

International Development Committee

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From Stephen Twigg MP, Chair

The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP
Secretary of State
Department for International Development

2 April 2019

Dear Penny,

UK Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals

Thank you for your recent appearance before the Committee to give evidence on the UK's Voluntary National Review (VNR) on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As the Government prepares to submit its "main messages" to the United Nations (UN) in May, in advance of the presentation of the VNR at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July, the Committee is keen to share its assessment of the process so far, including lessons learned and some informal recommendations.

Timeline

To date, 111 countries have submitted their VNRs to the UN. Despite the UK being at the forefront of the negotiation of the SDGs, the Government has been slow to put itself forward to present its first VNR, finally committing in November 2017 to present its VNR at the 2019 HLPF.¹ In doing so, the UK has fallen behind other OECD nations, which have already submitted their first reviews, including Germany (2016), France (2016), Sweden (2017), Canada (2018) and Ireland (2018). DFID's written evidence states that "the UK's leadership on this agenda means UN Member States are looking to the UK to deliver a strong and high-quality VNR".² It is worth noting that the bar for what constitutes a good VNR has been raised significantly in the last three years, by both developed and developing countries, and the expectations on the UK may be even higher.

Despite having more than eighteen months to consult on and complete the VNR, the timeline seems to have been unnecessarily tight, with a flurry of activity taking place in the last eight months. DFID hosted its first stakeholder meeting on the VNR on 31 July 2018, eight months after the commitment to report was made.³ Departmental 'Champions' – described by DFID as

¹ [Letter](#) from Lord Bates to Maria Miller MP, Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, 15 November 2017

² DFID ([SDG0017](#))

³ ["Creating the UK's Voluntary National Review on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals"](#), UK Open Government, 2 August 2018

“responsible for supporting production of the review” - were not appointed until late October 2018, and were then given very short time-frames within which to produce contributions to an ‘Emerging Findings and Future Engagement’ document.⁴ The Government’s VNR website states that “initial drafting” was still taking place between October and December 2018.⁵ DFID’s stakeholder engagement events – the only comprehensive attempt to reach out to different groups on the VNR, including parliamentarians - did not then take place until March 2019.

The Government has known about the VNR process since its inception in 2015. It will have had a period of over eighteen months since committing to its first VNR by the deadline for presentation at the UN in July 2019. It is clear that this time could have been used much more effectively, and that the vast majority of purposeful activity has been squeezed into the final eight months before submission.

When embarking on future VNRs, the Government should produce a detailed, publicly-available timeline as soon as the Review is announced, including the main deliverables and deadlines.⁶ This would help focus minds across Government and enable stakeholders to engage more effectively with the process.

Stakeholder engagement

One of the founding principles of the 2030 Agenda is “the requirement for all implementation and follow-up processes to be participatory and inclusive”.⁷ Stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, Parliament and national human rights institutions, as well as the general public, should be involved in the VNR.⁸

UK-based civil society organisations have been very active on the SDGs agenda and have offered engagement and support throughout the VNR process, especially membership organisations, UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) and the Bond SDGs Group. We note that these two organisations, together with the UN Global Compact, sent a brief to DFID in March 2018 – over a year ago – making detailed recommendations for developing the UK’s VNR.⁹ Parliamentarians have also continued to be very engaged in the 2030 Agenda, with regular consideration of the Goals in both Houses since 2015.¹⁰ Lord Bates spoke

⁴ DFID written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry, ‘Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow Up’ ([SDF0029](#)); [Q53](#)

⁵ ‘[About the Voluntary National Review](#)’, Gov.uk, accessed 28 March 2019

⁶ UNDESA, [Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: The 2019 Edition](#)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Bond and UKSSD, [Recommendations for developing the UK VNR 2019](#), 28 March 2018

¹⁰ [Hansard: Sustainable Development Goals](#), accessed 29 March 2019

passionately in evidence to us about the engagement of young people in the agenda.¹¹

However, despite the enthusiasm from stakeholders, the Government's engagement with them during the VNR process has been described as "limited and selective".¹² Bond told us, "the Government has not been clear about specific opportunities for consultation with non-government stakeholders within the VNR process."¹³ In October 2018, the Government invited individuals and groups to share how they were contributing to the SDGs by completing a survey on the new VNR website. We understand that you have had many contributions via this process. Whilst we welcome the provision of an open and accessible online platform to engage with the VNR, this could have been used in a much more meaningful way. UKSSD told us the approach of collecting case studies, "will not provide a sufficiently meaningful approach to yield a rigorous VNR."¹⁴

As Lord Bates emphasised in evidence, it was left to each Government Department to "consult with its stakeholders on the goals for which it is responsible" in the VNR.¹⁵ This seems to have resulted in very different levels of activity across departments according to our evidence from both stakeholder groups and senior responsible officials within departments.

