples, however, exist. Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Sudan, in attempts to guarantee broader ownership, have adopted inclusive approaches while setting their national priorities and developing their national vision.

Analysis of Weaknesses and Challenges

Although all reviewed VNRs dedicate sections to listing and discussing challenges, they largely miss a unified approach to challenge analysis that probe deeper in the structural sources of the recognized challenges. Iraq and Kuwait provide good examples where structural challenges are highlighted.

Recommendations

- Make the best benefit from the process of preparing VNRs through integrating its approaches to inclusion and accountability into the modalities of developing and implementing national strategies and policies.

- Focus on institutional reform. Start with developing an institutional structure to lead SDGs implementation efforts that has the following characteristics: supremacy through directly reporting to the head of country or government, inclusion through including non-governmental representatives at equal footing with governmental ones, and role specificity through incorporating separate bodies with clear non-overlapping but interconnected mandates.
- Truly and consistently embrace SDGs leaving no one behind vision. Transcend mitigating vulnerability to addressing its structural causes. Leaving no one behind should not be a single section in the national vision or review, it should be the backbone of every policy and development action.
- Along with institutional reform and keeping the goal of leaving no one behind as central, be mindful of the need for policy coherence and continuous coordination. Develop and adopt integrative and multisectoral approaches for this purpose.
- Mainstream the current approaches to participation, inclusion, and accountability, as practised in VNR preparation, and continually develop these approaches such that citizens become the true owners of the national vision. Focus on producing evidence of non-governmental participants deriving and guiding the development agenda.
- Recognizing challenges is a good practice, but there is a need to produce further analyses of these challenges that probe their interconnections and interactions as well as their structural causes.
- Open channels for experience sharing and peer learning through regional organizations, such as the League of Arab States.

Governance of SDGs Implementation in the Arab States: A Critical Reading of Voluntary National Reviews

1. Introduction

The monitoring process of the 2030 sustainable development agenda reflects the agenda's visionary state-led bottom-up inclusive approach through embracing voluntary and participatory reporting. Within this partnership-based framework, voluntary national reviews (VNRs) represent the main vehicle for governments to share experiences and learnt lessons from SDGs implementation efforts. As stated in the 2019 Handbook on the preparation of VNR,¹ “[t]he process of carrying out the voluntary national review should not be seen as separate from implementation of the SDGs. Rather than an end in itself, the VNR is a process by which countries take stock of and assess progress – and shortcomings - in the implementation of the goals and targets.” (p. 8)

As foreseen by the 2015 General Assembly SDG Resolution,² a VNR should be substantive and knowledge based, as well as open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people, with a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind. The reviews should adhere to the following set of guiding principles:

- a) The follow up and review processes are voluntary and country-led, take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respect policy space and priorities.
- b) They should track progress in implementing the universal goals and targets, including the means of implementation, in all countries in a manner which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development (the economic, social, and environmental).
- c) They should maintain a longer-term orientation, identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices. They will help to mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships, support

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). *Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews, the 2019 Edition*.
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20872VNR_hanbook_2019_Edition_v2.pdf. 2018.

² United Nations. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, General Assembly Seventieth Session Agenda Items 15 and 16: Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015. United Nations A/RES/70.1.
https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E. 2015.

the identification of solutions and best practices, and promote the coordination and effectiveness of the international development system.

- d) They should be open, inclusive, participatory, and transparent for all people and support reporting by all relevant stakeholders.
- e) They must be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights, and focus on the poorest, most vulnerable, and those furthest behind.
- f) They should build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist, avoid duplication, and respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities. They will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.
- g) They are to be rigorous and based on evidence, and informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability, and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.
- h) They will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes.
- i) They can benefit from the active support of the United Nations system and other multilateral institutions.

As far as they live to their potential as inclusive multi-stakeholder enterprises, and even when they fail to reflect that inclusive vision, VNRs permit penetrating the governance structure of SDGs' implementation processes and uncovering their guiding principles. This critical reading of the voluntary reviews submitted by a selected group of Arab states aims at taking full advantage of this opportunity. The goal is to build a knowledge base regarding the governance of the implementation of the sustainable development agenda in the Arab region.

