PROGRESSING NATIONAL SDGs IMPLEMENTATION:

An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2020

The **Fifth Edition** in an annual series commissioned by civil society organizations

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Acknowledgments

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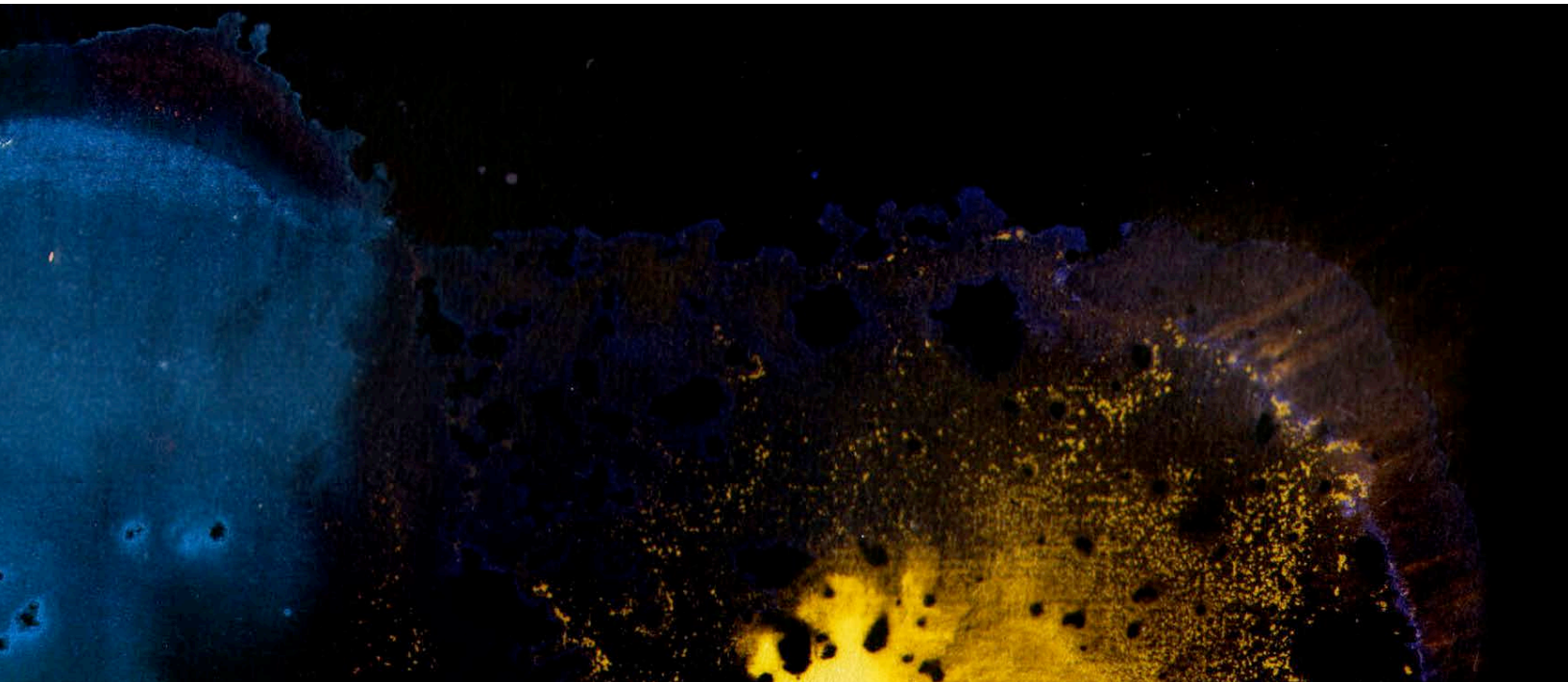

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HIGHLIGHTS

Following commitments by heads of state and government around the world to a Decade of Action and Delivery to realize the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2019, 2020 saw the growth of an unprecedented global pandemic. In early 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) quickly spread around the world, leading to devastating health impacts. Containment measures negatively impacted decades of economic and social progress with some governments harnessing the pandemic response as an opportunity to further close civic space. **The need for governments to accelerate the 2030 Agenda has become more urgent in the context of a global response to COVID-19 with the 2030 Agenda's transformative principles remaining critical to ensure a participatory, just, equitable and sustainable recovery that ensures no one is left behind and harnesses lessons from the pandemic.**

For the past five 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 at the national level. VNR 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.

The review of the 47 VNR reports submitted to the HLPF in 2020 revealed a range of good practices and both positive and concerning trends in implementation and reporting. **The *Progressing National SDGs Implementation* report covers all aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation through an examination of governance, institutional arrangements and 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 sets of good practices spotlights and of recommendations are consolidated at the end of the report.

Here we highlight the key messages arising from the analysis of 2020 VNR reports. The messages have been numbered for ease of reference, and further details are provided below.

KEY MESSAGES

1. Countries are more consistently providing information on most aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation.

2. Broad gains in reporting were also matched by decreased reporting on important issues such as 2030 Agenda budgeting, trade, technology and – not least – main challenges faced in implementation of the Agenda.

3. Many states continued to provide only partial information on the key components of the voluntary common reporting guidelines.

4. Reporting on leaving no one behind increased, as well as embedding this principle in national plans and policies. However, identifying left-behind groups, developing dedicated strategies, and using disaggregated data no leave no one behind remain as challenges.

5. In terms of a whole-of-society approach, non-state actors continue to be included in governance arrangements for implementation and formal processes for stakeholder engagement. However, reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement outside governance arrangements experienced some backslide.

6. The VNR reports are silent on closing civic space globally and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists. The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse by some governments to further close civic space.

7. Although fewer countries reported on contributions by non-state actors, there have been improvements in reporting on partnerships and recognising the role played by civil society.

8. Fewer countries reported conducting baseline and gap assessments, and fewer countries provided information on data availability. Conversely, there has been an increase in the number of countries reporting the integration of the SDGs into national policies and programs.

9. VNR reports from 2020 experienced improvements in the attention given to the transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda. However, there has not been an increase in the linkages with international agreements.

10. While more countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation, 2020 VNR reports revealed a limited analysis of domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally.

11. Overall information on national, regional and global follow-up and review processes suffered from backsliding. Most VNR reports lack reference to accountability mechanisms at the national level.

1. **Countries are more consistently providing information on most aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation.**

In comparison to two previous years, VNR reports for 2020 showed increased reporting on most aspects of implementation. For example, information on awareness-raising activities was available for 98% of countries. Reporting on localization also continues to improve, as 83% of countries provided information on their efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda, and more countries reported on partnerships in 2020 than in previous years. In relation to other aspects, reporting on the means of implementation improved overall for information on international public finance (83% of the countries), capacity development (83%), systemic issues (70%), best practices (58%), lessons learned (53%), and learning from peers (15%). Information on these topics is important for ensuring the success of the HLPF as a forum for peer learning and exchange.

2. **Broad gains in reporting were also matched by decreased reporting on important issues such as 2030 Agenda budgeting, trade, technology and – not least – main challenges faced in implementation of the Agenda.**

While more countries provided information on the means of implementation overall, 2020 saw decreased reporting on budgeting and costing for the 2030 Agenda, trade, technology, and challenges faced in implementing the 2030 Agenda. A little over half of the counties (51%) reported information on budgeting for the 2030 Agenda, and there was a slight decrease in reporting on trade (58%), challenges (94%) and technology (79%). While improved reporting on best practices and learning from peers is a positive gain for supporting the HLPF's mandate, declines in other areas are worrisome, particularly in terms of planning for implementation and addressing encountered difficulties.

3. **Many states continued to provide only partial information on the key components of the voluntary common reporting guidelines.**

While VNR reports showed increased compliance with reporting against the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines over 2016 to 2019, there has been little change between 2019 and 2020 in terms of overall compliance. Reporting increased in six components listed in the guidelines, with the most significant gains seen in reporting on structural issues, whereas reporting declined in six other components. Although many of the 2020 reporting countries have fully met various guidelines' components, there was still a considerable amount of countries providing only partial information.

4. **Reporting on leaving no one behind increased, as well as embedding this principle in national plans and policies. However, identifying left-behind groups, developing dedicated strategies, and using disaggregated data no leave no one behind remain as challenges.**

There continues to be an increase in reporting on leaving no one behind (LNOB). In 2020, 92% of reporting countries provided either robust information throughout their VNR report, or a dedicated chapter to LNOB. Moreover, more countries reported incorporating the principle of leaving no one behind in the creation of national sustainable development policies. Although data to leave no one behind improved in 2020, with 40% of the VNR reports indicating that efforts to LNOB were informed by existing data, disaggregated data remains a challenge to many countries.

All countries (45) reporting in 2020 with full VNR reports identified groups left behind or at risk of being left behind, which indicates a positive upward trend in comparison to previous years. Most VNR reports listed people with disabilities (85%), women and girls (83%), and children and youth (79%) as at risk of being left behind. Although these three groups continue to be the topmost ones facing more vulnerabilities, there was a decline in the number of countries that promoted such identification between 2019 and 2020. In terms of countries' overall plans and approaches, there has been some positive movement towards incorporating the principle of leaving no one behind to create national sustainable development policies. In 2020, 28 countries (60%) highlighted embedding leaving no one behind or

efforts to address inequality and social exclusion as part of overarching development plans.

5. **In terms of a whole-of-society approach, non-state actors continue to be included in governance arrangements for implementation and formal processes for stakeholder engagement. However, reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement outside governance arrangements experienced some backslide.**

Formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements is becoming a standard practice. Over 2016-2020, 70% of reporting countries noted that non-state actors are included in governance arrangements to guide implementation. Moreover, instead of engagement happening mainly through technical working groups, as it had been the case in the previous year, the countries reporting in 2020 mostly mentioned more lead councils or committees. The increase in engagement in high-level governance arrangements is positive, suggesting that there may be more opportunity for non-state actors to input overall strategic direction and coordination.

However, reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement outside governance arrangements experienced some backslide, as 47% of countries (versus 60% in 2019) reported on formal processes for stakeholder engagement, such as communication strategies to support awareness-raising, participatory budgeting processes, multi-stakeholder forums, youth councils or annual events. The percentage of countries reporting on consultations to define national priorities also decreased significantly, from 89% in 2019 to 47% in 2020.

Conversely, in terms of engagement in the VNR process, all but one (98%) of the countries that presented a full VNR report in 2020 referred to consultations and/or non-state actor engagement to prepare the VNR report. Although there continues to be a steady increase in the number of countries directly including non-state actors in drafting VNR reports or providing written inputs, the actual inclusion of non-state actors' recommendations in the final reports continues to be less verifiable. In 2020, 25 out of the 47 reporting countries (53%) included information on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement.

6. **The VNR reports are silent on closing civic space globally and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists. The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse by some governments to further close civic space.**

While some countries emphasized the creation of enabling policies for non-state actors engagement and participation in 2030 Agenda implementation, no VNR report referred to closing civic space or to attempts to create a more enabling environment for civil society. Over 2017-2020, VNR reports have been largely silent on these issues despite increasing calls for action by civil society organizations and others worldwide 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.

7. **Although fewer countries reported on contributions by non-state actors, there have been improvements in reporting on partnerships and recognising the role played by civil society.**

There has been a decline in the percentage of countries reporting on non-state actors' contributions, with 89% versus 98% in 2019. Conversely, there continues to be a positive trend in terms of countries recognizing the contributions by civil society organizations in their VNR reports. In 2020, 79% of countries provided this information. There has also been an improvement in how reporting countries showcase civil society organizations' actions and the role they play in 2030 Agenda implementation. Moreover, there has been an increase in reporting on the role of parliamentarians (53%), the private sector (75%), and academia (55%). In addition, 45% of the 2020 VNR reports specifically mentioned the participation of children and youth in

SDGs implementation, another increase in the category of partnerships noted compared to previous years.

8. **Fewer countries reported conducting baseline and gap assessments, and fewer countries provided information on data availability. Conversely, there has been an increase in the number of countries reporting the integration of the SDGs into national policies and programs.**

In 2020, the percentage of countries that indicated their approach to 2030 Agenda implementation had been informed by an assessment of policies, data, or both declined to 64%. Significantly fewer countries (45%) provided information on data availability. Conversely, all the countries reported integrating the SDGs into their policies in 2020. Another positive trend in comparison to previous years refers to the selection of national priorities, with 45 countries (almost 96%) providing this information. Priorities related to social outcomes and economy were most commonly cited, followed by the environment. In 2020, 77% of countries provided some information on national targets and indicators selection, another increase in relation to the previous year.

9. **VNR reports from 2020 experienced improvements in the attention given to the transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda. However, there has not been an increase in the linkages with international agreements.**

The reporting countries continue to refer more to the SDGs than to the broader 2030 Agenda and its transformational principles. Among these principles, leaving no one behind continues to receive more focus in the 2020 VNR reports, and there has been an increase in the number of countries pointing to the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda and human rights-based approaches.

There has also been an improvement in reporting integrated approaches to implement the SDGs. Although only 49% of countries gave equal attention to economic, social and environmental dimensions of development in their VNR reports, more than half referred to appropriate linkages between the goals. Seventy percent of VNR reports assessed the full set of SDGs, a considerable increase in relation to 2019, where this figure had been 40%. On the other hand, reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda and relevant international agreements such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda showed mixed results in 2020 over 2019. Such linkages point to the recognition of synergies between the 2030 Agenda and other relevant agreements to promote sustainable development. The variation of results in relation to different agreements does not suggest an increase in such recognition. Moreover, a minimal number of countries (4%) referred to COVID-19-related actions apart from measures carried out at the domestic level. No country referred to global commitments regarding the pandemic.

