

# APRM POLICY BRIEF

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## UN Voluntary National Reviews and national responses to COVID-19 in Africa

### APRM DIALOGUE WITH BENIN, EGYPT, SOUTH AFRICA, AND SEYCHELLES

- Ms. Sara Hmouda, SDGs & Agenda 2063 Researcher, APRM.

#### Executive Summary

The High-level Political Forum (HLPF) 2020 took place virtually from 7-16 July 2020 due to the unprecedented consequences of COVID-19, including suspension of flights and restrictive measures on people's movement worldwide. The HLPF is the highest institutionalized gathering among countries, UN organs, civil society organizations, and youth representatives to assess progress towards Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is committed to supporting peer-learning between African countries in the preparation for and evaluation of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the APRM organized a series of virtual dialogues with AU member-states, which are scheduled to submit VNRs in the HLPF 2020. The virtual conversations provided an opportunity to evaluate the readiness of African countries to submit VNRs, in the context of an unprecedented pandemic, on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as Agenda 2063.

#### Scope of discussion:

The COVID-19 crisis reveals fragilities and insufficient institutional capacities in many countries across the globe, including developed countries (DCs), to respond effectively to the pandemic. The unprecedented ramifications of COVID-19 for the implementation of SDGs, especially goal 3 - Health and Wellbeing, which lies at the core of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, as well as Agenda 2063 "The Africa we

want", are far-reaching. This goal is aligned with Aspiration 3 of Agenda 2063- Healthy and Well-Nourished Citizens.

Most importantly, national responses to the pandemic hinge on the countries' progress towards the domestication and follow-up of both agendas at federal and municipal levels as well as the capacity of the state to adopt adaptability mechanisms and devise transformation strategies to mitigate the crisis. The following countries shared with the APRM, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), and the African Union Commission's (AUC) experts their insights into national responses to the pandemic and preparations for the HLPF 2020.



#### BENIN:

**Mr. Aguessy Augustin**, General Director of coordination for SDGs, Ministry of Planning and Development

Benin is one of the most active AU member-states in reporting on Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. The country has been committed to improving national statistical capacities to track the implementation of SDGs as well as integrating SDGs indicators within its national development planning. Despite COVID-19, the public service and VNR Focal point directorate - Ministry of planning and development-used various technological tools, i.e., emails, webinars, and surveys to finalize Benin's 2020 VNR. Among the highlighted challenges in the

case of Benin are the lack of financial resources to support SDGs implementation, difficulty in monitoring the SDGs progress yearly especially in a crisis- time, i.e., COVID 19 and the necessity of supporting human capacity building to report on both agendas; Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030.



**EGYPT:**

**Dr. Howaida Barakat-** *Head of Sustainable Development Unit, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development*

Egypt submitted VNRs twice since the adoption of Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. It is worth noting that its 2018 VNR is highly advanced in terms of quality, content, and SDGs indicators’ alignment with the National Development Plan (NDP) compared to the VNR submitted in 2016. Egypt also launched a transformative economic reform program in 2016 which is aligned with Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. Accordingly, the current budget witnessed visible increases in specific sectors, including health, education, and agriculture. A performance-based budget has also been adopted to assess progress in each sector.

Governance, population growth, financing, and data have been identified as critical challenges for Egypt’s efforts to accelerate the implementation of SDGs. In preparation for the third VNR 2021, the government of Egypt is compliant with a participatory approach for the domestication and reporting on both agendas, which will take account of the aspirations of various segments of society, the respect for human rights, and the need to forge partnerships with international institutions and countries



**SOUTH AFRICA:**

**Dr. Kefiloe Masiteng,** *Deputy Secretary of National Planning, Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (DPME);*

South Africa is one of the most affected AU countries vis a vis COVID-19. Under the leadership of President Cyril Ramaphosa, the government has adopted a comprehensive package and urgent measures to contain the impact of COVID-19. The country’s resilience in the mitigation of the crisis is the result of serious investments over the last few years in the implementation of SDGs and localization at local levels. The responsiveness of various stakeholders, including the business sector and civil society

organizations, and willingness to assist the government are noteworthy. A “Covid-19 response fund” has been established in the country. Furthermore, the health care sector is being advised by various bodies, such as the National CoronaVirus Command Council, which has been offering recommendations and guidance to the government on curbing the pandemic at the national level.

South Africa adopted its 2030 development vision in 2012. At the national level, a Committee under the Presidency plays a significant role in following up on the overall coordination and attainment of SDGs. The Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (DPME) is also leading the preparations for the VNR. The first VNR submitted by South Africa was in the HLPF 2019. Several lessons from the VNR process were learned, including the early planning for the report, stakeholders’ engagement, and the submission of periodic reports on implementation at the national level.

