



Briefing Note No. 5

Voluntary National Review 2020 and Youth Perspectives

1. THE VNR FRAMEWORK AND EXPERIENCE

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are part of the follow-up and review mechanisms of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development. This is done to encourage member states to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels. The VNRs aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 agenda. These reviews also seek to strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilise multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

VNRs are assessed based on three criteria viz. transparency, accountability and effectiveness. Through participating in the VNR process, government of a country wants to uphold its development efforts transparently to its citizens and to the global observants. As the preparation for the VNR is a participatory process, the government also goes through an accountability procedure, both nationally and globally. Finally, to meet the effectiveness criteria, countries must take note of feedback for carrying out midcourse corrections and moving forward. As of yet, these three criteria have not been maintained stringently and major global criticism remains regarding the VNR process – there is no follow-up and review process post presentation.

Bangladesh in the VNR process

In June 2017, Bangladesh submitted its first VNR report to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) of the United Nations. The report included key updates on SDG 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14 and also highlighted relevant aspects of means of implementation. In July 2020, Bangladesh presented its second VNR report to the HLPF. While the second submission of the VNR report highlights the progress covering all the 17 SDGs, the associated gaps, risks and opportunities must be looked into as well.

Bangladesh is among the three Asian countries which received the UN Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Awards for its commendable progress in attaining the goals, particularly in reducing child mortality. The legacy and achievements of the MDGs paved the way to embark on the journey of achieving the SDGs. In contrast to the MDGs, which did not have adequate accountability mechanism, the SDGs take into account the VNRs. Bangladesh has attended the VNR two times in five years. The year 2020 is of particular importance being the first year marking a decade of action, leaving only ten more years for achieving the 2030 Agenda. The collective interest surrounding implementation of the SDGs is there to ensure that no unfinished business remains in their implementation. This was evident in case of some MDGs.



There exists a youth community comprised of engaged and disengaged sections. In order to pursue the 'whole-of-society' approach, there needs to be a special mechanism to reach the disengaged youth, whose engagement has further aggravated due to COVID-19 and the digital divide. The pandemic has affected the women and girl children in particular. Small ethnic groups, Dalits, and the third gender have also been very visible as part of the groups left behind. To overcome this situation, taking full advantage of the available government facilities and initiatives is crucial along with ensuring their effectiveness.

Rationale of incorporating youth perspectives in the VNR process

Globally, the number of young people is about 1.8 billion and most of these youth are living in developing countries. In order to successfully implement the 2030 Agenda, the changes in demographics taking place over the next 15 years and beyond need to be highlighted greatly. At present, Bangladesh stands at the midway point of the demographic dividend that emerged in 2007 with more than 33 per cent of the total population representing the youth aged between 18-35 years. This demographic dividend has a possibility of turning into a 'demographic disaster' if there is no suitable environment for the youth to contribute effectively to the country's socio-economic development. In fact, almost 30 per cent of the youth in Bangladesh are not engaged in any sort of education, employment or training, with the majority of them being women. By ensuring equal opportunities to both boys and girls in education and freedom from all sort of violence, the demographic dividend can be maximised.

The VNR is an important process that must consider the diversities and contributions of young people. Although the VNR report states that youth are prime movers, acknowledgement of youth-led initiatives in terms of voluntary work, entrepreneurship, etc. was missing in it. Several goals of the VNR mentioned working with and for the youth, but the sort of activities being carried out and their effectiveness was absent.

Adequate participation and contribution of the youth in the national development and SDG implementation process is a pre-requisite for sustainability in the development progress of Bangladesh. It is essential to keep the youth as one of the core elements and provide sufficient time and space for the dialogue involving them while moving forward. The VNRs can provide such an opportunity. By fulfilling each and every young person's potential, sustainable graduation towards national progress can be attained.