The main questions addressed in this reading are:

- For each country, what are the main institutional mechanisms and governance modalities of SDGs implementation efforts?
- What underlying vision of SDGs ownership are reflected in these mechanisms and structures?
- What evidence exist for integration and interlinkage efforts?
- How strongly and consistently does the 'leaving no one behind' ethos shape SDGs implementation?
- Are structural constraints recognized? And are steps being taken to address them?

- What general patterns and unique features can be uncovered through contrasting different reports? Can we point to examples of success, or of challenges overcome, to enhance regional-based experience sharing?

2. Methodology

2.1. Main References and Guiding Principles

The United Nations system is responsible for guiding countries into the process of carrying out their reviews and writing their reports. The several guidelines and handbooks prepared for this purpose work as principal yardsticks to use in this reading of a selection of VNRs submitted by Arab countries since 2016. These guides include: the 2017 UNDP guidelines,³ and the 2018,⁴ 2019,⁵ and 2020⁶ versions of the VNR preparation handbook by UN DESA.

The handbooks explicitly call for including the following eight building blocks in the VNR:

1. Ownership of the SDGs,
2. Incorporating the SDGs into national frameworks,
3. Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, and environmental),
4. Leaving no one behind,
5. Institution mechanisms,
6. Structural issues,
7. Goals and targets, and
8. Means of implementation.

Under each of these building blocks, the handbooks provide general guidelines, tips, and concrete country examples. These represent our initial points of reference.

³ United Nations Development Group. Guidelines to Support Country Reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals. <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/Guidelines-to-Support-Country-Reporting-on-SDGs-1.pdf>. 2017.

⁴ United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). *Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: The 2018 Edition*. https://www.sdg16hub.org/system/files/2018-07/17354VNR_handbook_2018.pdf. 2017.

⁵ United Nations DESA (2018), op. cit. footnote 1.

⁶ United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). *Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: The 2020 Edition*. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25245Handbook_2020_EN.pdf. 2019.

This reading of VNRs has also benefited from key messages drawn from case studies done by Partners for Review.⁷ These include:

- High-level political commitment is crucial.
- The agenda helps overcome silos and foster policy coherence.
- Working through umbrella organizations is an effective way to reach out to stakeholders.
- Different actors have different roles, and it is important to clarify and communicate them.
- Stakeholder involvement supports continuity.
- The demand for peer learning is increasing.

2.2. Investigated Governance Dimensions

Governance is about how policies are developed and implemented. The interest in governance and its relationship to economic and human development is not new, since no theory of development can afford to ignore how policy is articulated and implemented. The modern use of the concept of good governance has been developed with the public sector reforms in the 1980s and 1990s.⁸ International aid organizations, especially the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, played a crucial role in publicizing this concept by conditioning the aid they offered on evidence of good governance. During the early phase of the development of the modern governance concept, the focus has been mostly on efficiency and fighting corruption. With the rise of the role of non-state actors and the push for democracy, the concept of governance started to focus more on inclusion, participation, transparency, and accountability. In this new phase of public-sector reform, institutional dynamics prioritizing networking and partnerships become important aspects of governance.

The centrality of good governance to human rights and to sustainable development has been long recognized by the United Nations and its organizations. There are several ways to define good governance, based on normative assumptions regarding how decisions should be made.⁹ According to the United Nations Development Programme,¹⁰ good governance has the following characteristics: participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness,

⁷ Partners for Review. SDG Review as an Engine for Action. <https://www.partners-for-review.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SDG-review-as-an-engine-for-action-P4R-June-2020.pdf>. Bonn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). 2020.

⁸ For a history of the governance concept and governance theories, see Bevir, M. (ed.) *The Sage Handbook of Governance*. Sage Publication Inc. 2011. See also Governance entry in Encyclopedia Britannica, by Bevir, M. Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/governance>, Published 23 May 2016.