10. **While more countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation, 2020 VNR reports revealed a limited analysis of domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally.**

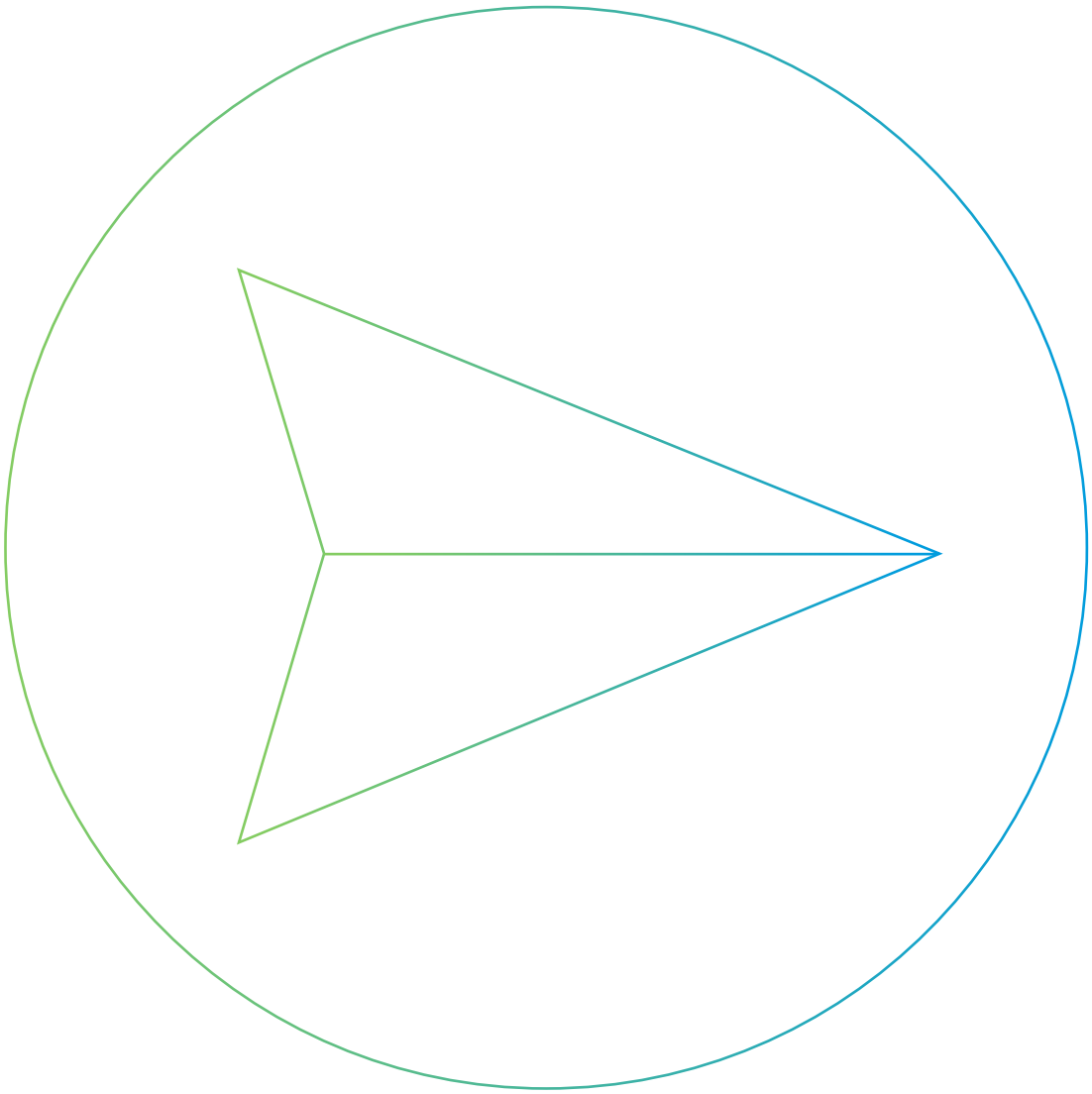
Furthermore, 2020 experienced an increase in the number of countries reporting on including the SDGs into national budgets: almost 45% of countries mentioned having already incorporated the SDGs into budgeting processes, and 4% of countries mentioned such incorporation as a plan. This might suggest an improvement in relation to the previous year in the sense that more countries are doing such incorporation, instead of mentioning it as a future plan. In terms of financing, 70% percent of countries reporting in 2020 identified finance sources to support 2030 Agenda implementation, pointing to domestic resources, private investment, remittances, and, where applicable, official development assistance (ODA) and South-South cooperation.

11. **Overall information on national, regional and global follow-up and review processes suffered from backsliding. Most VNR reports lack**

reference to accountability mechanisms at the national level.

In 2020, fewer countries provided information on follow-up and review processes at the national level (63%) and on data availability (45%). Apart from lesser reporting, countries continue to provide a limited reference to when, how and to whom national reporting will occur. Only five countries referred to parliament's role in follow-up and review processes, same as in 2019. This raises concerns over how countries are ensuring accountability through elected officials. On the other hand, two countries referred to engagement in regional review processes, and two mentioned future engagement at the HLPF.

In 2021, 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 comparative analysis and tracking progress further as many countries return for their second or even third VNR. The HLPF delivers 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 concerning 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.



CONTENTS

Acknowledgments **2**
Highlights **4**
Table of Contents **10**

1. INTRODUCTION 14

2. GOVERNANCE, INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND ENGAGEMENT 17

2.1. Key Findings **17**
2.1.1. Leadership, governance and institutional arrangements *17*
2.1.2. Stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation *18*

2.2. Leadership, governance and institutional arrangements **19**
2.2.1. Leadership *19*
2.2.2. Governance arrangements and institutional mechanisms *19*
2.2.3. Non-state actor engagement in governance arrangements *20*
2.2.4. Engaging peers on the 2030 Agenda *22*
2.2.5. Recommendations *23*

2.3. Stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation **23**
2.3.1. Process for stakeholder engagement *25*
2.3.2. Engagement in defining national priorities *27*
2.3.3. Engagement to carry out VNRs *28*
2.3.4. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement *30*
2.3.5. Recommendations *31*

3. POLICIES FOR 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION 32

3.1. Key Findings **32**
3.1.1. Baseline or gap analysis *32*
3.1.2. Incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks and policies *32*
3.1.3. Nationalizing the 2030 Agenda *33*
3.1.4. Integration and policy coherence *33*

3.2. Baseline or gap analysis **34**
3.2.1. Recommendations *35*

3.3. Incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks and policies **36**
3.3.1. Integrating the 2030 Agenda principles *36*
3.3.2. Recommendations *38*

3.4. Nationalizing the 2030 Agenda **38**
3.4.1. Priorities *38*
3.4.2. National targets and indicators *39*
3.4.3. Recommendations *40*

3.5. Integration and policy coherence **40**
3.5.1. Reporting on the SDGs *40*
3.5.2. Policy coherence for sustainable development *44*
3.5.3. Recommendations *46*

4. IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA 47

4.1. Key findings **47**
4.1.1. Leaving no one behind *47*
4.1.2. Awareness-raising *48*
4.1.3. Localization *48*
4.1.4. Partnerships to realize the SDGs *48*
4.1.5. Means of implementation *48*
4.1.6. Measurement and reporting *48*

4.2. Leaving no one behind **49**
4.2.1. Understanding who is at risk of being left behind *49*
4.2.2. Efforts to leave no one behind *51*
4.2.3. Targeting domestic inequality *53*
4.2.4. Impact of COVID-19 on leaving no one behind *54*
4.2.5. Recommendations *54*

4.3. Awareness-raising **55**
4.3.1. Recommendations *57*

4.4. Localization **57**
4.4.1. Recommendations *59*

4.5. Partnerships to realize the SDGs **59**
4.5.1. Civil society *60*
4.5.2. Parliamentarians *63*
4.5.3. The private sector *64*
4.5.4. Academia and experts *65*
4.5.5. Children and Youth *66*
4.5.6. Other stakeholders *66*
4.5.7. Development partners *67*
4.5.8. Recommendations *67*

4.6. Means of implementation **67**
4.6.1. Budgeting for 2030 Agenda implementation *68*
4.6.2. International finance *69*
4.6.3. Trade *72*

4.6.4. Capacities for 2030 Agenda implementation 72
4.6.4.1. Capacity development 72
4.6.4.2. Technology 73
4.6.4.3. Systemic issues 73
4.6.5. Experiences in implementation 73
4.6.5.1. Best practices 74
4.6.5.2. Challenges 75
4.6.5.3. Lessons learned 76
4.6.5.4. Learning from others 77
4.6.6. Impact of COVID-19 on the means of implementation 77
4.6.7. Recommendations 78

4.7. Measurement and reporting **78**
4.7.1. Data availability 80
4.7.2. Improving data availability 81
4.7.3. National reporting on 2030 Agenda implementation 82
4.7.4. Recommendations 83

5. REPORTING ACCORDING TO THE VOLUNTARY COMMON REPORTING GUIDELINES 84

5.1. Key findings **84**
5.1.1. Use of the voluntary common reporting guidelines 84

5.2. Voluntary common reporting guidelines **84**

5.3. Use of the guidelines **86**

5.4. Recommendations **88**

6. CONCLUSION 89

7. CONSOLIDATED BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHTS 91

7.1. Governance, institutional mechanisms and engagement **91**
7.1.1. Leadership, governance and institutional arrangements 91
7.1.2. Stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation 91

7.2. Policies for 2030 Agenda implementation **92**
7.2.1. Baseline or gap analysis 92
7.2.2. Incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks 92
7.2.3. Nationalizing the 2030 Agenda 92
7.2.4. Integration and policy coherence 92

7.3. Implementing the 2030 Agenda **92**
7.3.1. Leaving no one behind 92

7.3.2. Awareness-raising 92
7.3.3. Partnerships to realize the SDGs 92
7.3.4. Means of implementation 92
7.3.5. Measurement and reporting 93

8. CONSOLIDATED RECOMMENDATIONS 94

8.1. Governance, institutional mechanisms and engagement **94**
8.1.1. Leadership, governance and institutional arrangements 94
8.1.2. Stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation 94

8.2. Policies for 2030 Agenda implementation **95**
8.2.1. Baseline or gap analysis 95
8.2.2. Incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks 95
8.2.3. Nationalizing the 2030 Agenda 95
8.2.4. Integration and policy coherence 95

8.3. Implementing the 2030 Agenda **96**
8.3.1. Leaving no one behind 96
8.3.2. Awareness-raising 96
8.3.3. Localization 96
8.3.4. Partnerships to realize the SDGs 96
8.3.5. Means of implementation 96
8.3.6. Measurement and reporting 97

8.4. Reporting to the HLPF **97**

ANNEX 1. VNR REPORTS REVIEWED 98
ANNEX 2. METHODOLOGY 100
ANNEX 3. COUNTRY PROFILES 114

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the July 2021 United Nations High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development, United Nations member states and others will meet to review progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While member states have committed to take stronger action and delivery for sustainable development, the 2021 HLPF will serve as an important moment to take stock on the impacts of the global coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) on shared progress towards sustainable development, following preliminary reporting and discussion in 2020.

Governments, civil society and other stakeholders share their efforts to implement and monitor the SDGs at procedural and substantive levels during HLPF. The Forum is mandated to carry out regular, inclusive, state-led and thematic reviews of 2030 Agenda implementation, with inputs from other intergovernmental bodies, regional processes and Major Groups and Other Stakeholders. Different countries present voluntary national reviews (VNRs) on an annual basis. The follow-up and review process aims to promote accountability to citizens, support effective international cooperation and foster exchange of best practice and mutual learning.[1] To date, 183 countries have presented VNRs with 35 having presented more than once.[2] In 2020, 47 countries will present their VNR reports, 21 of which will be presenting their VNR for a second or third time. Though not presented as a formal component of the HLPF, civil society organizations and coalitions from around the world also regularly produce their own

1. See United Nations. 2016. *Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level.* Report of the Secretary-General. A/70/684. New York: UN.
2. Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Benin, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Qatar, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Slovenia, Switzerland, Togo, Turkey, Uganda, and Uruguay.

independent reviews and analysis on their respective governments' implementation of the 2030 Agenda, complementing official processes.

This publication is the fifth in a series prepared by a coalition of civil society organizations to document and analyze progress on the 2030 Agenda through an annual examination of VNR reports and a sample of civil society reports.[3] **The review aims to improve the VNR process and the VNR reports and strengthen accountability around the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Complementary to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs' synthesis of VNR reports, the assessment provides an analytical critique of progress on 2030 Agenda implementation and identifies good and best practices as well as where VNR reports could be improved. The analysis provides a basis for recommendations on how governments, civil society organizations and other stakeholders can improve efforts to implement and report on the 2030 Agenda.**

The fifth edition includes an assessment of all 47 VNR reports submitted in 2020. Of those 47, all countries except for Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines submitted full VNR reports.[4] An overview of reporting countries by region and income level is available in Annex 1. Of the 47 countries that submitted a VNR report in 2020, 20 presented for the second time. One presented their third VNR report. The review follows the *Progressing National SDGs Implementation* assessment framework that was built and expanded upon since the first report in this series from 2016. Findings presented in the 2021 edition also include a comparison with the key trends identified in previous reports, where appropriate.[5, 6] The fifth edition also includes special reference to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout, as relevant, given the significant impacts of the pandemic on sustainable development progress and attention to this topic in VNR reports for 2020.

COUNTRIES REPORTING TO THE HLPF IN 2020

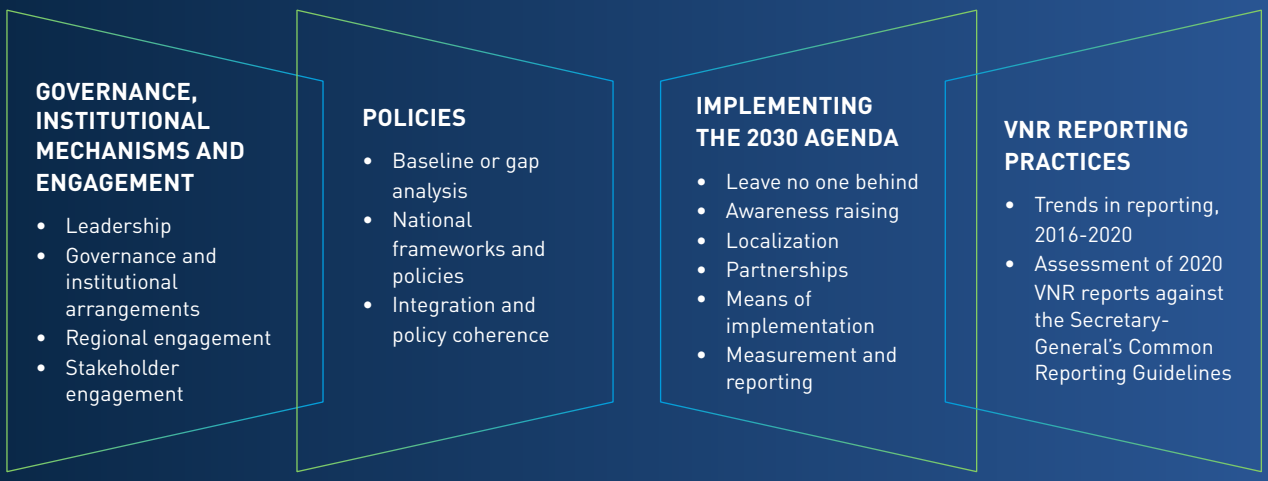
Austria, Barbados, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gambia, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Micronesia, Mozambique, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Syrian Arab Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Zambia.