2. THE DIALOGUE

In this backdrop, The Daily Star, in association with Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and Plan International Bangladesh, organised a virtual policy dialogue titled "Voluntary National Review 2020 and Youth Perspectives" on July 16, 2020. The session was moderated by Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, Convener, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) with Mahfuz Anam, Editor and Publisher, The Daily Star as chair of the session. Panellists included: Saber Hossain Chowdhury, MP; Honorary President, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU); and Chairman, Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change; Dr Shamsul Alam, Member (Senior



Secretary), General Economics Division (GED), Bangladesh Planning Commission; Md Rashadul Islam, Director General, NGO Affairs Bureau, Prime Minister's Office; Orla Murphy, Country Director, Plan International Bangladesh; Asa Britta Torkelsson, Country Representative, UNFPA Bangladesh; Kashfia Feroz, Head of Influencing, Plan International Bangladesh; Reneka Ahmed Antu, National Girl Child Advocacy Forum (PNGO-GAA); Mishal Bin Salim, National Girl Child Advocacy Forum (PNGO-GAA); Halima Akhter, EDUCO Bangladesh; Ferdousi Begum, Uddipon; Kothok Biswas, National Children's Task Force; Swapan Kumar Guha, Rupantar; Mahmudul Hasan, UNDP; Reefat Bin Sattar, Save the Children Bangladesh; Asif Ibrahim, Core Group Member, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh; Rafiqul Islam, Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB); and Professor Mustafizur Rahman, Distinguished Fellow, CPD and Core Group Member, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh. The event was live-streamed on The Daily Star's social media receiving great public exposure.

Kashfia Feroz, Head of Influencing, Plan International Bangladesh, made the keynote presentation. It provides specific policy recommendations to the concerned authorities based on the issues and challenges brought to surface from the discussion at the dialogue. It is hoped that the findings will prove to be useful in the formulation of effective strategies towards voicing the youth in national commitments and reports and specifically in future VNRs.

3. KEY INTERVENTIONS

Motivations for countries to join in the VNR process

Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, Convener, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), pointed out three major motivations which drive the countries aspiring to achieve the 2030 Agenda in joining the VNR process. Firstly, member countries get an opportunity to showcase their development success in front of the global community at the HLPF platform. They also learn about the challenges and good-practices facing certain SDGs from their peer nations. Their efforts behind the progress in achieving the SDGs are duly accredited through the participation in the VNR process. Secondly, the countries want to encourage the global community to support their efforts. Thirdly, through receiving encouragement or endorsement from the global community, political and developmental legitimacy can be earned to some extent.

Creation of an environment for the youth voices to be heard

According to Mr Mahfuz Anam, Editor and Publisher, The Daily Star, an environment of tolerance and acceptance needs to be created for the youth voices to be heard, along with those of the non-state actors. Bangladesh's youth can be divided into two groups based on the privileges received and accesses to technology and education. In order to achieve simultaneous progress in these two diversified youth communities of Bangladesh, a comprehensive national campaign can be undertaken. This will involve the youth in the formulation and implementation of the SDG process. Different perspectives and views of the non-state actors need to be welcomed. An environment of acceptance, tolerance of divergent views and the assurance that



the different perspectives ultimately gets incorporated into the collective thinking are critically important for non-state actors' effective involvement in the SDG process.

Two-way responsibility in SDG implementation

Dr Shamsul Alam, Member (Senior Secretary), General Economics Division (GED), Bangladesh Planning Commission, highlighted Bangladesh's achievements and progresses in a number of SDG indicators that have been presented in the VNR report. These include achievements in attaining a lower stunting rate, acceleration of economic growth, increments in value addition from manufacturing, along with transformational changes which are evident in the economic structure. The upcoming Eighth Five-Year Plan considers the implementation of Bangladesh's second Perspective Plan 2021-2041 as its main task. The extent to which the COVID-19 fallout can be contained will determine how close Bangladesh can be towards reaching the upper-middle-income country status by 2031. This plan centres on important issues such as rapid recovery from the COVID-19 crisis to restore human health, confidence, employment, income and economic activities. With increased allocations in health, education and social protection, the youth are to be highly benefitted. Technical and vocational education and skills development are also to be given more emphasis.