⁹ Bevir, M. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Governance*. Sage Publication. 2007 (entry: Good Governance, pp. 359-362)

¹⁰ United Nations Development Programme. *Governance for Sustainable Development*. UNDP Policy Document. 1997.

consensus orientation, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, accountability, and strategic vision. Evidence of good governance include:¹¹

- effective, responsive, and accountable state institutions,
- openness and transparency (public access to information),
- addressing corruption and curbing illicit financial flows,
- justice and rule of law,
- participation in decision-making, and
- curbing violence and combating transnational organized crime.

Planning for the long-term, innovation, and collaboration have also been considered vital among the post-2015 governance priorities, according to UNDP.¹²

More concisely,¹³ the principles for good governance fall within three large categories or dimensions: **effectiveness**, **accountability**, and **inclusiveness**. Competence, sound policymaking, and collaboration fall under the effectiveness dimension. Accountability implies integrity, transparency, and independent oversight. Inclusiveness means leaving no one behind, non-discrimination, participation, and equity. This analysis of VNRs is informed by this specific understanding of good governance. Reports on national voluntary reviews are searched for evidence for prioritization of these three dimensions of good governance in the implementation of the sustainable development agenda.

The search for evidence of these three governance dimensions (effectiveness, accountability, and inclusiveness) focuses on the following characteristics of the national environment for policymaking and implementation as portrayed by the VNR.

- The institutional structure. This refers to the institution leading or coordinating the implementation of the SDG agenda and its connections with stakeholders. The supremacy of the leading institution assists effectiveness, its independence promotes accountability, while its connectivity and broad representation reflect both inclusiveness and accountability.
- Stated vision. A vision that reflects good governance should prioritize building capacities and building institutions, be future-looking, and, most importantly, promote inclusion.

¹¹ United Nations Development Programme. *Governance for Sustainable Development: Integrating Governance in the Post-2015 Development Framework*. UNDP Discussion Paper. <file:///D:/SRC%20Files/SDG%20platform/VNR%20reading/References/UNDP%202014%20Discussion-Paper--Governance-for-Sustainable-Development.pdf>. UNDP. 2014.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Economic and Social Council. Principles of Effective Governance for Sustainable Development. Economic and Social Council Official Records, 2018 Supplement no. 24. E/2018/44-E/C.16/2018/8, para. 31. https://publicadministration.un.org/Portals/1/Images/CEPA/Principles_of_effective_governance_english.pdf. 2018.

- Policy coherence. Effectiveness requires policy coherence and the insistence on integration and the avoidance of fragmentation. Policy coherence is also an evidence of a unified vision and the adoption of participatory approaches to policy development.
- Ownership and participation. These provide evidence for inclusion, accountability, as well as effectiveness.
- Analysis of weaknesses and challenges. This is necessary for building a strategic vision. The recognition and admission of weaknesses and challenges also shows respect for accountability.

2.3. Selection of VNRs to Include in the Reading

This analytical report has a regional focus on the Arab countries. As of 15 November 2020, there are available 22 VNRs submitted by 19 Arab countries (Egypt, Morocco, and Qatar submitted two reviews each). We excluded reports submitted exclusively in French; these include reports from Algeria, Comoros, Mauritania, and Tunisia. We also excluded reports from Libya, Palestine, and Syria where national turmoil and civic unrest drastically intervene with the sustainable development agenda. Although we include Sudan’s review, since it was a core pilot country, it should be noted that it was dated before the 2019 deposition of Omar Bashir and, hence, cannot be considered as representative of the current national direction. In addition, we include only three examples, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar, from the oil-rich members of the Gulf Cooperation Council that share similar demographic, social, and economic profiles. Only the most recent review is included for Egypt and Morocco. The two reviews submitted by Qatar are combined because the 2018 review is considered a complement, rather than an update, of the 2017 review.

This analysis is hence confined to the following set of voluntary reviews from nine Arab countries:¹⁴ Bahrain (2018), Egypt (2018), Iraq (2019), Jordan (2017), Kuwait (2019), Lebanon (2018), Morocco (2020), Qatar (2017/2018), and Sudan (2018). Each review was read carefully for evidence of the governance dimensions listed above. The findings are summarized below. Because of the centrality of the institutional structure to governance, detailed information is given under the corresponding subsection. For the other dimensions, only the overall picture is presented.

