



Environmental Audit Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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Baroness Sugg
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
Department for International Development
22 Whitehall
London SW1A 2EG

04 June 2019

The UK's Voluntary National Review of the Sustainable Development Goals

Dear Baroness Sugg,

Thank you for providing evidence to the Committee on the Voluntary National Review (VNR) of UK progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and for your subsequent letter. As you will be aware, the Chair of the International Development Committee and I had previously written jointly to the Secretary of State for International Development to request that the Government considers holding a Parliamentary debate in Government time on the VNR before the Government sends the final report to the UN on 14 June. Following our evidence session, I am writing again to reiterate this call for a Parliamentary debate, and to follow up on some of the issues raised during the session.

Stakeholder engagement and “Leave No One Behind”

The UN Guidelines set out that a VNR should be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent, and support reporting by all relevant stakeholders.¹ DfID's written evidence said that the VNR would “reiterate” the UK's 2030 Agenda to “leave no one behind”.²

However, Scotland's International Development Alliance, WWF and Bond SDG group said that they were not confident that the UK's VNR was aligned with the UN's Guidelines, particularly in this area. Their written evidence to us pointed to stakeholder engagement being limited and often at short notice.³ UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) said that the lack of a transparent process for engagement meant that they received last minute and ad hoc requests to promote engagement opportunities to their network, which limited stakeholder engagement.⁴ For example, they were given three days' notice for an event by BEIS on Goals 7, 9 and 13.

Disability Rights UK told us that such limited notice had been a barrier to attendance, particularly for people with access and support needs and those who do not live in London, as well as a barrier to engagement with high-level representatives from stakeholder organisations. Direct engagement with

¹ United Nations, [Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: The 2019 Edition](#), (October 2018), p.57

² Department for International Development ([VNR0015](#))

³ Scotland's International Development Alliance ([VNR0007](#)), WWF ([VNR0012](#)), Bond ([VNR0014](#))

⁴ UKSSD ([VNR0010](#))

non-professional members of seldom-heard groups appeared limited.⁵ The British Deaf Association could find no materials about the process in accessible formats such as British Sign Language, further excluding deaf and disabled people from the VNR process.⁶

Failure to acknowledge areas of poor performance

Government has missed the opportunity to use the VNR as an honest self-assessment. The UN Guidelines set out that a VNR will identify achievements, and success factors, but also challenges and gaps in implementation.⁷ However, written submissions to our call for evidence repeatedly pointed to areas where Government had only focused on positive issues. For example, Disability Rights UK told us that at their stakeholder session, requests were made for “only positive case studies”:

Engagement did not feel tokenistic, but civil servants involved only wanted to hear good news. Requests were made for case studies, but only positive case studies, not areas that needed improvement. Civil Servants were receptive to hearing about the (many) areas of failure identified by stakeholders, but were very clear that these would not be included in the review.⁸

There was particular concern around the quality of the UK’s Emerging Findings and Further Engagement (EFFE) document, which was used to engage with stakeholders during the VNR process. Disability Rights UK, Scotland’s International Development Alliance, UKSSD, the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM), The Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education, WWF and Bond SDG Group all found that the EFFE ignored widespread areas of concern and seemed only to report on positive things.⁹ CIWEM argued that “the VNR should be an honest assessment, not a glossy brochure” but claimed that presentation of water issues in the EFFE “borders on greenwash”.¹⁰

We wrote to the Chairs of a number of Select Committee Chairs to ask them their views on Government’s progress in meeting the goals within each Committee’s remit, and whether any of them had been approached as key stakeholders in the VNR. Many raised multiple and significant issues, such as poor performance in children’s services, inequalities in education, rising poverty among children and pensioners, the housing crisis and high levels of online fraud, which had not been covered in the EFFE document.¹¹

For example, the Chair of the Education Committee highlighted that the EFFE failed to mention the rising number of exclusions in England or the Committee’s concerns at the practice of “off-rolling”, when a pupil leaves the school roll for a reason other than legal exclusion, such as to improve a school’s results, or to

⁵ Disability Rights UK ([VNR0013](#))

⁶ British Deaf Association ([VNR0017](#))

⁷ United Nations, [Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: The 2019 Edition](#), (October 2018), p.57

⁸ Disability Rights UK ([VNR0013](#))

⁹ Disability Rights UK ([VNR0013](#)), Scotland's International Development Alliance ([VNR0007](#)), UKSSD ([VNR0010](#)), The Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management ([VNR0002](#)), EAUC ([VNR0011](#)), WWF ([VNR0012](#)), Bond ([VNR0014](#))

¹⁰ The Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management ([VNR0002](#))

¹¹ [Letter from the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee to the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee](#), 15 April 2019, [Letter from the Chair of the Education Committee to the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee](#), 11 April 2019, [Letter from the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee to the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee](#), 1 April 2019

relieve financial pressures on schools.¹² The Education Committee had heard that “disadvantaged pupils, such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and black and minority ethnic pupils” were at particular risk of these practices, leaving them unable to access appropriate education. Similarly, the EFFE’s section on Goal 2: Zero Hunger failed to mention the significant concerns of the Environmental Audit Committee in its SDGs follow-up report, which found that severe food insecurity in the UK was amongst the worst in Europe, particularly for children.¹³

None of the Select Committee Chairs had been approached to share their expertise as part of the VNR process. The Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee said that he feared that the VNR had failed to systematically capture the views of select committees on the UK’s progress towards the SDGs.¹⁴

Parliamentary oversight

The UN Guidelines stipulate that Members of Parliament should be considered in the stakeholder engagement plan for the VNR.¹⁵ In October 2018, Lord Bates assured the Committee that there would be a mechanism for consulting Parliament on progress towards the VNR before May 2019.¹⁶ The EFFE document was subsequently published on 4 March 2019, and was allocated one session for Parliamentary oversight on 11 March 2019. Prior to this, we note that DFID had not scheduled specific time for Parliamentary scrutiny of the VNR.