The 2030 Agenda is designed in such a way that it bestows the responsibility of SDG implementation to not only the government but also to every responsible citizen. Businesses, community leaders, and media have significant roles to play to influence the government. This two-way responsibility delineates the effectiveness of SDG implementation through the resilient role of a vibrant society.

Enhancing youth integration through appropriate measures

In case of 2030 Agenda, the targets, goals, as well as the indicators of whether they have been achieved, are all provided. This does not provide much space for differing opinions. The only space where a difference in opinion can exist is while deciding on the strategies to reach the goals. However, there is no argument when it comes to the globally agreed-upon goals as the HLPF is primarily country-led and country-driven.

Mr Saber Hossain Chowdhury, MP; Honorary President, IPU; Chairman, Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, also mentioned a draft bill that has already been created to defunct the Evidence Act. According to the current act, if a woman, who is a victim of rape, goes to court, her character and her past can be questioned. The main issue pertaining to cases of rape is consent. If the matter of consent is ignored while these other factors are brought up, many legal obstacles can occur. Many parts of the Act are to be amended by the Ministry of Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. Mentioned changes will be included there as well.

2030 Agenda should be presented to the youth as their agenda. Youth engagement is highly required as responsibility of implementing the SDGs will be theirs in the future. Also, it is the youth who will reap the maximum benefits of the SDGs. The parliamentary system, standing committees, and planning commissions are fora that should be used to amplify different voices.



Discussions should centre on whether the numerous publications and reports produced so far are realistic and making a difference.

All the SDGs are equally significant. But if one is to be spotlighted, then it should be SDG 16 which relates to the governance aspect of development. The quality of our achievements is ultimately going to be determined by governance. The difference between the MDGs and SDGs is the governance mechanism. The funding required to implement the SDGs is about 20 per cent of Bangladesh's GDP. A large portion of this comes from tax money. Therefore, the discourse on SDGs must take an inclusive approach. The more the youth in Bangladesh talk about these issues, the more its governance and oversight mechanism will improve.

Importance of GO-NGO collaboration on the verge of the fourth industrial revolution

Mr Md Rashadul Islam, Director General, NGO Affairs Bureau, Prime Minister's Office, Government of Bangladesh, mentioned that the NGO Affairs Bureau's main tasks revolve around supporting the disadvantaged groups. This is carried out with the assistance from the NGOs under both usual and unusual circumstances. NGOs work beside the government and play an important role in a nation's development. Additionally, the pandemic has provided the nations an opportunity to work towards a common goal, setting aside their differences. Mr Islam stressed on the significant role of innovative ideas, alongside the knowledge of information technology, on the verge of the fourth industrial revolution. In this backdrop, youth are given much importance through political commitments which is clearly reflected in the 2018 election manifesto as well as in the national budget. Collaboration between the government and NGOs, particularly at the grassroots level, will be helpful in closing the existing gaps and therefore supporting the government to reach its goals in this context.

4. MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing a National Child Rights Commission

As stipulated in the Children Policy, it is high time for Bangladesh to establish a National Child Rights Commission (NCRC). Strengthening of the Children's Welfare Board and district-based monitoring and supervision system with a view to effectively implement the Child Marriage Restraint Rules 2018 and Children Act 2013 is also necessitated. Following the government's plan of eradicating child marriage by 2030, a separate section should be introduced in the national budget addressing this issue. A comprehensive policy should be prepared for sexual harassment as well. According to the report of Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF) – a national network of non-government organisations, at least 1,387 children have been abused during the January to June period of 2020. The trial process has also become quite difficult as the victims themselves are also reluctant to come out and seek help from the authorities. Therefore, the government needs to look into incidences for child abuse and make the complaint process easier to ensure swift justice.