¹⁴ VNRs from Arab states are accessible at <https://emrsgslearn.net/External/vnrs>. The complete global VNR archive is available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>.

3. Findings

3.1. The Institutional Structure: Leading Institution and its Connections with Stakeholders

Distinction should be made between the institutional structure directing the implementation of the sustainable development agenda and the institution responsible for preparing the VNR, though in many cases they overlap. It is important to gauge both structures as the process of preparing a VNR is an integral part of SDGs implementation. Because the guidelines for VNR preparation explicitly call for discussing the process of its preparation, including the identification of the leading institution, almost all reviewed reports provide information regarding these leading institutions. Ministries of planning (in **Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Qatar**), ministries of cabinet affairs (in **Bahrain**), or the prime minister office (in **Lebanon and Morocco**) play leading or coordination role in carrying out the VNRs, either because they also coordinate the implementation efforts or because of their easy access to other governmental actors that facilitates working as secretariat for reviewing committees.

The institutional structure coordinating SDGs implementation is of greater importance as it hints to the prioritization level of the agenda and uncovers relevant participatory and accountability dimensions implicit in its governance. The reviewed VNRs portrayed different types of institutional frameworks. Three attributes of these frameworks are of special relevance: supremacy, inclusion, and role specificity.

Effectiveness is enhanced through high-level leadership and participation. Although the nine countries included in this analysis all have governmental bodies assigned the responsibility to monitor, and sometimes lead, SDGs implementation, such bodies are rarely headed by prime ministers or report to a supreme council. Connectivity with different ministries and governmental bodies including the statistical offices are always guaranteed, however, through membership and through assigning secretariat functions to the cabinet office or to a ministry of planning. Such connectivity is always guaranteed because it is essential for reporting, including preparing VNRs. Connectivity for reporting, however, requires only one-way flow of information – from the implementing bodies to the reporting institution. The connectivity that is essential for effective governance, on the other hand, requires two-way flows, where the leading national institution is able to influence and coordinate implementers and where implementers actively share in directing the national strategies building on their first-hand experience. Only few VNRs, among the seven reviewed, seem attentive to the need for such double-stream connectivity.

Inclusion is so strongly integrated in the global 2030 agenda that no government can afford to ignore it, at least while reporting on its progress in realizing this agenda. And, indeed, the processes followed in the preparation of the different VNRs typically included

meetings and workshops with broad membership from the civil society, the private sector, the academia, and different interest groups. Such inclusive approach, however, is not consistently followed in developing and implementing the national agenda. In some, but not all, countries, the leading bodies responsible for the mainstreaming of the SDGs in national strategies and policies include non-governmental participants. Occasionally, non-governmental representatives only act in advisory, rather than steering, capacity. And in few cases, membership in the leading national body is restricted to governmental representatives.

The third attribute of interest is role specificity as reflected in clear, complementary, and non-overlapping mandates. This requires not just the assignment of a leading institution, but also building a differentiable institutional framework. An effective institutional framework should include separate but continually interacting components, each with its clear mandate and spelled-out functions. Only little evidence exists in the reviewed VNRs of attention to building such differentiable frameworks.

Details of the Institutional Structures in the Nine Countries

Bahrain VNR report, in discussing ownership of the SDG agenda, signalled out the establishment of the National Information Committee (NIC) in 2015. The NIC, which is chaired by the minister of cabinet affairs and includes members from ministries and government agencies, is assigned the function of following up on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda and for linking it to national development strategies. The committee's role seems to be limited to monitoring and reporting, through connection to the e-government portal. The detailed membership of the NIC is not provided, but it seems to be confined to governmental bodies.

After launching its 2030 strategy in 2016, **Egypt** established the National Committee for Monitoring the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals under the prime minister office. The committee membership includes representatives from 17 ministries and state entities. The committee's mandate is to link, or align, the global SDGs agenda with the national strategy. By 2018, however, the monitoring function has moved within the mandate of the ministry of planning and economic development, the rapporteur of the national committee. While the national committee itself still nominally stands, its role is blurred.

