



An independent
assessment of the
Voluntary National Review
reports submitted to the
United Nations High-level
Political Forum on
Sustainable Development
in 2019

Progressing National SDGs Implementation



The Fourth Edition in an annual series
commissioned by civil society organizations

actionaid



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HIGHLIGHTS

In September 2019, heads of state and government around the world came together again for the first time since 2015 at the SDG Summit to commit to a [Decade of Action and Delivery](#) to realize the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The fifteen-year agenda for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership enters its fifth year in 2020, and it is hoped that governments will respond with accelerator actions and transformative change to meet their commitments for 2030 and ensure that no one is left behind.

For the past four years, civil society organizations have reviewed reporting by governments to the United Nations' High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports submitted by governments as part of the follow-up and review processes indicate the status of 2030 Agenda implementation. These reports are meant to be prepared through inclusive and participatory processes, serve as a source of information on good practices, lessons learned and challenges in implementation and provide a basis for peer learning and accountability at the global level.



Tom Merilion / Save The Children

The review of the 47 VNR reports submitted to the HLPF in 2019 revealed a range of good practices and trends in implementation and reporting, many of which are positive, some of which are cause for concern. *The Progressing National SDGs Implementation* report covers all aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation through an examination of governance and institutional arrangements, stakeholder engagement, policies, the means of implementation and reporting. Key findings, good practice case studies, emerging best practices and recommendations are presented throughout the report. The full set of recommendations is consolidated in the conclusion. Here we highlight the key messages arising from the analysis of 2019 VNR reports.

Countries are more consistently following guidelines for VNR reports and providing information on most aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation.

VNR reports show increased compliance with reporting against the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines over 2016 to 2019. Over 75% of countries reporting in 2019 included information on all components in the guidelines except for information on structural issues. VNR reports for 2019 showed increases in reporting on most aspects of implementation. For example, 60% of VNR reports referred to processes for stakeholder engagement versus 39% in 2018. More countries reported on localization efforts and partnership in 2019 than in 2018. Nearly all countries reported on the challenges they face in implementing the 2030 Agenda (96%) compared to 2018 (80%). The most significant increase in reporting, however, was seen in the inclusion of a dedicated chapter or robust information on leaving no one behind. While 61% reported this information in 2018, 81% did so in 2019.

However, broad gains in reporting were also matched by decreases in reporting on international public finance and trade as well as best practices and learning from peers. Information on these topics is important for ensuring the success of the HLPF as a forum for peer learning and exchange. Also, many states continued to provide only partial information on the key components in the guidelines.

While more countries provided information on the means of implementation overall, 2019 saw decreased reporting on international public finance and trade. All but two countries (96%) referred to the role of international public finance in 2018 versus 77% in 2019. Similarly, only 60% of countries reported on trade in 2019 versus 76% in 2018. These declines follow gains in 2018 over 2017. Concerning stakeholder engagement, the level of detail on formal processes varies significantly across reports. Declines were also seen in reporting on best practices (38%) and learning from peers (4%). While improved reporting on challenges and lessons learned is a positive gain for supporting the HLPF's mandate, declines in other areas are worrisome, particularly after increases in reporting on these dimensions in 2018 over 2017.

Reporting suggests that leaving no one behind is becoming a defining consideration in 2030 Agenda implementation.

Like 2018, most countries provided nuanced information on those at risk of being left behind. Data to leave no one behind remains a recognized challenge. Reporting on the key forms of disaggregated data needed to leave no one behind improved in 2019 over 2018. Countries most commonly cited the need for disaggregated data by gender, age and disability. All countries except one provided information on efforts related to at least one vulnerable group in 2019 versus 89% in 2018 and 73% in 2017, indicating a positive upward trend. All VNR reports except one indicated women, children and youth are at risk of being left behind. The majority of VNR reports also mentioned people with disabilities (96%), poor people (94%) and migrants and refugees (70%).



Yet, the extent to which overall efforts are guided by leaving no one behind, matched with changes to policies, programs and approaches, remains unclear.

Only 36% of countries highlighted embedding leaving no one behind or efforts to address inequality and social exclusion as part of overarching development plans. While an improvement on 2018 when 22% of countries reported the same, there is a need for more countries to demonstrate how the principle of leaving no one behind is informing overall plans and approaches. Countries continue to present a range of universal and specific approaches to leave no one behind pointing to legal frameworks, overall policies, social protection and specialized programs for certain groups. The extent to which these approaches are new or have changed because of the promise to leave no one behind is generally not articulated in VNR reports. In 2019, 21% of countries recognized that leaving no one behind is a key challenge in 2030 Agenda implementation overall.

The promise of a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation appears to be translating into practice with tangible gains in non-state actor participation in governance arrangements for implementation and formal processes for stakeholder engagement.

Formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements is becoming a standard practice. Over 2016-2019, 70% of reporting countries noted that non-state actors are included in high-level and/or working-level institutional arrangements to guide implementation. An increasing number of countries are pointing to examples of formal processes for stakeholder engagement outside governance arrangements such as policies for stakeholder engagement, communication strategies to support awareness-raising, participatory budgeting processes, multi-stakeholder forums, youth councils or annual events. While more forms of stakeholder engagement are emerging, the use of these approaches broadly continues to be limited across countries. Direct engagement of non-state actors in the drafting of VNR reports appears to have increased (53% versus 29% in 2018), but the actual inclusion of their recommendations in the final reports is less verifiable.