Strengthening of the policy framework regarding GBV issues

Gender-based violence (GBV) has seen a new rise specifically in the period of lockdown induced by the pandemic. According to Manusher Jonno Foundation, 1,672 women have become victims of abuse for the first time during this lockdown. Certain measures need to be taken to ensure their safety. The government of Bangladesh has supported the establishment of a strong policy framework, introducing laws and national plans of action, which work as the foundation in achieving SDG 5. Some of these include the Child Marriage Restraint Act, the High Court verdict on the prevention of sexual harassment in schools and workplaces, the commitment of the government around primary and secondary school enrolment. The government now needs to strengthen the implementation of the existing sexual violence legislation, including the high court directive on sexual harassment. Bangladesh's penal code is sorely in need of amendments to better protect rape assault victims. Along with that, amendment of section 155(4) of the Evidence Act, 1872, which states "when a man is prosecuted for rape or an attempt to ravish, it may be shown that the prosecutrix was of generally immoral character" is necessary in Bangladesh. There is no measurement of immoral character and such a clause may create unnecessary complications. Also, neighbouring countries such as India and Pakistan have already amended it. Moreover, the allocation of resources needs to be increased to successfully implement the National Plan of Action to end violence against women and children (2013-2025).

Mainstreaming of the SRHR issues

Raising awareness regarding taboo topics such as menstruation will help accelerate the process of SDG implementation. Although use of sanitary napkins by women has increased to 20 per cent from the prevailing 14 per cent in 2015, more awareness needs to be raised by both the public and private sectors. This will increase the usage and reduce associated diseases among women. The increasing prices of sanitary napkins need to be brought down in order to ensure that women from all backgrounds have access to personal hygiene products. The government could allocate separate funds for the menstrual hygiene of women. In order to implement the National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030), the allocation of budget needs to be specified and if needed, increased. Increasing and improving the Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (ASRHR) services is a key objective of the Adolescent Health Strategy. Age specific comprehensive sexuality education, in Primary and Secondary needs to be included as part of the formal curriculum. A Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) corner should be established at every school, college, industry, and office with a proper monitoring system. Apart from these, revamping the existing family planning programmes is highly required. In Bangladesh, religious leaders play a key role in influencing mind-sets and gender norms. The government can intervene in this key aspect to bring a change in the view and perspective of the masses.



Creating a safe environment in social media

Public awareness campaigns led by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs should be undertaken through media with a view to combatting online sexual exploitation. Defining and including the new forms of cyber-crimes in existing Acts, such as The Digital Security Act 2018, Pornography Control Act 2012, The Information and Communication Technology Act 2013 should be prioritised. In response to the continuous spread of radical content through social media, Gateway monitoring needs to be strengthened.

Improving partnerships within the country

In order to achieve SDG 17, partnerships within the country need to develop. The parliamentary system, standing committees, and planning commissions are fora that should be used to amplify different voices and NGOs. More focus needs to be drawn on partnerships between civil societies, NGOs, youths and gender issues. A mechanism for institutional linkage between NGOs and the government bodies need to be developed. A national level platform should be formed including government agencies, civil society organisations (CSOs), development partners, think tanks, academicians and youth representatives. An environment of acceptance, tolerance of divergent views, and assurance of incorporating the different perspectives in collective thinking are fundamental prerequisites of the non-state actors' effective involvement in the SDG implementation process.

Ensuring decent employment for youth

The pandemic strikes a challenge to the government by putting it off-track from the road of achieving the SDGs. The economic cost of the COVID-19 fallout globally stands at nine trillion dollars, which is only ever increasing. Globally, one in six young people have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. The massive gap in financing within the dimensions of the SDGs also stands at around 2.3 – 3.0 trillion dollars each year. Facing such substantial financial losses, it is critical for the government to jumpstart the economy and generate employment. The post-pandemic situation is expected to have a large number of students as dropouts, who will in turn become labourers, victims of child marriages and child trafficking. An integrated SDG framework led by goal 8 to ensure decent employment for the youth will render useful in the context of the recent and future unemployment scenario triggered by the pandemic. The government can collaborate with the NGOs to ameliorate the conditions of the youths who are facing unemployment or losses, especially in the remote areas.