When stakeholder engagement events – including an event for parliamentarians - were finally announced by DFID, we were disappointed to find that the accompanying documentation (the 'Emerging Findings and Future Engagement' document) was merely a snapshot of progress and activity, prohibiting us from engaging fully with the emerging findings of the VNR. However, we welcome your assertion in evidence that,

"...when we produce the document, there will still be time for people to tell us what they think and what we should be doing in terms of the final presentation."¹⁶

We are pleased that there will be room for further consultation on the VNR before submission to the UN and look forward to taking you up on this opportunity. For our own planning purposes, we would be grateful to know when the final document will be ready for review and what format this engagement will take.

Stakeholders could have been engaged in the VNR process in a much more meaningful way. Asking for case studies of stakeholder implementation, without giving interested groups the opportunity to *meaningfully* participate in

¹¹ [Q70](#)

¹² UKSSD ([SDG0029](#))

¹³ Bond ([SDG0018](#))

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ [Q86](#)

¹⁶ [Q89](#)

bringing the review together, has caused disquiet amongst organisations with much to offer on this agenda.

The 2019 VNR should outline a clear strategy for ongoing stakeholder engagement on the UK's implementation of the SDGs. Parliamentarians, civil society organisations, community groups, charities, individuals and businesses have reached out to the Government during this process. If harnessed correctly, and combined with Government action, a powerful coalition for change could be created from this process.

For future VNR processes, the Government should produce a comprehensive stakeholder engagement plan at the outset, which ensures that a wide range of stakeholders are involved in the process at an early stage and have a chance to engage constructively with the review.

Cross-government coordination

Cross-government engagement with the SDGs – up to this point – has been woefully insufficient. Outside of DFID there is still very limited knowledge of the Goals amongst Whitehall officials. Given that the UK signed up to achieve the SDGs in 2015, well over three years ago, this is just not good enough.

The allocation of Goals (chapters within the VNR) to different government departments and the appointment of director-level departmental 'Champions' are very positive initiatives, ensuring buy-in amongst senior officials and ensuring civil servants and Ministers across Government are accountable for the delivery of the review. However, these initiatives have been limited in their implementation by the failure to engage departments at an earlier stage in the process or to fully appraise these senior officials of their roles.

We are not convinced that DFID should be leading on the coordination of the VNR, or that DFID should remain the Cabinet-lead for implementation of the SDGs across Government. This is something that we will address further in the next part of our inquiry.

When conducting future VNRs, we recommend that a specific team within the Cabinet Office's Implementation Unit is given responsibility for coordinating the review, with final sign-off from the Prime Minister. This would reflect more accurately the whole-of-Government nature of the SDGs agenda and VNR process, which requires leadership from the very top of Government.

The VNR

As the 'Emerging Findings and Further Engagement' document was so high-level, we have so far been unable to engage with the format of the VNR. It is clear from evidence taken in mid-March that – at this stage – even other government departments are unclear as to what the final product will look

like.¹⁷ We hope that the Government is paying due attention to this now and look forward to reviewing the document before its submission to the UN.

There are very clear guidelines on what the VNR should include, laid out in the UN's Handbook for Voluntary National Reviews. Evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee from Dr Graham Long also set out very clearly what the VNR should include:

1. A rigorous assessment of governance for, and implementation of, this integrated and universal agenda;
2. A focus on those furthest behind in the UK context, and their human rights;
3. Reporting on participation and inclusion in the review;
4. Reporting on awareness-building efforts;
5. Presence of stakeholder perspectives in the review.¹⁸

We would add to this that we would like to see the report reference each Goal, target and indicator. This should include data on progress (including comprehensive and rigorous assessment of where we need to do more), commentary and forward plans. The Office for National Statistics has made significant progress in identifying and creating datasets to measure the UK's progress against the SDG targets and indicators, so we hope that we can present a comprehensive picture of the current situation for the whole of the UK – including the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies - and where we must go further.¹⁹