We note that the then Secretary of State was only able to attend the meeting for one hour, which was inadequate for the Members present to voice their concerns or fully scrutinise the document. There were considerable criticisms of the EFFE raised at this meeting, including omissions of significant areas of poor performance and inadequate coverage of the most vulnerable people in society. During our evidence session, you clarified that the EFFE was “never intended to be a draft of the VNR” and was instead a “tool...to continue the conversation.”¹⁷ Neil Briscoe, Head of the Global Partnerships and Multilateral Effectiveness Department, assured my Committee that the EFFE is “not how the VNR is looking” now.¹⁸

Given the truncated opportunity for oversight, the substantial criticisms of the EFFE and the fact that the EFFE is not and was never intended to be a draft VNR, we consider that Parliament has not had a genuine opportunity to contribute towards and to scrutinise the VNR. We therefore reiterate the request made in my joint letter with the Chair of the International Development Committee for Government to hold a debate in Government time on the VNR, to give MPs the opportunity to engage formally and more comprehensively with the full review on the floor of the House. This debate should be held before the Government sends its final report to the UN on the 14 June.

¹² [Letter from the Chair of the Education Committee to the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee](#), 11 April 2019

¹³ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow-up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK](#), HC 1491, (January 2019), p.4

¹⁴ [Letter from the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee to the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee](#), 15 April 2019

¹⁵ United Nations, [Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: The 2019 Edition](#), (October 2018), p.14

¹⁶ Lord Bates, [Q99](#), Oral Evidence: Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow-up, Tuesday 23 October 2018

¹⁷ Baroness Sugg, Oral Evidence: Voluntary National Review of UK progress against the Sustainable Development Goals, Wednesday 8 May 2019, [Q43](#) and [Q29](#)

¹⁸ Neil Briscoe, Oral Evidence: Voluntary National Review of UK progress against the Sustainable Development Goals, Wednesday 8 May 2019, [Q84](#)

Raising awareness and embedding the SDGs

The Committee's 2017 inquiry into the Sustainable Development Goals in the UK described awareness of the goals as "shockingly low," and its January 2019 follow-up inquiry found that still "the Government has not yet done enough to drive awareness and embed the SDGs across the UK—including within Government itself."¹⁹

Your letter acknowledged that data from the Aid Attitudes in July 2018 showed that just 9 per cent of respondents knew what the SDGs were. One of the purposes of the VNR is to "strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilise multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals". However, by truncating the opportunities for stakeholder engagement, and failing to engage meaningfully to identify areas of poor performance, the VNR has not fulfilled its potential role in raising the profile of the SDGs and mobilising action.

The SDGs are also not adequately embedded in Government's activities. The Committee has repeatedly criticised the Single Departmental Plans (SDPs) as Government's chosen mechanism for implementing the SDGs. In our most recent report, *SDGs in the UK follow-up* (January 2019), the Committee found that in their present format the SDPs are "insufficient to deliver the SDGs in the UK" and that "Government's failure to ensure that all SDG targets are covered in the SDPs has left significant gaps in plans and accountability".²⁰

The VNR's main messages statement acknowledged that the VNR has emphasised "how much of sustainable development depends not just upon government but also on civil society and the private sector too." Achieving the sustainable development goals will not be possible unless government, civil society, the private sector and the public are aware of the SDGs and embedding them in their activities.

Future Voluntary National Reviews

The UK is not among the first to submit their VNR, with 111 countries having already presented their VNRs at the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development between 2016 and 2018.²¹ Moreover, we note that while the UK is submitting its first VNR this year, ten countries will present their second: Azerbaijan, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, France, Guatemala, Indonesia, Philippines, Sierra Leone and Turkey.²²

It does not match the UK's leading role in developing the SDGs to be seen to be lagging behind in reporting on progress through the VNR. WWF told us that the Government should commit to another VNR before 2023 and UKSSD said this should be by 2025. Scotland's International Development Alliance said it should commit to a second VNR, and the process should be refined to:

Review progress against all 169 targets and consider interlinkages between the goals, identify accelerators and develop plans to take them forward;

Look at lessons from other countries, including the countries and regions within the UK with devolved government; Scotland and Wales both have different and

¹⁹ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Sustainable Development Goals in the UK](#), HC596, (March 2017), p.6; House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, [Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow-up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK](#), HC 1491, (January 2019), p.4

²⁰ Environmental Audit Committee, [Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow-up](#), p.4

²¹ <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/51-countries-preparing-to-present-national-sdg-reviews-at-hlpf-2019/>

²² Ibid.

progressive approaches to delivering and tracking the SDGs and their experiences should be incorporated throughout the report;

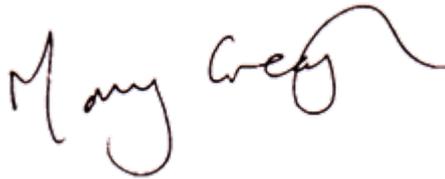
Review existing international comparisons in some sectors, which do measure all countries of the world using the same methodology, and treating all equally...;

Focus on both domestic delivery and the UK's global impact on SDGs through ODA and its footprint e.g. trade, consumption and environmental footprints;

Engage stakeholders systematically and inclusively; to do this properly requires a clear methodology, budget and time.

We encourage the UK Government to take on board the lessons learned in conducting this VNR and to commit to conducting its next VNR before 2023.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Mary Creagh', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mary Creagh MP
Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee

CC: Rory Stewart, Secretary of State for International Development