These promising trends, however, come in the context of silence on closing civic space globally and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists.

While some countries emphasized the creation of enabling policies for non-state actor engagement and participation in 2030 Agenda implementation, no VNR report referred to closing civic space. Over 2017-2019, VNR reports have been largely silent on this issue despite increasing calls for action by civil society organizations and others around the world to address the deteriorating human rights situation in many countries and protect human rights defenders and environmentalists. Moreover, reports by civil society organizations on 2030 Agenda implementation continue to point to the need for improvements in the quality of interactions and engagement between government and civil society.

VNR reports also indicated a move towards inclusion through technical working groups rather than high-level councils or committees. Reporting on partnerships suggests limited improvements and some backsliding over previous years.

Compared to 2018, 2019 saw a decline in the number of countries that pointed to the inclusion of academia, civil society, government institutions and the private sector in lead councils or committees with declines seen across these stakeholder groups. Academia, civil society and the private sector all saw significant increases in their inclusion in working groups or



technical committees. The greater focus on technical working groups rather than high-level governance arrangements is worrisome as it suggests that there may be less opportunity for non-state actors to input into overall strategic direction and coordination.



Louis Leeson / Save The Children

All countries, except one, provided examples of contributions by non-state actors to 2030 Agenda implementation in 2019 beyond consultation on priorities, participation in governance arrangements and general references to their role in implementation, an improvement over previous years. While 68% of VNR reports referred to civil society in 2019, an increase over 2018, individual reports tend to portray narrow perceptions of the roles that civil society organizations play focusing largely on specific projects, forming coalitions and promoting accountability. Only 23% of reports reported on parliamentarians, 53% on the private sector and 28% on the role of academics and experts, representing declines in reporting on all three groups over 2018.

Informed by baseline and gap assessments, countries report the integration of the SDGs into national and, to a lesser extent, local policies and programs.

Over 77% of countries reporting over 2017-2019 indicated informing their approach to 2030 Agenda implementation with an assessment of policies, data or both. In 2019, 76% of countries provided information on data availability, a significant increase

over previous years. Nearly 80% of countries reported integrating the SDGs into policies in 2019, up from around 50% of countries reporting in 2018 and 2017. At the local level, 28% of countries highlighted having integrated the 2030 Agenda into local plans and policies with 11% noting plans to do so. This was a positive shift over 2018 when more countries indicated plans to integrate the 2030 Agenda at the local level (22%) rather than having already done so (13%).

Nevertheless, except for leaving no one behind, VNR reports continue to suggest limited attention to the transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda. Reporting in 2019 also raises concerns regarding the extent to which countries are taking integrated approaches that respect all dimensions of sustainable development and ensuring policy coherence for sustainable development.

Over 40% of VNR reports did not assess the full set of SDGs. Only 25% referred to appropriate linkages between the goals, down from previous years. Fewer countries – 57% – gave equal attention to economic, social and environmental dimensions of development in their VNR reports, down from 63% in 2018 and 75% in 2017. Reports were more likely to bias social issues over other dimensions of sustainable development. While increases were seen in the number of countries referring to relevant international frameworks supportive of the 2030 Agenda such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, 2019 saw an overall decline in countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development. This was both in terms of policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation and analysis of the impact of domestic and foreign policies on global progress.

VNR reports indicate increased integration of the 2030 Agenda into budgeting processes with countries noting that sources of finance have been identified.

While under 46% of the VNR reports for 2018 provided information on the inclusion of the SDGs in national budgets or budget-related processes, 2019 saw an increase to 64% of countries. Of the 30 countries reporting this information, 14 indicated plans to incorporate the SDGs into budgeting processes while 16 noted having already done so. Seventy percent of countries have also identified sources of finance to support 2030 Agenda implementation, pointing to domestic resources, private investment, remittances, and where applicable, official development assistance and South-South cooperation.

Yet, countries have not costed 2030 Agenda implementation, nor do VNR reports consistently refer to all means of implementation.

Nearly 75% of countries reporting in 2019 have not costed implementation of the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, over half of VNR reports noted that finance and resource mobilization are a challenge. VNR reports showed declines in detailed reporting on international public finance, trade and systemic issues. One lesson learned from the Millennium Development Goal era pertained to difficulties operationalizing goal 8 on global partnership. Reporting on all means of implementation is critical for informing global discussions on gaps and challenges and identifying where accelerator actions are needed to fully realize the ambition of SDG 17 on partnerships for the goals.

Finally, overall information on national, regional and global follow-up and review processes is limited. VNR reports lack reference to accountability mechanisms at the national level.

While 85% of countries provided information on follow-up and review processes at the national level in 2019, up from

previous years, it was unclear when reporting occurs, by whom and to whom. Only five countries noted involvement by parliamentarians in follow-up and review processes, raising concerns over how countries are ensuring accountability through elected officials. No country referred to engagement in regional review processes or future engagement at the HLPF.

In 2020, the global community starts a new cycle of follow-up and review. The procedures and mechanisms of the HLPF are under review. This provides an opportunity to strengthen the processes of comparative analysis and tracking progress further as many countries return for their second or even third VNR. The HLPF provides the critical forum for VNRs to take place and links the monitoring and accountability cycle from national to regional and global level reviews. Following promising trends with respect to stakeholder engagement at the national level, it is hoped that the future development of the HLPF will include even more time for meaningful dialogue and engagement between member states, civil society organizations, experts and other stakeholders.