Countries reporting for the 2nd time: Argentina, Armenia, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Honduras, India, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Samoa, Slovenia, and Uganda.

Countries reporting for the 3rd time: Benin.

3. Details on the methodology, including the analytical framework, used for the assessment of all the VNR reports can be found in Annex 2.
4. Though these countries did not submit full VNR reports, they have been included in the data presented below. Both countries reported on a number of elements in the assessment framework and on components of the reporting guidelines through main messages.
5. The 2017, 2018 and 2019 reports are referred to throughout, however only cited once here for ease of reading. See Kindornay, Shannon. 2018. *Progressing national SDGs implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2017.* Ottawa: CCIC. See Kindornay, Shannon. 2019. *Progressing national SDGs implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2018*. Ottawa: CCIC. See Kindornay, Shannon and Gendron, Renée. 2020. *Progressing national SDGs implementation: An independent assessment of voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2019.* Ottawa: CCIC. Similarly, for the 2016 edition of this report see Cutter, Amy. 2016. *Progressing national SDGs implementation: Experiences and recommendations from 2016.* London: Bond.
6. The 2017 edition of this report examined all countries except Belarus. The Kingdom of the Netherland's VNR report included information on four countries – Aruba, Curaçao, the Netherlands and Saint Maarten. As such, the report included data for 45 countries, though only 43 VNR reports were submitted to the HLPF that year. Unless otherwise stipulated, data for 2017 is for 45 countries, not for the 42 VNR reports reviewed that year. The 2016 review of VNR reports by Bond only examined the 22 available English reports.

Figure 1. What is in the Progressing National SDGs Implementation Report?



The analysis in the review is based largely on the VNR reports, and where available, civil society reports.[7] No additional research was conducted to verify the accuracy and confirm the validity of the information governments included in their reports. This is a clear limitation of the findings.

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

This review of VNR reports is comprehensive and covers most, if not all, aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation and VNR reporting. The report has a lot to offer governments, civil society, researchers and others interested in understanding the current state of 2030 Agenda implementation and reporting, including good practices. While stakeholders are encouraged to review the report in its entirety to get a full picture of 2030 Agenda implementation, subsections of analysis can be read on a standalone basis, allowing readers to review topics that are of most interest.

Find good practices

For governments that are planning to carry out a VNR, this report serves as a useful guide of good practices in implementing the VNR and reporting. It also offers a range of examples from which governments can draw in establishing governance and institutional mechanisms, policies, programs and partnerships to support 2030 Agenda implementation.

Inform civil society reporting and advocacy

For civil society organizations, the content and structure of this report provides a basis for parallel reporting and highlights the key issues that civil society organizations may want to consider, including to improve their own reporting on 2030 Agenda implementation. The report is also a powerful advocacy tool that can be used to promote the adoption of best practice at the country level.

Know where your country stands

Finally, the country profiles included in this report provide a simple, short overview of the current status of 2030 Agenda implementation according to the pillars of analysis for reporting countries, serving as a useful reference document.

7. Civil society reports are available for eleven of the countries reviewed in 2020 and can be found under "Civil Society Reports." A civil society report from Denmark is also available, even if the country did not present a VNR in 2020. Such report was not assessed in the present analysis.

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2. GOVERNANCE, INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND ENGAGEMENT

This chapter has two main sections. The first one focuses on leadership, governance and institutional arrangements, and looks into how governments presenting VNR reports in 2020 organize mechanisms at the governance and leadership levels to realize the 2030 Agenda, including by engaging non-state actors and peers. The second section focuses on stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation, examining processes of engagement apart from governance and institutional arrangements, including how multiple stakeholders have been engaged in defining national priorities and carrying out VNRs. This section addresses the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement. Both of this chapter's sections are followed by a dedicated list of recommendations.

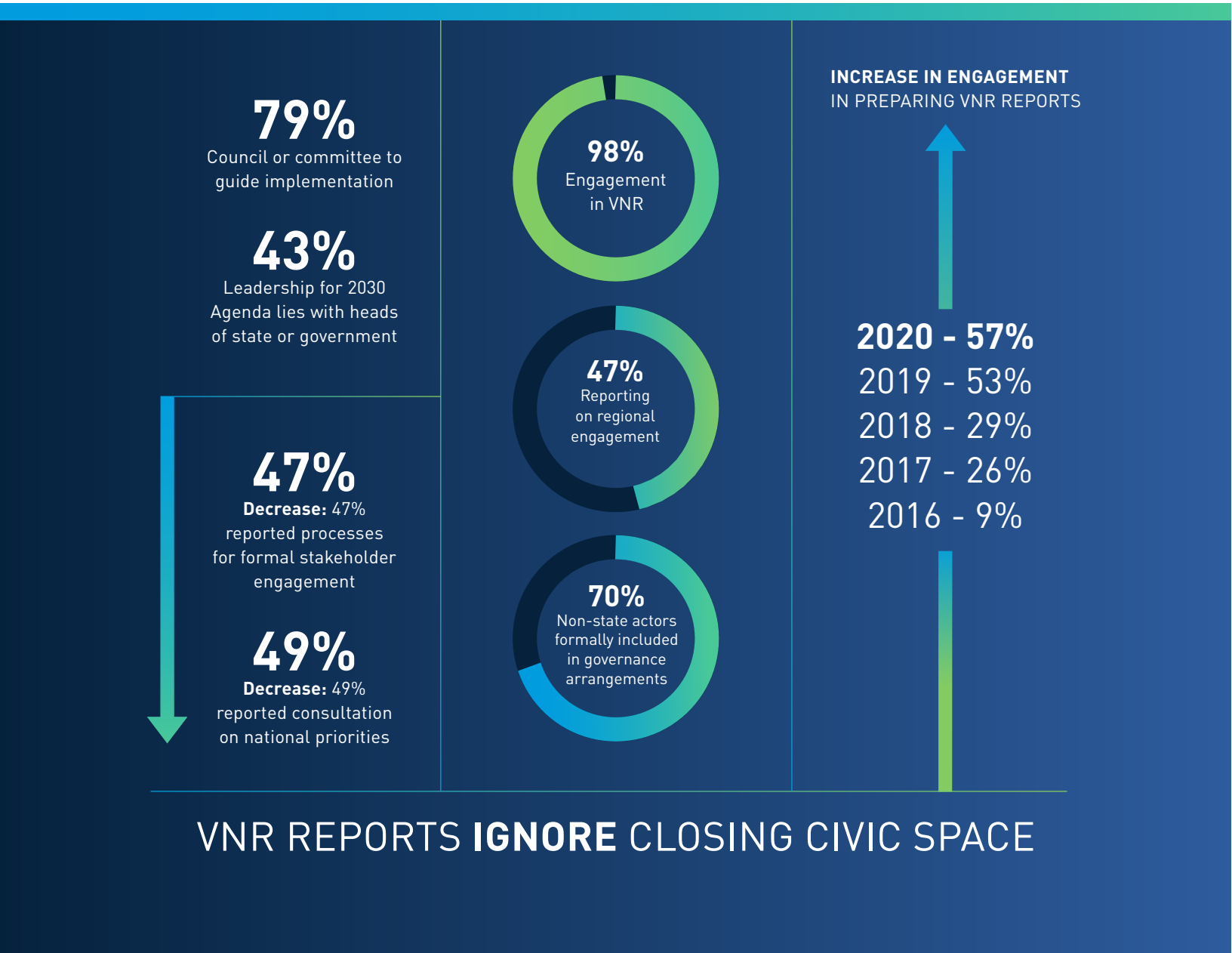
2.1. **KEY** FINDINGS

2.1.1. Leadership, governance and institutional arrangements

- **Governance trends:** As with 2017, 2018 and 2019, most countries reporting in 2020 – almost 79% – are making use of new or existing councils, committees or specialized offices to govern 2030 Agenda implementation. Leadership most commonly (43%) resides with the head of state or government. There was limited reporting on subnational institutional arrangements.
- **Inclusion of non-state actors:** Formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements continues to be an emerging standard practice. In 2020, 70% of countries noted inclusion of non-state actors, the same percentage as 2019. However, instead of engagement happening mainly through technical working groups, the countries reporting in 2020 largely mentioned lead councils or committees.
- **Peer engagement:** The 2020 VNR reports reversed the downward trend in terms of countries reporting on how they engage with peers at the regional level on the 2030 Agenda. In 2017, 53% provided this information, 41% in 2018 and only 34% in 2019. In 2020, this percentage rose to 47%.

2.1.2. Stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation

- **Multi-stakeholder engagement:** Reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement experienced some backsliding, as 47% of countries reported on formal processes for stakeholder engagement in 2020, against 60% in 2019. Information presented in VNR reports does not assess the quality of formal processes for multi-stakeholder engagement.
- **Civic space:** The VNR reports continue to ignore the issue of closing civic space and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists. The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse by some governments to further close civic space.
- **Consultations and the VNR process:** The percentage of countries reporting consultations to define national priorities decreased from 89% in 2019 to 47% in 2020. Conversely, all but one (98%) of the countries that presented a full VNR report in 2020 referred to consultations and/or non-state actor engagement to prepare the VNR report. There continues to be a steady increase in the number of countries directly including non-state actors in drafting VNR reports or providing written inputs. In 2020, 57% noted such approaches, against 53% in 2019.
- **COVID-19 on stakeholder engagement:** In 2020, 25 out of the 47 reporting countries (53%) included information on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement.



2.2. **LEADERSHIP,** GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

Governance arrangements and institutional mechanisms are basic building blocks for effective 2030 Agenda implementation. With the 2030 Agenda in its fifth year at the time of reporting, VNR reports should demonstrate that basic foundational structures are in place. In this context, where governments assign leadership for 2030 Agenda implementation indicates the level of political commitment as well as lines of accountability. Information on governance arrangements for 2030 Agenda implementation was available in all VNR reports examined from 2017-2020.[8]

2.2.1. Leadership

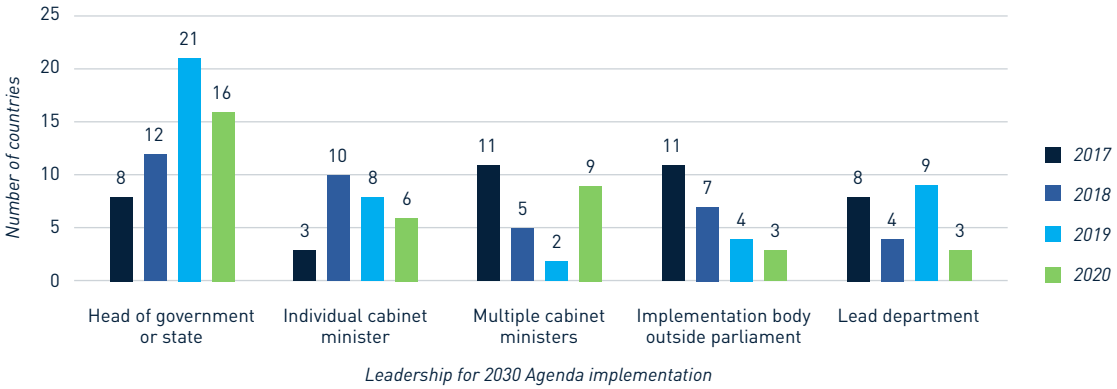
Most VNR reports include information on leadership, identifiable through an examination of governance arrangements. VNR reports over 2017-2020 show a range of approaches (Figure 2). In 2020, information on leadership was available for most countries though leadership was unclear for ten out of the 47 countries reporting.

In 2020, the most common category of leadership for the 2030 Agenda was a head of state with 43% of countries.[9] The second most common type of leadership was multiple cabinet ministers (24%), followed by an individual cabinet minister (16%), leadership by a body outside parliament (8%), and to have a lead department (8%). Among the countries reporting leadership for 2030 Agenda implementation, leadership continues to reside with the head of state.

2.2.2. Governance arrangements and institutional mechanisms

Effective governance arrangements and institutional mechanisms are important for orienting and providing impetus for implementation, ensuring policy coherence and coordinating action across government institutions, including at national and subnational levels. As with 2017, 2018 and 2019, most countries reporting in 2020 – almost 79% – are making use of new or existing councils, committees or specialized offices to govern 2030 Agenda implementation.[10] The use of councils, committees or other forms of coordinating bodies appears to be emerging standard practice with respect to institutional arrangements. In 2020, 15 countries noted creating a new council, committee or specialized office. Thirteen (13) countries noted that implementation occurs through government institutions and one (1) noted the use of a lead department for this purpose. Nine (9) countries are making use of existing councils or committees.

Figure 2. Most common sources of leadership for 2030 Agenda implementation



8. In 2020, Barbados is the only country not to provide information on either leadership or governance arrangements. On the other hand, Barbados did not present a full VNR report, but only main messages, thus the incomplete information.
9. Percentages refer to the 37 countries that provided information on leadership. Data includes countries submitting a subsequent VNR report to the HLPF following their first presentation.
10. Countries submitting a subsequent VNR report to the HLPF are included in this figure. A council or commission was still considered "new" if it was established following 2015, even if the country had reported on the council or commission in a previous VNR report.

Seven (7) countries referred to implementation through government institutions and did not refer to the existence of a council or similar governing body. Information provided by Solomon Islands was unclear in terms of the governance structure while Barbados did not provide any information in this regard.

As with previous years, the main responsibilities for governing bodies tend to include overseeing and driving nationalization of the 2030 Agenda, policy alignment, coordination, implementation and monitoring. In 2018, 13 countries noted the creation of technical and/or substantive working groups or other specialized bodies to support implementation, and in 2019 this was done by 26 countries. Such practice continued to be observed in 2020 VNR reports. For example, Liberia has established 12 Technical Working Groups (TWGs) composed of experts and specialists from ministries, agencies and commissions that ensure multi-stakeholder participation with regards to public planning and information dissemination on the country's development agenda.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Establish technical and/or substantive working groups or other specialized bodies for 2030 Agenda implementation. This shares responsibilities and enhances support towards implementation.