Currently, the government is encouraging reporting on SDGs & Agenda 2063 at the local level, which is called Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). The VLR is an exercise supplementing the presentation of VNRs and offering a better understanding of authorities’ endeavours to realize SDGs at the municipal level. It was noted that the South African cities of Tshwane and Cape Town expressed their interest in partaking in VLRs as an example of SDGs domestication. Dr. Masiteng also highlighted that the COVID-19 crisis tested the political will to present a reliable model of collaborative leadership in South Africa and the accountability of different ministries while assuring the necessity of a whole-of-society approach to mitigate such a disaster.

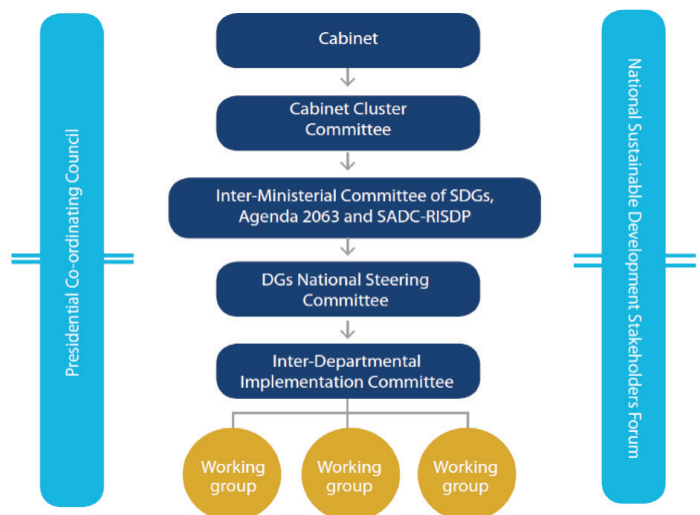


Figure 1 institutional Coordination Mechanism for SDGs (source: DPME)



## SEYCHELLES:

**Ms. Elizabeth Agathine**, *Principal Secretary for Economic Planning*

Seychelles is one of the latest AU member-states to have joined the APRM. The country will present its VNR during the HLPF 2020. To date, it has been one of the least affected countries by COVID-19 in Africa.

Seychelles possesses a national vision 2033, which aims to promote the creation of “A resilient, responsible, and prosperous nation of healthy, educated, and empowered Seychellois living in harmony with nature and engaged with the wider world.” To embark on VNR preparation and other global commitments, A National Oversight Strategic Committee for the Implementation of Seychelles’ Regional and Global Commitments (NOSCIS) has been established.

It consists of different entities, including the Ministries for Finance, Trade, Investment, and Economic Planning and the Secretary of State in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

The government’s eagerness to accomplish the VNR 2020 despite COVID-19 restrictions and the temporary lockdown was commendable. Thanks to the proper institutional arrangements put in place to prepare the report and the national specialized technical working groups, the government can finalize the report as planned. Nevertheless, key challenges were identified from this experience, including the necessity to raise awareness on SDGs and ensure stakeholders’ engagement in the evaluation process due to the postponement of many meetings to adhere to social distancing rules.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Reflections on the four countries’ presentations were offered by the UNECA and AUC representatives as follows:

- Mr. Charles Akol, the UNECA representative, indicated that while exerting efforts to tackle data paucity is vital, universal reporting on SDGs is an aim that the African continent should strive for. Fragile states in Africa should be particularly encouraged to submit their VNRs at the 2021 HLPF to assess continental progress made on the SDGs. Even if the COVID-19 dissipates in the next weeks and months, its impact will remain for the foreseeable future. It is thus imperative for countries to stay steadfast in attenuating economic shocks.
- Speaking from the perspective of Agenda 2063 “The Africa we want”, Mr. Mesfin Ashagrie, Director of Strategy, Policy Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Resource Mobilization at the AUC, commended the member states’ ownership of their VNR process despite COVID-19 challenges. He advised that African countries reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on SDGs, especially in the long-term in the VNRs. Mr. Ashagrie also encouraged national representatives to align the national goals while reporting on SDGs with Agenda 2063 as well to be involved in the AUC Progress Report on the achievement of Agenda 2063, which will be adopted by 2021.
- The collection of data was also identified as one of the challenges encountered by national bureaucracies. Without proper data, reporting will be complicated, so obstacles in terms of collating data must be captured in the same way as the high degree of convergence of goals between Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030. In this regard, Leila Ben Ali, Head of the Statistical division at the AUC, updated the participants on the AUC’s current efforts to collaborate with the UNECA and the African Development Bank (AfDB) on consultations with national statisticians to identify data challenges in the health sector in Africa in response to COVID-19. She also encouraged member-states to make use of remote options such as phone calls.

For further information on the HLPF 2020 and AU countries’ reports, please visit: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020>

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African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)  
230 15<sup>th</sup> Road, Randjespark  
Midrand, South Africa  
Tel: +27 (0) 11 256 3401  
[www.aprm-au.org](http://www.aprm-au.org)