Iraq's VNR stands out in highlighting the importance of the institutional framework of SDGs implementation. The report clearly states that "[i]t is difficult to imagine achieving SDGs without efficient government coordination and institutionalizing the development effort to support planning, implementation, and follow-up. ... Such coordination must ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the development process under government leadership and that the right combination of SDGs is achieved with national development plans and policies." (p. 28) To achieve this vision, two federal bodies are established, under the leadership of the

minister of planning: the Monitoring Committee and the National Commission for Sustainable Development (NCSD), which reports to the monitoring committee. Both include representatives from ministries and other governmental bodies. The monitoring committee, in addition, include representatives from civil society organizations and the private sector in addition to experts and academicians. The monitoring committee acts as a consultative body that suggests national policies and programs, based on reports from NCSD, and facilitate their introduction through liaison with federal and local cabinets. Governorate-level committees for sustainable development, headed by governors, complete the institutional structure. Memberships in these local committees include both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

The institutional framework for SDG implementation in **Jordan** is exemplary in terms of both effectiveness and inclusion. It includes two high-level bodies: the Higher Steering Committee, headed by the prime minister, and the Higher National Committee for Sustainable Development headed by the minister of planning and international cooperation. Both committees have members from the government as well as from the civil societies organizations and the private sector. Membership in the higher national committee for sustainable development also include representatives of women, youth, the two legislative chambers, and local communities. This latter committee, which is established in 2002 during the MDGs era, provides a good example of making best use of existent institutions and mechanisms. In 2017, membership in the committee has been expanded in reflection of the more inclusive vision of the 2030 agenda. The institutional framework is completed by the Coordination Committee, which is headed by the secretary general of the ministry of planning and international cooperation with membership from line ministries, governmental departments, and other stakeholders.

The Jordanian higher steering committee directs long-term planning. The higher national committee for sustainable development provides guidance to ongoing decisions and policies, including setting priorities, mainstreaming the agenda within national strategies and plans, and supervising all reporting activities. The committee is assisted in carrying its role by a number of working groups and technical committees, which the steering committee establish as needed, The Coordination Committee provides direct supervision and management during the preparation of the national executive development programs (EDP), ensures mainstreaming of the SDGs, targets and indicators within national plans, through 18 specialized working groups with memberships from the government, the civil society, and the private sector. These working groups define objectives and actions based on the EDP and in alignment of SDGs. Setting the specific mandates of the working groups is interesting in that it avoids separating the 17 goals. For example, although there is a working group dedicated to health, there is no strict correspondence between the mandate of that group and Goal 3.

On one hand, the health working group is also concerned with Goals 2, 5, 6, 10, and 17. On the other hand, Goal 3 falls within the mandate of seven other working groups: agriculture, water & environment; productivity & combating poverty; culture & youth; transport, public works & telecommunication; national economy; gender; and freedom & human rights. True to the connectivity of the SDGs vision, members of the last two working groups (gender, and freedom & human rights) are embedded within the other 15 working groups.

After adopting the 2030 sustainable development agenda, **Kuwait** established the National Sustainable Development Committee (NSDC) and the National Observatory on Sustainable Development and Anticipation for the Future (NOSD) to work as supportive institutional structure “to roll out the SDGs Agenda as a national participatory undertaking.” (Kuwait VNR, p.8) The NSDC is a permanent national steering committee headed by General Secretariat of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development (GSSCPD). It meets regularly to provide guidance and leadership for the mainstreaming of the 2030 agenda in national planning. Membership in NSDC is broad, including representatives of line ministries and governmental departments and agencies as well as observers from national and international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. NOSD serves coordination and monitoring functions and is responsible for the VNR preparation.

The rolling out of the SDGs agenda in **Lebanon** is led by a national committee shared by the prime minister and includes more than 50 state officials at the director general level. The relatively low level of participation is meant to ensure continuity in face of political changes. Inclusiveness is guaranteed through representatives of the civil society and the private sector. The committee works as both a coordinator and a monitor of progress, helped by the office of the prime minister as its secretariat.