2.2.3. Non-state actor engagement in governance arrangements

The involvement of non-state actors in governance arrangements is one indicator of the extent to which a government is adopting a whole-of-society approach for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Information on the involvement of non-state actors in formal governance arrangements was either unclear or not available for 30% of countries that reported in 2020, which is the exact same percentage as in 2019. Nevertheless, most countries reporting in 2020 (70%) provided information on engagement with non-state actors. As shown by others,[11] the formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements is an emerging standard practice with 70% of countries reporting to the HLPF noting formal inclusion of non-state actors in high and/or working-level institutional arrangements over 2016-2019. While this is a positive move towards a whole-of-society approach, VNR reports do not provide an indication of how policies and approaches change as a result of inclusive governance arrangements.

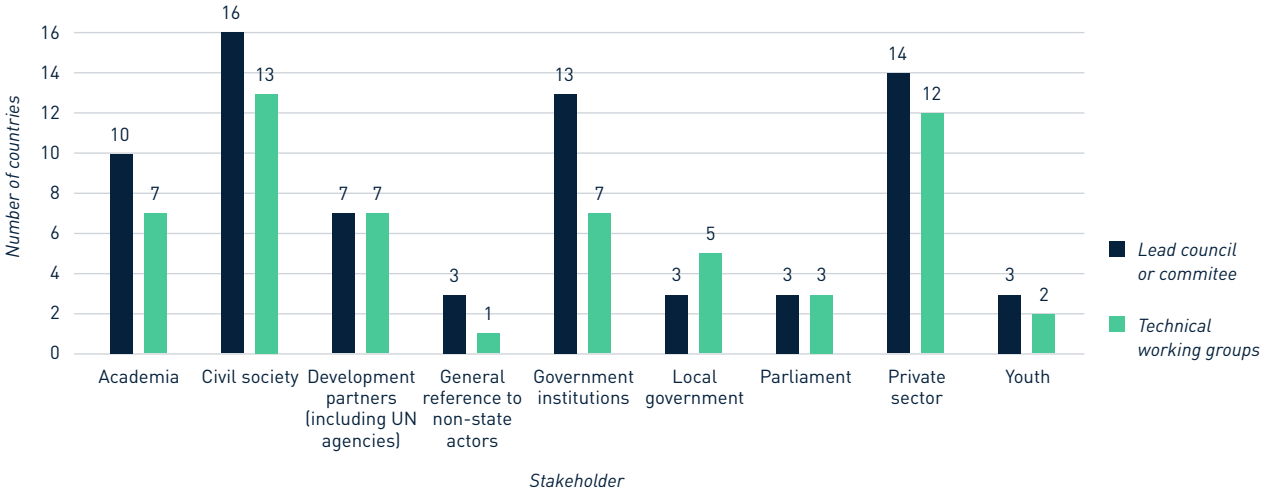
BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Formally include non-state actors in governance arrangements. This contributes to inclusivity, and a whole-of-society approach in 2030 Agenda implementation and the promotion of partnership.

Figure 3 presents figures regarding the inclusion of different stakeholder groups in working-level and high-level governance mechanisms. Working groups or technical committees tend to focus on progressing technical issues. High-level governance mechanisms refer to lead councils or committees that aim to provide overall direction for 2030 Agenda implementation and typically involve senior level officials.

11. Kindornay, Shannon and Gendron, Renée. 2020. *Multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation: A review of Voluntary National Review Reports (2016-2019).* New York: UN DESA.

Figure 3. Participation in governance and institutional mechanisms for SDG implementation according to 2020 VNR reports



In 2020, both working group and lead council or committee governance arrangements had the highest levels of participation from civil society, the private sector and academia, like previous years. However, 2020 VNR reports mention a higher degree of participation of government institutions such as ministries, for example. Over 2017-2020, the review of VNR reports has consistently shown progress in terms of formal inclusion of non-state actors. While 2017 VNR reports tended to point to a commitment to engage non-state actors rather than formal inclusion, 2018 saw a significant increase in their inclusion, particularly through lead councils or committees. The trend towards formal inclusion continued in 2019, albeit predominantly through technical working groups. Conversely, the 2020 VNR reports present a broader level of multi-stakeholder engagement in lead councils and committees. However, the exact manners by which engagement occurs (e.g. if stakeholders have voting power) is not often clear, or information is not sufficiently detailed in the VNR reports.

Compared to 2019, 2020 saw an increase 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. In 2019, 5 countries pointed to academia, 10 to civil society, 2 to government institutions and 7 to the private sector. In 2020, 10 countries listed academics as part of high-level governance mechanisms, 16 referred to civil society, 13 to government institutions and 14 to the private sector. In 2020 there was also an increase in the number of countries pointing to formal inclusion of local governments over the previous year at 5 countries versus 3 in 2019. On the other hand, there was a decrease in terms of inclusion in working groups. Down from 14 countries pointing to academics in 2019 to 7 in 2020. Civil society was referred to by 14 countries in 2019 versus 13 in 2020 with similar trends for government institutions (down to 7 from 17 in 2019) and the private sector (12 versus 15 in 2019).

In addition to formal inclusion in governance mechanisms, the review also pointed to governments that have committed to engagement as shown in previous editions of this report. A commitment to engage was noted when the VNR report did not specify a formalized mechanism of engagement, but there is a well-established precedent for engagement or promise to engage non-state actors. For example, Uzbekistan indicated that civil society as an independent institution is still at the stage of formation, and that its development is supported by a presidential decree that aims to further involve civil society and enhance its role towards the renewal of the country's democracy. However, there are no details on which means will be used to ensure such engagement.

Overall, the 2020 VNR reports suggest a continued approach to formal inclusion of representatives from major stakeholder groups. This approach supports whole-of-society ownership over the 2030

Agenda, cross-sector relationship and trust building, and inclusive multi-stakeholder approaches to implementation. Moreover, in comparison to the previous year, there has been a greater focus on non-state actors in high-level governance mechanisms, which is positive in the sense that there might be more opportunities in place for non-state actors to input into overall strategic direction and coordination. However, direct impact resulting from such inclusion in formal governance arrangements remains unclear, as well as the extent to which policies and approaches are redesigned due to diverse voices being heard.

2.2.4. Engaging peers on the 2030 Agenda

An important element of the 2030 Agenda is implementation at the regional level, including through engagement with regional organizations, peer learning and regional follow-up and review. A higher number of VNR reports provided information on regional activities in 2020, suggesting an increase in terms of countries reporting on this dimension in comparison to the two previous years. In 2017, 56% of countries provided this information, 41% in 2018, 34% in 2019, and 47% in 2020. Different from 2019, when most VNR reports tended to provide limited information on regional efforts that specifically addressed implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the 2020 VNR reports bring interesting examples in this regard.

Some countries referred to their contributions with respect to advancing partnerships and agreements towards the 2030 Agenda and/or specific SDGs. That is the case of Austria, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Georgia, Liberia, Mozambique, Seychelles and Uganda. Hosting or participation in regional events was noted by Benin, Brunei Darussalam, Burundi, India, Libya, Panama, Slovenia and Syria. Argentina and Solomon Islands mentioned participation in specific SDGs frameworks, and Costa Rica referred to its leadership in work progress around the SDGs. Finland referred to participation in special country groupings to advance the 2030 Agenda, in particular the Nordic Council. Nigeria and Samoa participated in peer review processes that regarded the SDGs.

Overall, reporting on regional country grouping and participation in special country groups to advance the 2030 Agenda continues to decline. The lack of activities within country groupings suggests there has not been a movement towards regional follow-up and review (particularly with respect to the development of regional frameworks and indicators), peer-to-peer engagement and collective efforts to promote sustainable development at regional levels. In the 2020 VNR reports, only two out of the 47 countries reported specific country grouping activities. As a European Union state, Austria mentioned its commitment to supporting sustainable economic development in partner countries, to mainstreaming environmental protection and to advancing human rights, democracy and good governance. Conversely, as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), Samoa referred to its participation in the Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development and the Regional VNR Capacity Building Workshop for SIDS as an important opportunity for engagement with national and regional stakeholders.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Regional coordination to peer-review a VNR process in the Pacific

Samoa participated in a good practice initiative regarding regional coordination. Alongside Papua New Guinea, Australia, and a CSO representative from Fiji, Samoa engaged in the first global review of a VNR process. This initiative, named Pacific Islands Forum Peer Review, focused on Vanuatu's VNR report in 2019. The participation in Vanuatu's review bared lessons that were valuable for Samoa's own VNR process.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Samoa's VNR report.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Engage with peers to promote learning, establish collaborative initiatives to realize the 2030 Agenda and review progress on implementation.

2.2.5. Recommendations

- **Clearly establish leadership and governance structures to support 2030 Agenda implementation and lay out lines of accountability between various national stakeholders.**
- **Formalize non-state actor engagement in governance structures to realize the 2030 Agenda. This includes lead councils or committees and technical working groups.**
- **Identify opportunities to realize the 2030 Agenda domestically and globally through engaging more formally in regional level initiatives and with like-minded countries. Such engagement offers opportunities to share best practice with and learn lessons from peers.**
- **Support a positive public narrative around civil society and its participation in policy-making and development processes.**

2.3. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Establish an enabling environment through the creation of appropriate legal, regulatory and policy frameworks that support non-state actors to contribute to sustainable development and set out how multi-stakeholder engagement and partnership will occur.

The multi-stakeholder and inclusive nature of the 2030 Agenda are well established through its emphasis on whole-of-society approaches to implementation and leaving no one behind. A prerequisite to effective engagement is an enabling environment[12] for non-state actors to contribute. Some countries that reported in 2020 noted efforts to create an enabling environment through policies that support multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation. These included Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Brunei Darussalam, Comoros, Finland, Gambia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation, Samoa, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, and Trinidad and Tobago.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Policy frameworks to promote an enabling environment for 2030 Agenda implementation

* In **Benin**, a framework for consultation of civil society organisations (CSOs) was put in place to promote civil society's participation in SDG implementation of SDGs, especially at the community level.

* **Gambia** adopted an institutional framework that, through a decentralized approach, enables different stakeholders (e.g. civil society, private sector, local government representatives, youth, academia) to play active roles and ensure accountability.

* **Kenya's** VNR report pointed to the creation of a multi-stakeholder engagement framework, which was developed by means of consultations in order to strengthen engagements, institutional and coordination mechanisms towards the 2030 Agenda.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Benin, Gambia, and Kenya's VNR reports.

12. "The political, financial, legal and policy context that affects how CSOs carry out their work. It can include: 1) Laws, policies and practices respecting freedom of association, the right to operate without state interference, the right to pursue self-defined objectives, and the right to seek and secure funding from national & international sources; 2) Institutionalized, inclusive and transparent multi-stakeholder dialogue; 3) Effective support from development providers to empower CSOs." Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC), FAQs for Participating in the Second Monitoring Round of the GPEDC: Indicator 2

However, countries in general tend not to engage directly with the issue of closing civic space[13] in their VNR reports. This gap in VNR reports is particularly concerning given the increasing trend of closing civic space around the world.[14] Moreover, response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse by some governments to further close civic space, compounding existing concerns regarding the enabling environment for all stakeholders to contribute to the 2030 Agenda, and more recently, recovery from the pandemic.[15]

According to the CIVICUS Monitor, which examines the status of civic space around the world, civic space for over two thirds of the countries that reported to the HLPF in 2020 (62%) is characterized as "obstructed," "repressed" or "closed."

UNDERSTANDING THE STATUS OF CIVIC SPACE IN VNR REPORTING COUNTRIES FOR 2020

CIVICUS's Monitor of civic space has information for all 47 countries that reported to the HLPF in 2020. Only eight (8) of the countries that reported to the HLPF in 2020 were considered "open," meaning the state enables and safeguards civic space.[16] For 10 countries, civic space is considered "narrowed."[17] This means the rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly have been violated. For a country to be considered obstructed, civil space must have a series of legal and practical constraints on the practice of fundamental rights. In these conditions, illegal surveillance and bureaucratic harassment occur. There is some space for non-state media, but journalists are subject to attack. Sixteen (16) reporting countries were classified as "obstructed."[18] The monitor ranks a country as "repressed" if civic space is severely restrained. Individuals who criticize a power holder may be subject to surveillance, harassment, intimidation, injury or death. The work of civil society organizations is often impeded and under threat of deregistration by authorities. Mass detentions may occur, and the media usually only portrays the position of the state. Websites and social media activities are heavily monitored. In 2020, nine (9) reporting countries were in the "repressed" category.[19] The last category in the CIVICUS scale is "closed." In this category, there is a complete closure of the civic space. An atmosphere of fear and violence is prevalent. Powerful state and non-state actors routinely imprison people and cause injury and death to individuals who seek to peacefully assemble and express themselves. In such circumstances, criticizing authorities is severely punished. The internet is heavily censored and online criticisms of authorities are severely punished. In 2020, four (4) reporting countries were classified as "closed."[20]

13. "Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organizations are able to organize, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions. These are the three key rights that civil society depends upon." CIVICUS website.
14. See, for example, De Burca, Deirdre and Mohan Singh, Jyotsna. 2020. Realising the potential of Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda to promote and protect Civic Space. Asia Development Alliance (ADA) and Forus. July, 2020. Rowlands, Lynda and Gomez Pena, Natalia. 2019. We will not be silenced: Climate activism from the frontlines to the UN. *CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation position paper, November 2019*. Johannesburg: CIVICUS. Brechenmacher, Saskia and Carothers, Thomas. 2019. Defending Civic Space: Is the International Community Stuck? Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has also recently launched an Observatory on Civic Space.
15. Cf. De Oliveira, Ana, Kindornay, Shannon and Tomlinson, Brian. 2021. Forus International Scoping Study of National NGO Platforms' Experiences in Promoting an Enabling Environment. Forus. January 2021. Cf. De Oliveira, Ana, Kindornay, Shannon and Tomlinson, Brian. 2020. Executive Summary: A Scoping Study of CSO Platforms' Experiences in Promoting an Enabling Environment. Forus. December 2020. Tomlinson, Brian. 2020. Literature Review: A Scoping Study of CSO Platforms' Experiences in Promoting an Enabling Environment. Forus. December 2020.
16. Austria, Barbados, Estonia, Finland, Micronesia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, and Solomon Islands.
17. Argentina, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Georgia, North Macedonia, Panama, Moldova, Seychelles, Slovenia, and Trinidad and Tobago.
18. Armenia, Benin, Comoros, Ecuador, Gambia, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Ukraine, and Zambia.
19. Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Honduras, India, Niger, Nigeria, Russian Federation, and Uganda.
20. Burundi, Libya, Syria, and Uzbekistan.