Crucial to the VNR should be a focus on "leave no one behind", to ensure that the UK's assessment of progress and gaps focuses in on the most marginalised groups, in the UK and overseas. This will mean addressing some uncomfortable issues, such as income inequality, hunger and child poverty, and assessments of the UK's human rights record, including CEDAW²⁰ and Professor Philip Alston's recent report.²¹ As you told us in evidence: "the best reviews are honest".²²

Of course, we are also keen to see a substantive assessment of how the UK is contributing to the SDGs overseas in the VNR. We agree with Bond's assertion that "the VNR presents an opportunity to engage meaningfully with 'beneficiaries' of the UK government's international programming". We hope that there are plans to do this and we know this is something that Bond's member organisations would be happy to support.

¹⁷ [Q30](#)

¹⁸ Dr Graham Long written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry, 'Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow Up' ([SDF0019](#)) (Dr Long was recently appointed as an adviser to the International Development Committee)

¹⁹ ONS ([SDG0016](#))

²⁰ [The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women](#)

²¹ [Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights](#), 16 November 2018

²² [Q76](#)

The VNR must include reference to every Goal, target and indicator with data, commentary and a plan for future action. We wish to see a comprehensive assessment of UK domestic progress towards the Goals, as well as its contribution to the Goals overseas.

The High-Level Political Forum

The presentation of the UK's VNR at the HLPF in July is an opportunity for the Government to show its "vision and ambition" to achieve the SDGs.²³ It is also a chance for us to show that this is a national agenda, not just a Government one. The inclusion of stakeholders in the UK's presentation to the HLPF would be welcome, and in line with the approach other countries, such as France and Sweden, have already taken.²⁴ We were therefore pleased to hear you say that,

"We have had all sorts of wonderful ideas, looking at what other people have done, about engaging young people. We need all sectors represented there."²⁵

We look forward to hearing more about your plans for the HLPF in due course. As a Committee, we hope to be represented at the event to show our own commitment to the agenda.

Looking ahead

We hope that the VNR will "kick-start" a comprehensive approach to SDGs implementation in the UK, as it has in other countries.²⁶ As Dr Graham Long told the Environmental Audit Committee:

"VNRs can prove an important catalyst for national level implementation: they promote the creation of relevant structures, awareness of the SDGs across government, and the collation of relevant data. There is evidence, for example, that stakeholders see action following VNRs in national planning and policy implementation for sustainable development."²⁷

It is also important for the Government to consider how it will bring the VNR back home once it has been presented to the UN in July, to reinforce and embed the SDGs into its programme for the country, and into the public consciousness. This could be an opportunity to debate what the SDGs really mean for the UK, and how we can work together to take the agenda forward.

²³ UKSSD ([SDG0029](#))

²⁴ Bond ([SDG0018](#))

²⁵ [Q91](#)

²⁶ [Q1](#)

²⁷ Dr Graham Long written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry, 'Sustainable Development Goals in the UK Follow Up' ([SDF0019](#)) (Dr Long was recently appointed as an adviser to the International Development Committee)

We hope that the UK's upcoming VNR will be a catalyst for more effective implementation of the SDGs in the UK and that it will encourage the Government to create the structures and lines of accountability needed to ensure the Goals are prioritised and embedded across Government. We remain sceptical of the Single Departmental Plans as the main method of integrating the SDGs across Government and ensuring accountability for progress, particularly in their current form.

We agree with UKSSD's recommendation that the VNR, "should include steps towards the creation of a plan or strategy for implementing the SDGs."²⁸ We recommend that the UK uses this process to consult widely and come up with a comprehensive and effective implementation plan, which clearly states that the achievement of the Goals in the UK is the responsibility of the Prime Minister and accountability for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda across Government lies with the Cabinet Office.

The Committee wishes to support you in ensuring the Global Goals are at the heart of everything the UK does. The IDC's inquiry continues, looking more specifically at the UK's contribution to the achievement of the Goals overseas. We look forward to welcoming you back to the Committee to give evidence on this element of the inquiry early in the summer.

Yours sincerely,



**Stephen Twigg MP
Chair of the Committee**

²⁸ UKSSD ([SDG0029](#))