In **Morocco**, the Higher Commission for Planning (HCP), a governmental agency for statistics and research, is the main body responsible for coordinating and monitoring SDGs-related efforts, including collecting necessary information to carry voluntary national reviews. Learning from the experience of preparing the 2016 VNR, especially the need for inclusion and wide participation, the formal responsibility of carrying out the 2020 VNR has been assigned to a National Committee for Sustainable Development (NCSD), headed by the prime minister. Membership in NCSD includes, on equal footings, members representing governmental bodies as well as professional and non-governmental organizations. Established in 2019, NCSD is assigned the responsibility of all SDGs monitoring activities. Such dual institutional framework combines the effectiveness and efficiency of a centrally-placed governmental body, the HCP and the inclusion guaranteed by the wider membership of NCSD. The Moroccan example demonstrates how the VNR participatory approach, when taken seriously, could transform national approaches to implementing the 2030 agenda.

Mainstreaming and coordination activities related to the implementation of the SDGs agenda in **Qatar** fall within the mandate of the ministry of development planning and statistics. The institutional framework includes a supervisory committee representing all ministries, an advisory committee representing NGOs and the private sector, in addition to eight national task teams.

The implementation of the sustainable development agenda in **Sudan** prior to the 2019 political change was directed by a multi-institutional structure. The leadership was allotted to a High-Level National Mechanism, headed by the prime minister, who was also the first vice president. Under the supreme leadership, the National Population Council works as the coordinating body, while oversight was provided by The National Assembly, the Council of State, and the National Audit Chamber.

3.2. Stated Vision

Submitting a voluntary national review indicates that the country is embracing the vision of the 2030 agenda as stated in the General Assembly resolution: achieving sustainable development in its three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – in a balanced and integrated manner; combating inequalities; building peaceful, just and inclusive societies; protecting human rights and promoting gender equality; ensuring the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources; and pledging that no one will be left behind. A typical VNR does not include a separate vision statement; the national development strategy is the more fitting place for stating a national vision. However, if SDGs implementation is anchored on strongly-held national visions, statements of these visions are expected to find their way to be explicitly stated in VNRs.

In its 2020 voluntary review, **Morocco** explicitly notes some of the guiding strategies for sustainable development endeavours. These include the promotion of human rights, the transition to a green economy, decentralization, social and territorial cohesion, citizenship participation, and the development of strategic partnerships. The salience of human rights to this vision is supported by the involvement in SDGs monitoring activities, including VNR preparation, of the National Council for Human Rights. Further, the adherence to human rights and equity is usually highlighted when reviewing national policies.

The 2018 voluntary review by **Sudan** explicitly refers to the vision on which the quarter century 2007-2031 strategy (QCS) was anchored. As stated, the QCS vision prioritized justice, freedom, democracy, human rights, dignity, full participation and unity as bases of planning.

Versions of unified national visions are also found in reviews submitted by the three members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (**Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar**). All three have already articulated visions before the SDGs resolution. With the adoption of the global SDGs agenda, these existent visions were carried over with minor changes to align them with the global

agenda. The vision of **Bahrain** has three pillars: competitiveness, justice, and sustainability, defined through ambitions in three areas: economy, government, and society. The strategic goal is phrased in terms of empowering Bahrainis to increase their contribution to development. In **Kuwait**, the vision is to transform Kuwait to a regional financial and trade hub, with competitiveness achieved through effective public administration, developed infrastructure, high-quality education and health care, and advancing the role of the private sector in economic growth. The original 2030 national vision of **Qatar** aspires to transform it into an advanced country capable of realizing sustainable development and a high-quality life for its people for generations to come. While the three Gulf countries put special emphasis on competitiveness and on investing in human capital development as a prerequisite for it, only **Bahrain** explicitly signals out justice and empowerment of all social classes as major components of its development vision. Bahrain's VNR highlights inclusiveness, especially of vulnerable groups including migrants working in low-income jobs.