2.3.1. Process for stakeholder engagement

In addition to an enabling environment, formal arrangements for stakeholder engagement are an element of governance and institutional mechanisms that support participation and input by all stakeholders in 2030 Agenda implementation. They help to promote greater understanding of shared goals, objectives and potential synergies, build momentum and strengthen partnerships in implementation, particularly with a broader set of stakeholders than those captured through lead councils or committees and working group structures.

In 2020, 22 VNR reports (47%) provided information on processes for stakeholder engagement beyond governance mechanisms, or ad hoc consultations. This shows a decrease in comparison to 2019, where the number of VNR reports providing such information was 28 (60%), against 18 VNR reports (39%) in 2018. Of these, one country (Liberia) only noted that they plan to develop a formal process for engagement with non-state actors (versus seven countries in 2019 and one country in 2018). In Liberia, such mechanism is to be called Citizens Feedback Mechanism and intends to increase civil society's participation in SDGs implementation, including monitoring, redress and feedback. Other examples include different approaches to stakeholder engagement. As highlighted above, Benin, Kenya and Gambia pointed to the development of multi-stakeholder engagement frameworks. Seychelles mentioned stakeholders' participation during budget processes preparation. Panama referred to conferences and working meetings conducted for participating actors to know and take ownership of the SDGs' objectives and targets, while Austria pointed to general coordination and on dialogue with relevant actors. Papua New Guinea mentioned the existence of a platform that provides stakeholders (e.g. civil society organizations, non-government organizations, individuals) with an opportunity to connect and therefore collaborate on the SDGs. Libya set up a forum for dialogue and coordination around the SDGs, and Solomon Islands established coordination committees for minority groups.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Establish and report on formal mechanisms to ensure regular, inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement on 2030 Agenda implementation in line with good practice for ensuring effective and inclusive engagement.

As noted above, there appears to be a continued positive trend in terms of non-state actor participation in formal governance arrangements from reporting in 2019 to 2020, with an increase in participation in lead councils or committees). On the other hand, less countries are reporting on processes of stakeholder engagement. This might be a concern, as the establishment of policies to support an enabling environment and the creation of formal processes and mechanisms that allow for more widespread and regular engagement with stakeholders outside governance mechanisms are important. They contribute to ongoing awareness-raising efforts, national ownership and whole-of-society approaches to implementation. Such mechanisms have potential to make a positive contribution to leaving no one behind by ensuring that populations that are being left behind, and individuals or the organizations that represent them, are included and supported to engage.

Information presented in VNR reports does not assess the quality of formal processes for multi-stakeholder engagement. Nevertheless, civil society reports for 2020 provide some indication of the challenges related to multi-stakeholder engagement. Civil society reports were prepared for the following countries that reported to the HLPF in 2020: India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Peru, Russian Federation, Slovenia, Uganda, and Zambia.[21] The VNR report for Finland, for example, included sections written by civil society. However important the views of civil society are in relation to their national experiences, civil society reports (e.g. spotlight, shadow, parallel reports) currently lack status in official United Nations' High-level Political Forum (HLPF) and its related processes.

21. A report was also available for Denmark, though this country did not submit a VNR report to HLPF in 2020. It is not examined as part of this review.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Multi-stakeholder participation in assessing the SDGs for Finland's VNR report

In Finland, civil society participates in the analysis of the country's progress in each one of the SDGs. In the goal-by-goal analysis of the VNR report, one page is dedicated to the government's assessment and another contains other stakeholders' assessment. Under each one of the 17 SDGs, while the government describes successes and key policy initiatives, the pages written by civil society point out challenges and propose recommendations. This good practice of a joint analysis corroborates a whole-of-society approach and presents a more holistic view of the country's progress towards achieving the SDGs.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Finland's VNR report.

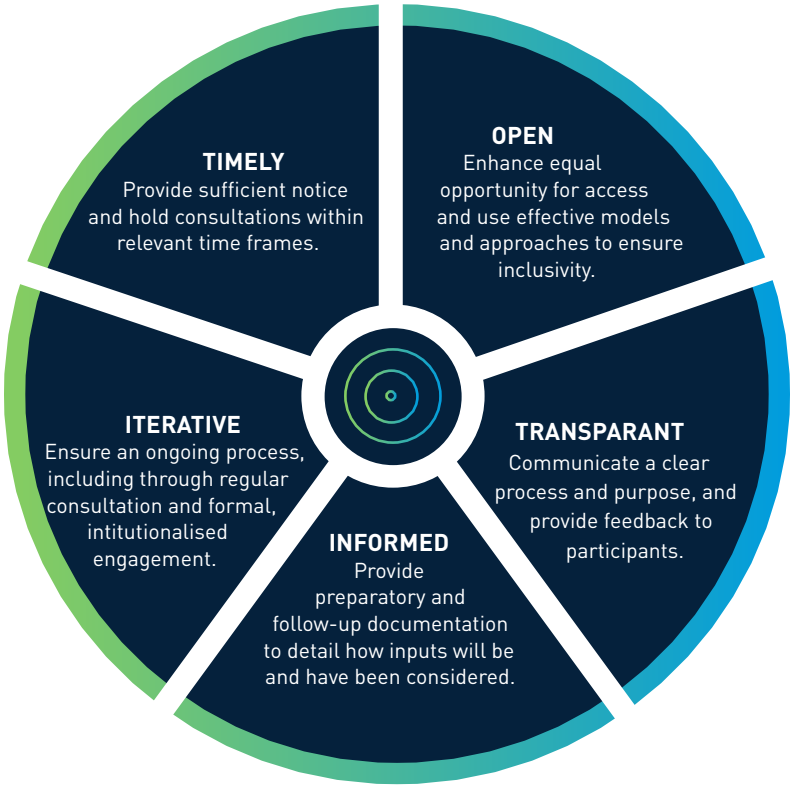
The reports and written inputs by civil society organizations in VNR reports point to challenges including the need for improved coordination, higher quality interactions between civil society organizations and government and increased capacity for all stakeholders, and the expansion of public space for civil society organizations to discuss, advocate and operate.

- In the case of **India's** civil society report, concern was raised over the challenges the country faces in achieving the SDGs, particularly with regards to securing them for the most vulnerable and marginalized communities.
- Civil society organizations in **Kenya** stressed the importance of non-state actors in influencing processes both at the local and the national levels. On the other hand, the report highlights that although there has been an improvement in the overall coordination of SDGs implementation among government institutions and non-state actors, such coordination is still considered weak.
- The civil society report for the **Kyrgyz Republic** praised the significant contributions that civil society organizations and other stakeholders provided to the VNR report, but presented concerns in the sense that weak coordination of development actors and lack of a multi-stakeholder partnership strategy creates barriers for the SDG implementation.
- **Malawi's** civil society report called for citizens' empowerment so that accountability and good governance are demanded and ensured.
- Civil society organizations in **Nepal** referred to the need for civil society organizations (CSOs)-friendly policies and the creation of enabling environment so that CSOs' strengths and expertise can accelerate the implementation of the SDGs.
- **Nigeria's** civil society report pointed out an extensive list of challenges, which include the need for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to have enabling environmental to support communities and educate them on the SDGs. It highlights the importance of participatory governance and understands it as a right.
- The civil society report for **Peru** noted a lack of institutional channels to keep the dialogue with the government permanently open.
- According to the report produced by civil society in the **Russian Federation**, public authorities exert excessive control over non-profit organizations, which hampers the activities of independent human rights and environmental organizations, whose expertise is vital to the achievement of the SDGs.
- In **Slovenia**, the report acknowledges the institutionalized processes in place to involve civil society in policy formulation, but points out that the guidelines that guarantee such involvement are often disregarded.
- When it comes to **Uganda**, its civil society report reaffirms the importance of close work between civil society and the government to ensure the pursuit of a shared agenda on the SDGs.
- Finally, **Zambia's** civil society report mentions that the institutional mechanisms in place for stakeholder coordination have not been implemented in all levels (e.g. constituencies, districts), and this lack of representation potentially undermines accountability and inclusiveness.

As noted in the 2019 *Progressing National SDGs Implementation Report*, the quality and long-term engagement of civil society and other non-state actors supports a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation. Engagement should occur within a broader context of fostering an enabling environment for

civil society (and other stakeholders) with approaches centred around the five core elements that support meaningful engagement as presented in the 2019 edition of this report.[22] However, it should be noted that the quality of stakeholder engagement is frequently unclear, as the states presenting VNR reports do not usually present details in this regard.

Figure 4. Core elements of effective and meaningful stakeholder engagement



In practice, an effective and inclusive approach to multi-stakeholder engagement means making use of varied and inclusive approaches to consultation such as online and offline methods and publicizing consultation opportunities widely and with appropriate lead time, including at subnational events in different parts of the country. It also means taking steps to include marginalized groups and their representatives and ensuring that information is available in local languages and accessible to all. As capacity for stakeholder engagement varies by country, there is also a role for development partners to support developing countries in this context.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Support capacity development of civil society, including grassroots organizations representing marginalized communities, to participate in opportunities for stakeholder engagement and promote accountability for 2030 Agenda implementation.

2.3.2. Engagement in defining national priorities

Part of a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation is developing a shared, national vision for implementation that reflects priorities from stakeholders across society. This approach supports broad-based, democratic ownership over the nationalization process. Less than half (49%) of the countries reporting in 2020 noted consultation on national priorities with non-state actors. This represents a significant decrease in relation to previous years, as

22. For a historical review of VNR reporting on stakeholder engagement with a focus on lessons learned, see Kindornay, Shannon and Gendron, Renée. 2020. *Multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation: A review of Voluntary National Review Reports (2016-2019)*. New York: UN DESA. See also Wayne-Nixon, Laurel, Wragg-Morris, Tanya, Mishra, Anjali, Markle, Dawson, and Kindornay, Shannon. 2019. Effective multi-stakeholder engagement to realize the 2030 Agenda. *Good Practice in 2030 Agenda Implementation Series*. Vancouver and Ottawa: BCCIC and CCIC.

the figures regarding countries pointing to consultations to identify national priorities was 89% in 2019,[23] 57% in 2018,[24] and 69% in 2017.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Ensure inclusivity and participation in the nationalization of the SDGs, including the creation of national targets and indicators, in line with the principles of the 2030 Agenda.

Overall, in the VNR reports that referred to non-state actors' participation in the definition of national priorities, there was enough information to understand consultation processes albeit with varying degrees of detail regarding who governments engage with and how. In the cases of the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan, non-state actors were not engaged in the identification of national priorities. Information was unavailable or unclear for 20 countries, plus the two that presented only main messages and not full VNR reports (Barbados, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines). For countries that reported national consultations, these tended to include online and offline elements. For example, Liberia and Malawi referred to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in consultations, which had to be either postponed to a later stage of the VNR process or moved into a virtual environment to ensure participation. Overall, governments tend to understand their VNR process as an opportunity to generate national ownership and select national priorities.

2.3.3. Engagement to carry out VNRs

The 2030 Agenda includes a commitment to participatory follow-up and review. The Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines encourage governments to provide information on how they carried out VNRs in their reports. As shown in previous reviews of VNR reports, governments tend to include this information, however, the level of detail can vary significantly. To support member states to carry out participatory VNRs, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs has prepared a 2020 edition of the Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews. Governments take a variety of approaches in this regard, including consultations, soliciting written inputs and commentary on draft reports and including non-state actors in drafting teams.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Defining national priorities in Armenia

Armenia organized an ongoing approach to engage stakeholders into defining the country's priorities. Such priorities are named Mega Goals, have been established under Armenia's Transformation Strategy 2020-2050, and are intimately related to the SDGs. Armenia's current long-term strategy implies not only governmental approaches and actions, but involves other stakeholders such as the private sector, civil society and all Armenian people, including the Diaspora. To this end, the country has organized its strategy as a living document, meaning it can continuously change to provide answers to the challenges being presented to country over time. According to the VNR report, this initiative is unprecedented, and its approaches have been regularly discussed, receiving approval from civil society, the business community, and other stakeholders.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Armenia's VNR report.

23. This analysis found a higher number of countries than Kindornay, Shannon, and Gendron, Renée (2020) as examples of prioritization carried out through governance mechanisms, in addition to broader consultations, are included in the figure above.
24. However, according to Kindornay, Shannon and Gendron, Renée (2020) 32 countries pointed to multi-stakeholder engagement to generate ownership over the 2030 Agenda. The difference in the figures is accounted for by countries that noted efforts in a more general sense rather than for the selection of specific national priorities.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Solicit verbal and written inputs from all stakeholders in the preparation of VNR reports and provide stakeholders with an opportunity to review and comment on the first draft through public consultation.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Youth engagement in Ukraine's VNR preparation

In Ukraine, youth was engaged in the process of the VNR preparation with a view of forecasting national development. As part of that process, the Ministry for Development of Economy, Trade, and Agriculture of Ukraine introduced a practice of involving youth in the forecasting and formulation of a set of long-term development priorities. For the first time, leading forecasting organizations, young scientists, students, and aspirants from higher educational institutions were engaged in formulating a national development consensus with the year 2030 as its horizon. To make that happen, the ministry and Ukraine's leading universities signed a memorandum of cooperation, giving students the possibility to assess and build the future common view.

Source: Except adapted from Ukraine's VNR report.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Engagement of stakeholders in the Russian Federation's VNR preparation process

Seventeen thematic groups were established to draft the Russian Federation's VNR report, one for each SDG. In addition to government institutions, the following stakeholders were engaged: development institutions, civil society organizations, research institutions, and business associations. Draft VNR chapters as well as the entire VNR underwent a series of public consultations. In addition to official state statistics, data from development and research institutions were used. The VNR provides a comprehensive list of stakeholders from scientific and research organizations, business, non-profit and civil society organizations, and international organizations that were involved in VNR preparation.

Source: Except adapted from the Russian Federation's VNR report.

Peru was the only country in 2020 that presented a full VNR report but did not refer to consultations and/or non-state actor engagement in the VNR. With 44 out of 45 countries[25] reporting non-state actor engagement, a positive trend is emerging towards non-state actor engagement in VNRs as standard practice.[26] As with the case of consultations on national priorities, most countries made use of offline and online consultation formats like previous reporting years.

A trend that emerges from the review of 2020 VNR reports is the inclusion of non-state actors in drafting VNR reports – either as part of the official drafting team or through the inclusion of dedicated chapters or subsections prepared by non-state actors. For example, in Argentina, non-state actors, such as civil society, have contributed with inputs and also sent texts that were included in the VNR report as boxes.