Although vocational skills training is being provided to youths, their business start-up costs after the training are not being considered. Bringing down the business start-up costs to a more affordable range for entrepreneurs is necessary as the loan strategy to start businesses has not been quite effective. A reform of the vocational skills systems should be considered to popularise technical education and facilitate access. Mainstreaming technical education in secondary schools could be particularly helpful to this end.

Safeguarding youth's mental health

The issue of mental well-being has gained renewed significance in the backdrop of the lockdown. To ensure a healthy stable mind of the youth and ensure their job-security in future,



initiatives regarding improving extracurricular skills should be undertaken which can be carried out through online training programmes. In Bangladesh, UNFPA has set up a helpline called Alapon to provide psychosocial support to adolescents and youth since the usual ways of providing support have now been deeply challenged by the pandemic. The helpline is managed by professional counsellors who can answer the numerous questions that adolescents and youth may have due to this unprecedented situation. Such innovations are of dire need to ensure the mental well-being of the youth.

Integrating youth voices in national commitments

As mentioned in the National Youth Policy, youth are envisaged to be actively involved in decision-making at local, national and international levels and also take part in the SDG implementation processes. Mobilisation of resources in this context should be accelerated. The policy also talked about the formation of a group under the leadership of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, through which youth policy implementations would be monitored. Follow-up regarding this initiative is necessary. Youth from the indigenous communities need to be more included in youth leadership and participation platforms. There should be separate chapter in the budget for all policies related to the indigenous community.

Positioning women through creation of safe political and civic space

To encourage young women and girls' agency building and active participation in leadership roles, creation of a safe political and civic space is highly necessary. All government orders, policies, directives and referral pathways concerning prevention of and response on gender-based discrimination should be widely disseminated at the grassroots level. In order to reduce gender inequality and attain SDG 5, it is important to provide recognition to, reduction and redistribution of women's unpaid care work in regional frameworks and national policies. Despite the declaration of a high court verdict regarding laws protecting women in workplace in 2009, transformation of the law has not taken place. The government should take active measures to transform this verdict into a law. This will ensure gender equality and women's rights specifically in workplaces.

Introduction of policies pertaining to climate refugees

Policies addressing climate refugees need to be introduced while setting up mechanism to ensure rehabilitation of the refugees and migrants. Also, in this regard, climate literacy and basic science should be mainstreamed into the curriculum.

Introduction/alignment of a separate department (more) dedicated to youth

In terms of ministry alignment, combining youth and ICT might provide more synergistic results instead of the present combination of youth and sports. The present alignment of 'youth and sports' does not adequately reflect the youth's capability and potential of contributing to economic growth. Specifically, in view of the Fourth Industrial Revolution which is surrounding Artificial Intelligence (AI), combining youth and ICT will render beneficial as the entire ICT process will be youth driven.



5. FOLLOW UP

Plan International Bangladesh, in association with Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, has already carried out a series of initiatives focusing youth positioning. These include Capacity building Workshop on SDG Accountability Framework with Youth, Consultation Workshop on VNR Bangladesh: Framework, Modalities and Expectation, and, National Consultation on VNR 2020 Bangladesh: Positioning Non-State Actors. There is also an effort to link the youth with different consultations and virtual HLPF side events so that they can contribute and share their views and opinions. The dialogue on "VNR 2020 and Youth Perspectives" again brought up the importance of youth integration in development process through different views of the panellists. It is evident that without integrating the youth into national development processes, the fruitfulness of the implementation of the SDGs will remain incomplete as it is the youth who will be benefitted the most from the SDGs. To make proper utilisation of this demographic dividend, this policy note, inclusive of the key interventions and rich recommendations emerged from the virtual dialogue, will be disseminated among the concerned stakeholders and authorities with due diligence. These consist of the Prime Minister's Office, various line ministries, relevant government agencies, development partners, and other stakeholders. Further use of the policy brief is also expected by the Partner Organisations of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs in future respective works and in advocacy with other stakeholder groups.