3.3. Policy Coherence

The 2030 global agenda stresses the connectedness and interdependence of the 17 SDGs. It also emphasises the need to treat the whole agenda as an umbrella encompassing all policies rather than an after-thought add-on to sectoral policies.

One clear evidence for policy coherence could be found in the way the VNR addresses the 'leaving no one behind' vision. All reviewed VNRs mentioned 'leaving no one behind' as an essential strategic direction of the national 2030 agenda and most reviewed VNRs have dedicated separate sections to discussing that vision and presenting policies directed towards vulnerable groups (such as, the disabled, the poor, orphans, expatriate workers, refugees, and the displaced). However, few VNRs show evidence of that vision being always present in efforts to achieve the SDGs. Leaving no one behind is typically addressed through mitigation policies targeting special vulnerable groups and not through addressing systematic biases and implementing structural changes for ingraining social justice. A notable exception highlights this pattern. As noted above, **Morocco** is adopting a human rights-based approach to sustainable development. Equity and leaving no one behind are explicitly linked to this approach and hence tend to be structurally addressed.

Evidence of policy coherence can also be found in the mechanisms employed to align national strategies with the global SDGs agenda. **Sudan**, for example, has adopted an integrative strategy where the 2030 agenda and the SDGs are linked to, and harmonized with, the national planning frameworks at the national, sectoral, and State levels. In **Bahrain**, the NIC has responsibility of mainstreaming the SDGs goals and indicators within the national vision. Such mainstreaming, however, is mainly concerned with gathering information and building databases and does not include a review of specific policies to assess their

compatibility with the SDGs agenda. After launching **Egypt's** 2030 vision, sustainable development units were established in different ministries and governmental entities as focal points for SDGs implementation. It is not clear, however, what leverage these focal points have on guiding policies and practices within their entities, or what kind of coordination exists between these focal units. Given the limited institutional structure, it seems that providing data and information to the ministry of planning for monitoring and reporting purposes is the sole function of these units.

Not surprisingly, **Iraq** and **Jordan**, the two countries that have invested in building elaborate institutional structures, are among only four countries, which also include **Lebanon** and **Morocco**, whose VNRs emphasise the incorporation of the SDGs within different policies and national plans. That is not to say that the other countries do not incorporate the SDGs in all their policies; the difference is that these four countries seem to be more aware of the need for treating the 2030 agenda holistically and for avoiding piecemeal incorporation.

3.4. Ownership and Participation

Following guidelines to VNR preparation, all countries covered by this reading have adopted inclusive approaches in their carrying out their reviews, mainly through conducting consultative workshops. What is of more interest, though, is how inclusive is the approach to mainstreaming the SDGs in the national strategies and to implementing the SDG agenda. Initial, and most relevant, answers to this question can be found in the institutional structures. As noted above, not all countries include non-governmental representatives in their leading or monitoring bodies. And when they do, the contribution of non-governmental representatives is sometimes limited to consultation.

Further evidence regarding inclusion and participation are found in the VNRs' depictions of the development and implementation of national agendas. **Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Sudan** have adopted inclusive approaches, through workshops, working groups, and other techniques for stakeholder engagement, such as using mobile applications in **Egypt**, to set their national priorities and to develop their national vision. The four countries regard this approach as necessary to guarantee broad-based national ownership.

Recognizing the need for wider participation, **Morocco** assign monitoring and evaluation functions to an inclusive body, the National Committee for Sustainable Development. The role of the committee in guiding policies and coordinating SDGs implementation is not clear, though. Also, in recognition for the necessity of broad participation, **Iraq, Lebanon, and Qatar** emphasise the need for continual dialogue with non-governmental actors, including the private sector and representatives of special social groups. It is, however, important to note that inclusion cannot work *ad hoc* but should be well-integrated within the institutional and governance structure. For participation to mean more

than just checking a reporting box, evidence for broad ownership, peer learning, and non-governmental leadership should be provided.