In Micronesia, representatives from the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and development partners were identified to draft various sections of the VNR report. Through a government website, stakeholders that included non-governmental

25. In 2020, 47 countries presented in the HLPF, but Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines are being excepted from the above figures as they only presented main messages and not full VNR reports.
26. In 2019, 45 out of 46 countries reported engaging non-state actors in the VNR, while this figure was 43 out of 46 in 2018, and 34 out of 45 countries examined in 2017.

organizations were able to submit proposals and special stories for further inclusion in the Armenian VNR report. Consultations with different stakeholders were mentioned by 27 countries (57%), which include Austria, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Gambia, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal, Samoa, Syria, and Uzbekistan. Estonia established a questionnaire for stakeholders to provide information to the review, and Zambia mentioned that the VNR report was validated by different stakeholders through virtual conferencing. Ukraine included an annex containing a summary of recommendations based on a multi-stakeholder discussion on monitoring the SDGs' progress.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Include non-state actors in institutional mechanisms responsible for the VNR and drafting the VNR report, and advocate for civil society reports to be given recognition and status in the United Nations' High-level Political Forum (HLPF) process.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Trinidad and Tobago's VNR as a tool to highlight stakeholder engagement in SDGs implementation

By using "boxes", Trinidad and Tobago's VNR report showcased initiatives carried out by stakeholders towards SDGs implementation. Such initiatives, written using stakeholders' inputs, were linked to particular SDGs' targets and underlined as ways to bring the "leave no one behind" principle into reality. As a result, the VNR report highlighted efforts made by civil society, academia, and the private sector to contribute to national SDGs implementation. By presenting information in such a way, the VNR report increased the visibility of stakeholders' contributions.

Source: Except adapted from Trinidad and Tobago's VNR report.

2.3.4. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted countries in various ways. With regards specifically to stakeholder engagement, 25 out of the 47 countries (53%) included information on the effects of the pandemic. Among those, most reported impacts and changes on VNR reporting, with a fewer number of countries reporting on overall engagement in terms of governance mechanisms. In terms of the VNR experience, countries mostly referred to the disruption of planned consultations or other forms of engagement, to meetings being delayed or postponed, and to the need of using virtual means to carry out participation and engagement.

Among the key impacts, 15 out of the 25 countries that included information on the impacts of COVID-19 on stakeholder engagement (60%) mentioned moving into online platforms, virtual meetings, or other forms of online engagement. Conversely, 11 out of 25 countries referred to planned engagements being cancelled, postponed, reduced, or put on hold, which represents 44% of the countries reporting on the pandemic impacts. Although Honduras and Niger have referred to complications arising from the pandemic, they did not detail the extent or consequences of such issues.

Despite the considerable negative impacts posed by the pandemic in consultative processes, some countries pointed to positive lessons learned. For example, Bangladesh's VNR report provided an appendix on COVID-19 that finishes by mentioning the opportunity for cooperation among different stakeholders. It notes the chance for the private sector and civil society to become agents of change by actively working on inclusion. According to the country's report, working on existing inequities can ensure that everyone in society receives fair opportunities for the post-pandemic context. In the case of Georgia, the VNR report did not refer to specific negative impacts, but to a coordinated response. The country's society perceived the need to resume economic growth while being mindful of the leave no one behind principle. In this sense, the response to COVID-19 brought more coordination within the Georgian government and with the country's society.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Virtual engagement towards inclusivity in Uganda

Uganda noted that virtual engagement brought more inclusion and less costs. According to the country's VNR report, online consultations elicited the participation of more people than traditional workshops, and counted with a comparatively greater diversity of stakeholders. Secondly, such process was undertaken with lower expenses, allowing for the resources to be dedicated to other budget-constrained processes in the country. Finally, Uganda mentioned a higher level of participation of young, tech-savvy people, who engaged better than when invited to attend physical meetings.

Source: Except adapted from Uganda's VNR report.

2.3.5. Recommendations

- **Follow good practice in multi-stakeholder engagement by ensuring that approaches are timely, open and inclusive, transparent, informed and iterative.**
- **Support an enabling environment for multi-stakeholder engagement through the legislation, regulation and the creation of policies that set out how engagement will occur.**
- **Create and report on formal mechanisms to ensure regular and inclusive stakeholder engagement.**
- **Engage diverse stakeholders in the selection of national priorities and partner with non-state actors to reach the furthest behind.**
- **Develop a range of opportunities for multi-stakeholder engagement in VNRs including through online and in-person public consultation, soliciting inputs to and feedback on draft reports, and inclusion of non-state actors as partners in carrying out the review and drafting the VNR report.**
- **Ensure that stakeholders continue to be engaged even in light of challenging situations (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic) by promoting resilience and finding alternative ways through which to secure participation.**

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3. POLICIES FOR 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION

This chapter covers four aspects related to policies towards 2030 Agenda implementation. The first one refers to the 2020 reporting countries' conduction of baseline or gap analysis to inform implementation strategies. The second section focuses on the incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks and policies, including the extent to which countries have integrated the Agenda's principles, such as human-rights based approach, universality, intergenerational responsibility, planetary boundaries, and leaving no one behind. The third section of this chapter addresses the topic of nationalizing the 2030 Agenda, looking into how countries have defined national priorities and established national targets and indicators. The fourth section focuses on integration and policy coherence, and examines how countries have reported on the SDGs and how they covered policy coherence for sustainable development. All of the four sections are followed by lists of recommendations.

3.1. **KEY** FINDINGS

3.1.1. Baseline or gap analysis

- **Conducting assessments:** In 2020, although most countries (64%) reported they carried out a baseline or gap assessment, this represents a reduction in view of 2019, when 79% of the countries reported having conducted such assessment.

3.1.2. Incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks and policies

- **SDGs integration:** All the countries reported integrating the SDGs into their policies in 2020. This is a positive trend in comparison to previous years, when 79% reported similar approaches in 2019, and only half of countries did so in 2017 and 2018.
- **2030 Agenda principles:** The reporting countries

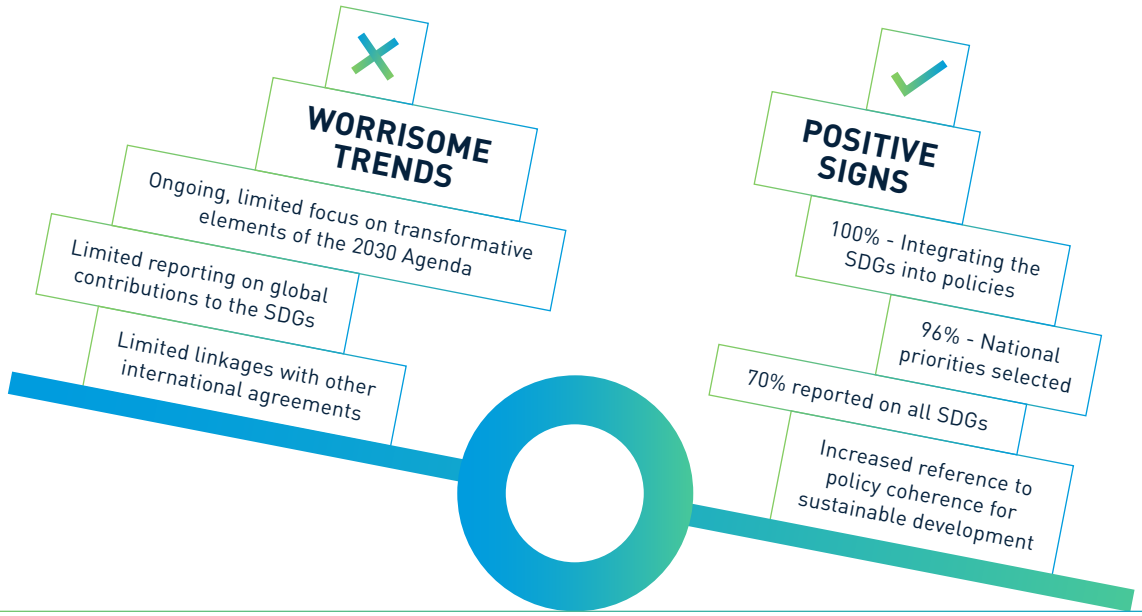
continue to refer more to the SDGs than to the broader 2030 Agenda and its transformational principles. Among these principles, leaving no one behind continues to receive more focus in the 2020 VNR reports, and there has been an increase in the number of countries pointing to the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda and human rights-based approaches.

3.1.3. Nationalizing the 2030 Agenda

- **National priorities:** Five years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, 45 countries, or almost 96% that reported in 2020, noted the selection of national priorities. This compares to 89% in 2019 and 76% in 2018 and 2017. As in 2019, priorities related to social outcomes and economy are most commonly cited, followed by the environment.
- **National targets and indicators:** In 2020, 77% of countries provided some information on the selection of national targets and indicators, which represents an increase in relation to the 60% of countries in 2019.

3.1.4. Integration and policy coherence

- **SDGs reporting:** There has been an improvement on reporting integrated approaches to implement the SDGs. Although only 49% of countries gave equal attention to economic, social and environmental dimensions of development in their VNR reports, more than half referred to appropriate linkages between the goals. 70% of VNR reports assessed the full set of SDGs, an increase in relation to 2019, when this figure had been 40%.
- **International agreements:** Reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda and relevant international agreements shows mixed results in 2020 over 2019. Such linkages point to the recognition of the synergies between the 2030 Agenda and other relevant agreements to promote sustainable development, and the variation of results in relation to different agreements does not suggest an increase in such recognition.
- **COVID-19 at the international level:** A very limited number of countries referred to COVID-19-related actions apart from measures carried out at the domestic level. No country made reference to global commitments regarding the pandemic.
- **Policy coherence:** More countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation. However, VNR reports revealed limited analysis of domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally in 2020, down from previous years.



3.2. **BASELINE** OR GAP ANALYSIS

Baseline and gap analyses typically examine policy alignment and/or data availability and baselines for 2030 Agenda implementation. These assessments inform decision-making, policy processes, programming and efforts to improve data availability. While the first four years of VNR reporting showed most countries reporting the completion of an assessment of all or some SDGs,[27] in 2020, only 30 countries (64%) provided this information. Alongside Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, who only presented main messages and not full VNR reports, Austria, Bulgaria, Brunei Darussalam, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Estonia, Honduras, Libya, Panama, Peru, the Russian Federation, Solomon Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uzbekistan did not indicate that they had carried out a gap analysis or baseline assessment. In the case of Gambia, the VNR report suggests an assessment is planned to identify data needs, as well as methodologies for sources and collection. More limited reporting on baseline assessments may be the result of 21 countries now submitting a second or third VNR report to the HLPF.

Overall, 2020 saw a reduction in the proportion of countries reporting that they had carried out a baseline or gap analysis over previous years.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Assess policies, data availability and baselines to inform prioritization and nationalization of the 2030 Agenda and ensure an evidence-based approach to implementation. When submitting a subsequent VNR report, indicate if and how relevant assessments have been updated.

In terms of the content of assessments, the degree to which assessments were detailed varied, though what was assessed was often clear. The most common type of assessment noted in VNR reports related to examining data (40%). In 2019, the highest percentage referred to the assessment of policies and their alignment with the SDGs (36%). In 2018 the most common type of assessment noted in VNR reports was for data and policies (33%). In 2017, most assessments (36%) focused on data availability and/or the establishment of baselines.

Figure 5. Types of baseline or gap assessments listed in VNR reports

27. In 2019, 79% of reporting countries indicated they performed an assessment for all or some SDGs. In 2018, 70% of countries noted that they had carried out an assessment or planned to while in 2017, the number was 84% versus 62% in 2016.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Making use of assessment tools to support 2030 Agenda implementation in the Kyrgyz Republic

The Kyrgyz Republic undertook a gap analysis using the United Nations Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support methodology, Complexity Analysis of the SDGs Interlinkages and Rapid Integrated Assessment tools. The assessments helped identify the level of alignment between national priorities and SDG implementation and attainment on the subnational level, as well as areas that can benefit from accelerated actions. Gaps identified include a lack of sufficiently disaggregated statistical data, persistent urban-rural discrepancies, continued social and gender inequalities, insufficient capacities among central and local authorities and limited financial and human resources to work on multiple priorities simultaneously. A statistical capacity assessment revealed that the Kyrgyz Republic is ready to report on 102 indicators, or 50% of all applicable global SDG indicators. The Rapid Integrated Assessment of 36 strategic documents found 82% alignment of the national strategic development planning with the SDGs, with full alignment observed with SDGs 1 (No poverty), 2 (Zero hunger), 3 (Good health and well-being), 5 (Gender equality), 7 (Affordable and clean energy) and 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure).

Source: Except adapted from Kyrgyz Republic's VNR report.

As noted in previous *Progressing National SDGs Implementation* reports, VNR reports for 2020 that included an assessment of policies similarly tended to provide information regarding the extent to which the SDGs and their targets are aligned or integrated into national policies, with some countries providing details on the percentage of targets aligned. The results of data assessments tend to be presented in terms of overall data availability. Information on gaps in terms of progress for 2030 Agenda implementation is also presented in the goal-by-goal analysis for some countries (however this information is not explicitly linked to the assessment carried out or showcased as results of the assessment). In the 2020 VNR reports, although some of the data showed assessments were carried out, information on how aligned policies were or how much data was available is not usually detailed. On the other hand, most reporting countries (30 out of 47) included SDG gaps.

In terms of COVID-19, while most VNR reports recognized the significant impact of the pandemic, particularly in terms of limiting and in some cases backsliding on sustainable development gains, most reports did not include a detailed description of implications for baselines. With respect to this area of analysis, Nigeria noted that their baseline data is outdated, but a new assessment was delayed due to the pandemic. Conversely, Trinidad and Tobago considered that the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for further assessment of gaps, but does not describe specific analysis being either carried out or postponed in view of the pandemic.

3.2.1. Recommendations

- **Conduct an assessment that identifies gaps in existing policies and programs, examines data availability, and sets out baselines from which to measure progress and assess where additional efforts are needed.**
- **Articulate how the assessment was conducted and provide a summary of the gaps identified for each goal.**
- **For countries presenting a subsequent VNR report to the HLPF, identify where progress has been made since initial policy and data assessments and provide information on changes between reporting years at national and subnational levels and for the furthest behind.**

3.3. **INCORPORATION** OF THE 2030 AGENDA INTO NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND POLICIES

National frameworks and policies set the overall direction for 2030 Agenda implementation and provide guidance to government institutions and other stakeholders. Incorporation of the 2030 Agenda includes the SDGs as well as the agenda's transformative principles including commitments to a human rights-based approach, intergenerational responsibility and leaving no one behind, for example. The review of VNR reports seeks to understand how governments have incorporated the SDGs as well as the guiding principles of the 2030 Agenda.