3.5. Analysis of Weaknesses and Challenges

Identifying challenges is a major component of any serious review. Including an analysis of obstacles and challenges to SDGs implementation is recommended in the United Nations guidelines for VNRs preparation, and this recommendation has been followed in all reviews included in this reading. Some VNRs dedicate a separate section to discussing the challenges while others include the discussion of challenges in the concluding section. **Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, and Qatar** also include analyses of sectoral challenges within each chapter of their reviews. Occasionally, plans to face the listed challenges are introduced. Typically, however, challenges are listed with little insight into their structural causes, and the plans proposed to face them tend to focus on mitigation efforts. **Iraq** and **Kuwait** provide good examples where structural challenges are highlighted.

4. Main Messages and Recommendations

4.1. Main Messages

- Carrying out voluntary national reviews, especially when adhering to the United Nations guidelines, could be beneficial to the SDGs implementation as it encourages building information base, promoting non-governmental participation, and acknowledging challenges. Making best use of the review process, however, requires ingraining such approaches to inclusion and accountability in implementation efforts not just in reporting, and this is not commonly done.
- Good governance of SDGs implementation requires strong, effective, integrative, and inclusive institutional structures incorporating clearly delineated, though interconnected, components. This prerequisite is still largely missing in the region. Existent institutional structures tend to serve reporting purposes more than to help guiding and coordinating the implementation efforts. Although institutional reform is a major component of an enabling environment, little attention to it is apparent in most reviewed VNRs.
- Leaving no one behind remains an add-on to the development vision in most countries in the region and has not yet assumed its hoped-for primacy. Typically, efforts at leaving no one behind stops at providing mitigation and safety net services to vulnerable groups. Addressing structural causes of vulnerability and integrating social justice in all policies are still largely missing from national visions.
- With only few exceptions, the implementation of the 2030 agenda remains highly sectoral and non-integrative. Lacking strong and effective institutional structure contributes to policy fragmentation.

- Due to its political and cultural heritage, inclusion and participation are not easily embraced in most countries in the Arab region. Nevertheless, the push by the SDGs agenda towards inclusion and participation starts to be felt. Admittedly, however, participation in many cases remains only nominal.
- Although all reviewed VNRs dedicate sections to listing and discussing challenges, they largely miss a unified approach to challenge analysis that probe deeper in the structural sources of the recognized challenges.
- Despite their several differences, the reviewed VNRs reveal lots of commonality across the Arab countries, especially with respect to the cultural and political challenges they face. There are several examples of good practices highlighted in the findings summarized in the previous section. Other countries could benefit from these good practices as well as many other not covered here.

4.2. Recommendations

The above list of main messages derived from the findings of this critical reading of nine VNRs by Arab states can be directly transferred to a list of recommendations. These recommendations are addressed to governments, as the custodians of the 2030 agenda, but they require support and active involvement from all stakeholders at both the national and regional levels.

- Make the best benefit from the process of preparing VNRs through integrating its approaches to inclusion and accountability into the modalities of developing and implementing national strategies and policies.
- Focus on institutional reform. Start with developing an institutional structure to lead SDGs implementation efforts that has the following characteristics: supremacy through directly reporting to the head of country or government, inclusion through including non-governmental representatives at equal footing with governmental ones, and role specificity through incorporating separate bodies with clear non-overlapping but interconnected mandates.
- Truly and consistently embrace SDGs leaving no one behind vision. Transcend mitigating vulnerability to addressing its structural causes. Leaving no one behind should not be a single section in the national vision or review, it should be the backbone of every policy and development action.
- Along with institutional reform and keeping the goal of leaving no one behind as central, be mindful of the need for policy coherence and continuous coordination. Develop and adopt integrative and multisectoral approaches for this purpose.

- Mainstream the current approaches to participation, inclusion, and accountability, as practised in VNR preparation, and continually develop these approaches such that citizens become the true owners of the national vision. Focus on producing evidence of non-governmental participants deriving and guiding the development agenda.
- Recognizing challenges is a good practice, but there is a need to produce further analyses of these challenges that probe their interconnections and interactions as well as their structural causes.
- Open channels for experience sharing and peer learning through regional organizations, such as the League of Arab States.