In 2020, all the countries reported integrating the SDGs into national policies. While most countries (34 out of 47) incorporated the SDGs into national development plans and related policies and frameworks, 11 have also included the use of a national SDG implementation strategy. Bulgaria and Barbados noted the creation of a national strategy to implement the SDGs without referring to national development plans. Overall, findings for 2020 show an increase in countries integrating the SDGs into their policies over reporting in 2019, when 79% of the countries reported similar approaches, and in 2017 and 2018, where only half of countries did so.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Integrate Agenda 2030 priorities into national policies and frameworks and develop a roadmap to accelerate implementation.

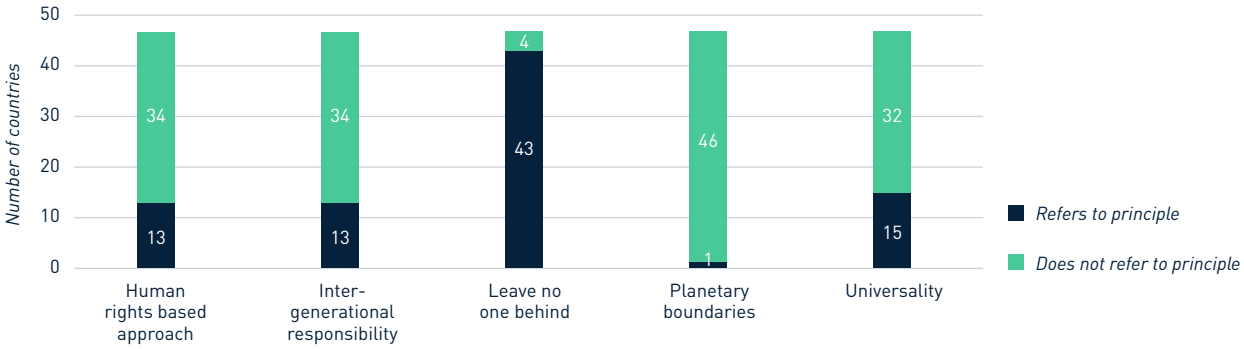
3.3.1. Integrating the 2030 Agenda principles

The principles of universality, human rights, integration, partnership, inclusivity, pursuing development within planetary boundaries, inter-generational responsibility and leaving no one behind are critical foundations of sustainable development. These principles represent the spirit of the 2030 Agenda and serve as transformative elements of implementation. The assessment of VNR reports looks at whether they mention principles of the 2030 Agenda, including human rights-based approaches, leaving no one behind, universality, inter-generational responsibility and planetary boundaries.[28]

As shown in Figure 6, the principle of leaving no one behind is well established and referred to in VNR reports with the vast majority of the countries (43 out of 47, or almost 92%). This finding points to a slight decrease in a continued upward trend in countries referring to leaving no one behind from 98% in 2019, 89% in 2018 and 87% in 2017. Different from 2019 and 2018, when inter-generational responsibility was the next most cited principle, in 2020 universality was the second principle mostly mentioned, with 15 countries making this reference, against 8 on 2019 and 16 in 2018. In regard to the principle of a human-rights based approach, 13 out of 47 VNR reports made this reference, against only 4 out of 47 in 2019. As for inter-generational responsibility, the same amount of 13 out of 47 reports referred to this principle in 2020, against 18 out of 47 in 2019. Finally, the planetary boundaries principle was referred to by only 1 out of the 47 2020 VNR reports, which is the same as the 2019 VNR reports. Compared to 2019, the principles of inter-generational responsibility and leaving no one behind saw a reduction. On the other hand, reference to human rights-based approach and universality experienced increases, which is a positive trend. The principle of planetary boundaries was again mentioned by only one country.

28. Other principles are captured in the sections that follow through the examination of integration, stakeholder engagement and partnership.

Figure 6. Reference to 2030 Agenda Principles



BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Explicitly link the implementation of each SDG to relevant national and international human rights frameworks. Establish policies and institutions to ensure a human rights-based approach to sustainable development in 2030 Agenda implementation.

Thirteen countries explicitly referred to the human rights-based approach (versus four countries in 2019, six countries in 2018, and 10 in 2017). Nevertheless, 22 countries made some reference to human rights in their VNR reports, down from 29 in 2019 and 28 in 2018. For example, in Ecuador's VNR report, many links between country policies towards 2030 Agenda implementation are referred as links with human rights. In the case of Austria, even if the human rights-based approach is not identified, human rights are considered as a cross cutting reference along the VNR report. Liberia and Mozambique, for example, referred to the constitution and to legal and policy frameworks that include the protection of human rights. Kyrgyz Republic's VNR report outlines government efforts to improve human rights protection and compliance with international human rights obligations, including by establishing human rights institutions. The VNR report from Niger mentions that the country has ratified almost all legal instruments for the protection of human rights at the international, regional and national levels. In the case of Zambia, human rights are referred to under specific SDGs, such as SDG 5 (Gender equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions).

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Slovenia's creation of a human rights centre

Human rights have been integrated throughout Slovenia's VNR report. Moreover, the foundation of a Human Rights Centre is mentioned as a form of good practice. Following an update in the Human Rights Ombudsman Act in January 2019, the country created a Human Rights Centre within the Ombudsman Office to perform broader tasks related to the topic of human rights.

The actions carried out by the centre include human rights-related promotion, information, education and training, as well as analyses, reports and panel discussions related to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Cooperating stakeholders include civil society, unions and other state bodies. Moreover, in partnership with education organizations such as universities and schools, the centre aims to conduct activities regarding education and awareness raising. Going forward, the centre is to continue its engagement with organizations at both the national and international levels.

Source: Except adapted from Slovenia's VNR report.

Only one country – Finland – referred to planetary boundaries,[29] compared to one country in 2019 and three countries in 2018. Of the nine planetary boundaries identified by the Stockholm Resilience Center,[30] countries that do not refer directly to planetary boundaries tend to refer to aspects such climate change, biodiversity, land system change, and chemical pollution. Even in the instances where reports refer to some of the planetary boundaries, they are not understood as such, but rather presented as part of country progress and commitments related to environmental goals.

As with previous reporting years, VNR reports show that countries tend to focus on the SDGs rather than the broader 2030 Agenda and its transformational principles overall. While the considerable reference to leaving no one behind continues to be welcome, even this principle experienced a decline in the VNR reports references. On the other hand, there has been an increase in the number of countries pointing to the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda and human rights-based approaches. The decline in countries pointing to inter-generational responsibility and the fact that there was no change in terms of a sole country referring to planetary boundaries is a worrying trend.

3.3.2. Recommendations

- **Fully integrate the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national and subnational plans and strategies based on an evaluation of existing policies, approaches and progress to identify gaps, adapt policies and target areas where further progress is needed especially for the furthest behind groups.**
- **Operationalize the principles of the 2030 Agenda in approaches to implementation recognizing the universal, human rights-based and interlinked nature of the agenda. VNR reports should demonstrate how approaches to sustainable development are transformative based on the principles of the 2030 Agenda and not just the SDGs.**
- **Ground plans and strategies in human rights, including by linking activities to international and national human rights commitments and establishing appropriate institutions and mechanisms to support a human rights-based approach to sustainable development.**
- **Undertake actions with reference to and respect for planetary boundaries and responsibilities towards future generations, including avenues for intergenerational partnerships.**

3.4. NATIONALIZING THE 2030 AGENDA

While successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires that governments work towards realizing all SDGs, governments are expected to implement the 2030 Agenda in line with their national context and priorities. This means identifying national (and local) priorities, targets and indicators through inclusive and participatory processes. This process helps countries situate implementation in light of baselines and existing progress, generate ownership and adapt the goals to country-specific contexts. In the context of prioritization, the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda means that countries can be a leader on some goals but a laggard on none.

3.4.1. Priorities

Five years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, 45 countries, or almost 96% that reported in 2020, noted the selection of national priorities. This compares to 89% in 2019 and 76% in 2018 and 2017. Barbados does not make reference to this topic in its main message. The only other country not referring to national priorities is Costa Rica, although this matter had been considered in detail in the country's 2017 VNR report. However, Costa Rica did refer to the COVID-19

29. The present analysis only considers the mentioning of "planetary boundaries" specifically. However, Slovenia's VNR report refers to a development "that takes into account the limits and capacities of our planet."
30. These include stratospheric ozone depletion, loss of biosphere integrity (biodiversity loss and extinctions), chemical pollution and release of novel entities, climate change, ocean acidification, freshwater consumption and the global hydrological cycle, land system change, nitrogen and phosphorus flows to the biosphere and oceans and atmospheric aerosol loading.

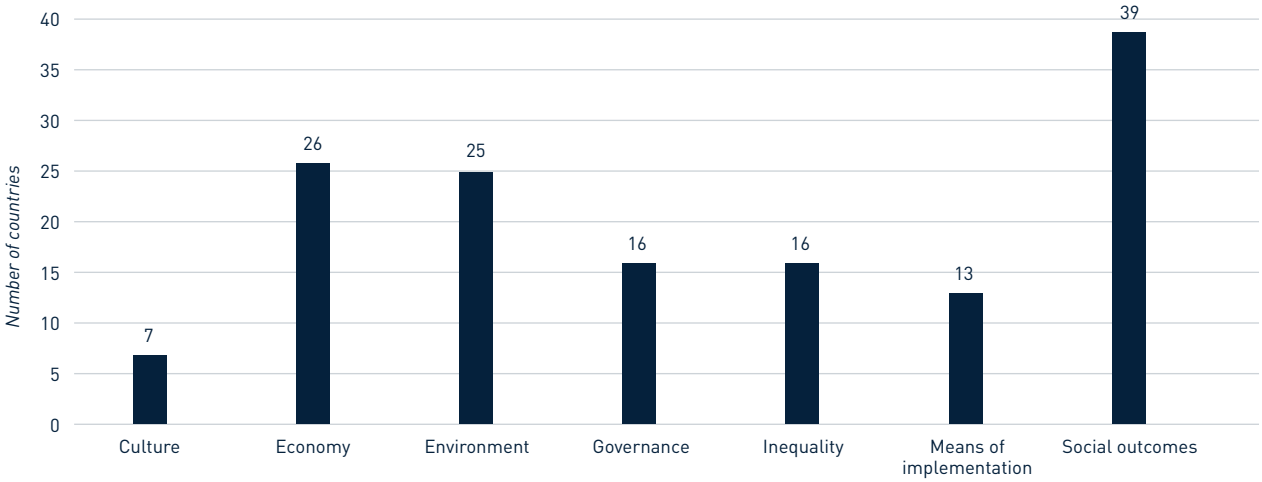
pandemic as a priority issue to be addressed in terms of emergency. Like previous reporting years, how countries articulate their priorities vary. Some list national priorities in terms of specific SDGs while others note priority areas, such as economic growth or social inclusion that apply to more than one goal. Others still point to priority targets within goals.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Include all dimensions of sustainable development in the selection of national priorities.

The 43 countries that provided more details on their priorities for 2030 Agenda implementation did not consistently referred to specific SDGs. Overall, there has been a decrease in the references for most priority areas in relation to previous years. However, the most commonly cited priorities continue to be those related to social outcomes (39 countries) and economy (26 countries) (Figure 7). In 2019, these figures were 33 and 34, respectively, and 32 and 30 countries in 2018, respectively. A slightly smaller number of countries prioritized the environment in 2020 at 25 versus 28. In 2018, this number was 26. The number of countries reporting governance issues as a priority declined in 2020 with 16 countries, against 31 in 2019 and 21 countries in 2018 and 2017. Less countries prioritized inequality at 16 countries versus 21 in 2019, 13 in 2018 and nine in 2017. Thirteen countries pointed to issues related to the means of implementation, or SDG 17, a figure that stood at 20 in 2019, 14 2018 and 10 in 2017. Seven countries pointed to culture as a priority overall, versus only two in 2019 and six countries in 2018. Estonia included an SDG 18 to be the viability of the Estonian cultural space.

Figure 7. Priorities for 2030 Agenda implementation



In terms COVID-19, the 2020 VNR reports did not frequently noted how the pandemic impacted national priorities. For example, Argentina mentioned the establishment of unexpected and urgent priorities posed by the health emergency situation. According to the country's VNR report, the pandemic highlighted the importance of the state providing essential services such as public health and subsidies to people in situations of social and economic vulnerability.

3.4.2. National targets and indicators

The selection of national (and local) targets and indicators links national priorities to monitoring and follow-up and review. In 2020, 77% of countries provided some information on the selection of national targets and indicators, which represents an increase in relation to the 60% of countries in 2019. Most countries reported selecting national targets and indicators – 34

of the 36 countries that provided information. This is an improvement over 2019, when the figures were 17 of the 29 countries that reported identifying both targets and indicators, and over 2018, when only seven countries provided such information. Only two countries reported only having developed national indicators, and none mentioned the development of targets only. Costa Rica, Barbados, Gambia, and Trinidad and Tobago did not provide information on the selection of national targets and indicators. Information available in the VNR reports for Brunei Darussalam, Ecuador, Honduras, Nigeria, Panama, and Peru was unclear on whether the countries had developed national targets and indicators. In the case of Morocco, the preparation of national targets and indicators is mentioned as a next step.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Mozambique's national framework of SDG indicators

In 2020, Mozambique created a National Framework of SDG Indicators (QNI) that adapts the global commitments to the country's context by the means of specific targets and indicators. Such framework aligns with the development priorities of Mozambique, particularly to its government's five-year program for the 2020-2024 period. Moreover, as the framework's indicators reflect the multidimensional nature of the SDGs, this mechanism offers further integration when it comes to programming. The framework informs the government's implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and specific agencies across sectors have been identified as being responsible for both achieving and monitoring particular targets. Furthermore, the framework will be useful to development stakeholders in terms of the integrating SDG indicators into management tools that look into planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Source: Except adapted from Mozambique's VNR report.

3.4.3. Recommendations

- **Identify national sustainable development priorities that address all dimensions of sustainable development, recognizing the interlinkages between society, the economy, the environment and governance.**
- **Develop national targets and indicators through an inclusive and participatory process to complement global targets and indicators.**
- **In order to generate national ownership of the VNR process, present VNR reports for debate at the national level (e.g. in national parliaments and official multi-stakeholder sustainable development councils/commissions) before presenting at the international level (e.g. United Nations' High-level Political Forum).**

3.5. INTEGRATION AND POLICY COHERENCE

The 2030 Agenda covers economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, alongside issues related to governance, culture, inequality and partnership. It has implications for domestic and foreign policies as well as efforts at the local level. Importantly, the 2030 Agenda links to the international human rights framework and a range of international agreements related to issues such as climate action, gender equality, financing for development and aid effectiveness, among others. All stakeholders face the challenge of ensuring an integrated and coherent approach to 2030 Agenda implementation. Implementation must promote synergies to realize progress on all dimensions of sustainable development at local, national and global levels while addressing trade-offs.

3.5.1. Reporting on the SDGs

While the HLPF has an annual theme and sometimes establishes specific theme goals, countries are encouraged to report on all 17 SDGs. This facilitates assessment of how well countries are progressing on the SDGs. Although some countries opt to report only

against the theme goals, this was not a valid option for 2020, as no theme goals were defined for this year. In 2020, 33 countries (70%) provided information on all 17 SDGs (Table 1), which represents an increase in relation to the 28 (59%) countries informing this in 2019 and in 2018.

Table 1. Goal by goal reporting in the 2020 VNR reports

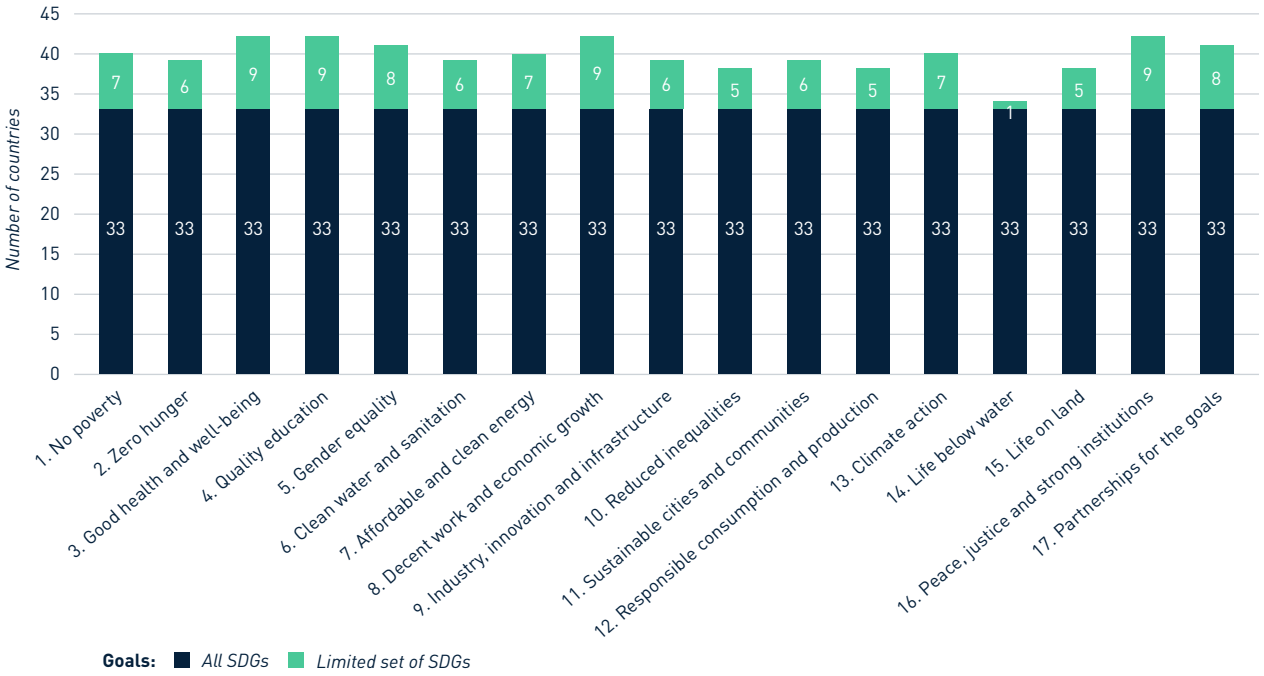
SDG Coverage	Countries		
All SDGs examined *(33 countries)*	Argentina Armenia Austria Bangladesh Benin Brunei Darussalam Bulgaria Burundi Comoros Costa Rica Democratic Republic of the Congo	Ecuador Estonia Finland Gambia Honduras India Kenya Liberia Malawi Micronesia Morocco Nepal	North Macedonia Panama Papua New Guinea Russian Federation Samoa Seychelles Slovenia Solomon Islands Uganda Ukraine
Limited set of country-selected SDGs *(9 countries)*	Libya Georgia Kyrgyz Republic	Mozambique Niger Nigeria	Trinidad and Tobago Uzbekistan Zambia
SDGs examination not articulated in the VNR *(3 countries)*	Barbados Peru Saint Vincent and the Grenadines		
No specific goal-by-goal analysis but rather analysis based on 5Ps (people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership) *(2 countries)*	Moldova Syria		

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Provide a detailed assessment of all 17 SDGs, with appropriate linkages to all dimensions of sustainable development and reference to domestic and global efforts to realize the 2030 Agenda.

Figure 8 provides an overview of the goals most cited in VNR reports according to the approach taken to the goal-by-goal analysis.

Figure 8. Specific SDG coverage



The review suggests a slight reverse in the positive trend in VNR reports towards greater detail in the examination of SDGs, targets and indicators. Most countries, 79%, provided a detailed examination, a decrease from the 89% of 2019, but still higher than the 65% in 2018 and 64% in 2017. Detailed examinations tend to include overall information on the status of a particular SDG, efforts to accelerate implementation, successes and challenges. Seven countries provided only summary level information while Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines did not provide details of the implementation of specific SDGs in their main messages. Peru did not mention an analysis of goals, targets and indicators mentioned in their VNR report. In the case of Moldova and Syria, the analysis was based on the 5Ps (people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership), and Syria was able to cover all the 17 SDGs via such analytical framework.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Reporting on SDG 14 in Armenia's VNR report

Armenia's VNR report covers SDG 14 (Life below water), which is not a customary practice for landlocked countries. Although this SDG is not subject to nationalization, the VNR report highlights that Armenia pays special attention to the management of fish resources, the preservation of fish species, the combat against illegal fishing, and that the country had allocated budget to care for the resources of a lake and its basin.

Source: Except adapted from Armenia's VNR report.

With respect to the integrated nature of the SDGs, the review of VNR reports also looks at the extent to which countries refer to linkages between the goals as well as coverage of all three dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic and environmental) overall in the VNR report. Apart from the detailed reporting on the SDGs, the review of 2020 VNR reports

found a reverse in the decline seen in previous years with regards to the number of countries making applicable linkages to all three aspects of sustainable development between the goals. In 2019, 25% made references to linkages versus 37% in 2018 and 49% in 2017. Conversely, 51% of the countries reporting in 2020 provided such linkages. This result may positively indicate that countries are working towards ensuring integration in their approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation.

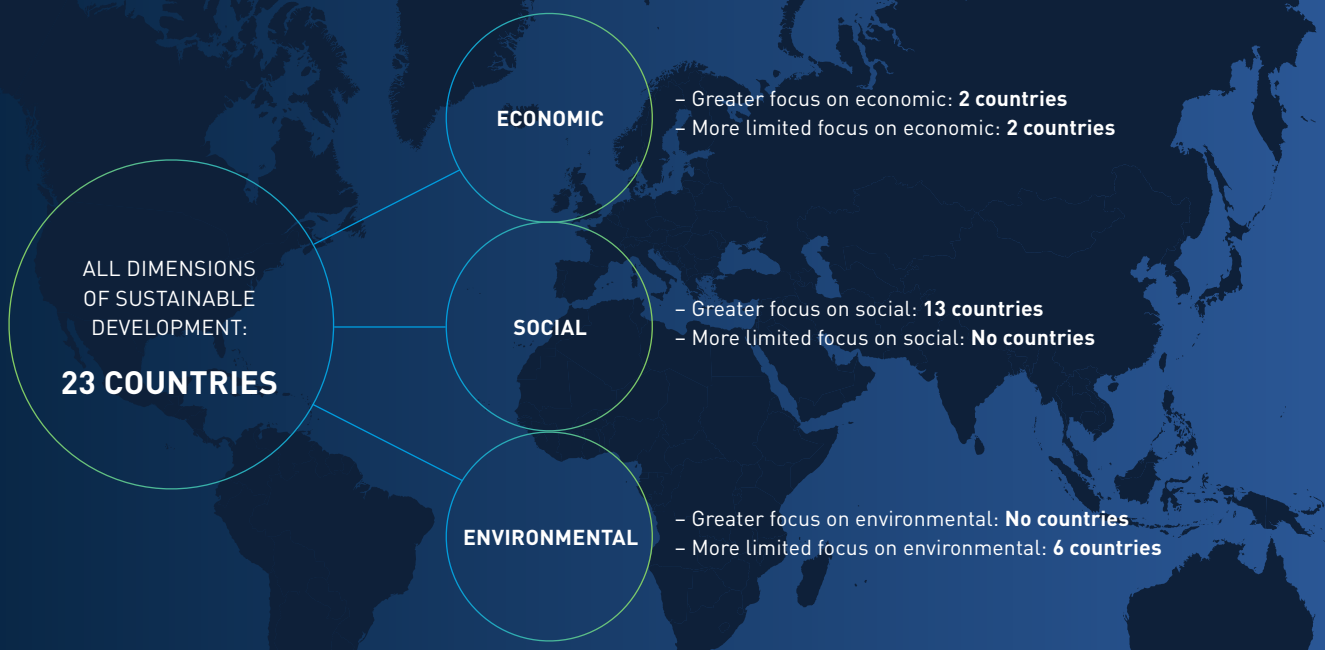
Despite the increase in the number of countries referring to linkages between the goals, 2020 VNR reports showed a decline in the number of countries giving equal attention to all three dimensions of sustainable development. Figure 9 provides an overview of the extent to which countries examined all three dimensions of sustainable development.[31] Twenty-three countries, or %49, placed equal emphasis on the three dimensions of sustainable development in 2020, versus %57) 27) in %63) 29 ,2019) in 2018 and %75) 33) in 2017. Thirteen countries (%28) addressed all three dimensions of sustainable development but placed greater importance on the social. Brunei Darussalam and Zambia addressed all dimensions of sustainable development but put greater emphasis on the economy. Conversely, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Solomon Islands put a more limited focus on economy. Gambia, Georgia, Honduras, Peru, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan gave more limited attention to the environment. No countries placed limited focus on the social dimensions. Overall, the review of VNR reports over 2020-2017 suggests a worrisome decline in terms of the extent to which countries are reporting integrated approaches to implementing the SDGs.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Interlinking the three dimensions in Samoa

Samoa's second VNR analyzed the country's priority areas established by its development strategy and highlighted that such strategy shares the 2030 Agenda's interlinkages of the three dimensions of sustainable development. In the goal-by-goal analysis of the VNR report, specific sections named "interlinkages" indicate such interrelations for each SDG.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Samoa's VNR report.

Figure 9. Attention to social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in VNR reports



31. Barbados is excluded from Figure 9 as it did not provide information on this matter.

3.5.2. Policy coherence for sustainable development

The review of VNR reports looks at the extent to which countries make linkages to international agreements related to the 2030 Agenda and policy coherence for sustainable development. There are many international agreements and frameworks that support implementation the 2030 Agenda. The review examined references to climate change and the Paris Agreement, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the global aid development effectiveness agenda.[32] Given the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic, the review also included an examination of whether countries referred to international commitments related to responding to the pandemic.

Overall, reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda relevant international agreements shows improvement in 2020 over 2019 except for a decline in references to the Paris Agreement on climate change. In 2020, 32 countries (68%) mentioned the Paris Agreement on climate change. Eleven countries (23%) did not mention the Paris Agreement but provided information on how they were addressing climate change. Such figures represent a decline in comparison with previous years, given that in 2019 there were 45 countries (95%) mentioning the Paris Agreement, versus 82% in 2018. In 2017, 22% countries reported on climate change. As with previous years, 2020 VNR reports tend to point to national climate policies, efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, renewable energy and improved energy efficiency and efforts to reduce vulnerabilities to climate change and disasters. Some countries also referred to education initiatives, adaptation, and conservation initiatives. In terms of other environment-related agreements, the review found that 38% of countries referred to the Convention on Biological Diversity, an increase from 2019 when 29% reported on the link, versus 57% in 2018. In relation to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, 60% of countries noted the framework in 2020 versus 59% in 2019 and 41% in 2018.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: An integrated approach in Mozambique

In its efforts to ensure an integrated approach to 2030 Agenda implementation, the government of Mozambique makes use of the SDG National Reference Group to enable different levels of government jointly towards integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development and strengthen policy coherence.

Source: Except adapted from Mozambique's VNR report.

With respect to financing the 2030 Agenda and other means of implementation, VNR reports reversed the positive trend from previous years in terms of references to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. Thirty-four percent of VNR reports referred to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda in 2020 versus 57% in 2019, 46% in 2018 and 33% in 2017. However, VNR reports showed a slight increase in the reference to the aid effectiveness and development effectiveness agenda in 2020, with eight countries compared to four in 2019 and nine in 2018. Bulgaria referred to its approaches to planning and allocating development assistance as being in line with the standards set out in the 2005 Paris Declaration and the 2011 Busan Declaration. Gambia's VNR report mentioned links to the Istanbul Programme of Action. Moldova's VNR report mentioned that the government subscribed to international commitments to streamline foreign aid, such as the Paris Declaration, the Accra Agenda for Action, the Busan Commitments and the Mexico Communiqué. Papua New Guinea pointed to the revision of the country's development cooperation policy in 2018 towards the principles of Aid Effectiveness and Global Partnerships for Effective Development Cooperation.

32. The revised Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines for 2020 now encourage countries to make specific reference to these agreements (and others) in the introductory section.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Samoa's participation in aid and development effectiveness efforts

In 2010, Samoa was one of the few Pacific Island Countries (PICs) participating in the global evaluation on the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness implementation. Moreover, Samoa engaged in both global and regional aid and development effectiveness efforts, such as the High-Level Conferences carried out in Accra (2008), Busan (2011), Mexico (2014), Nairobi (2016), and the Pacific Forum Compact between 2010 and 2015.

Source: Except adapted from Samoa's VNR report.

In terms of COVID-19, VNR reports tended to focus on domestic responses to the pandemic. There were no countries that explicitly referred to global commitments in this area, either in terms of adapting their approaches to foreign assistance or commitments to global initiatives such as the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. However, Bulgaria mentioned its participation in the online pledging conference organized by the President of the European Commission and the Bulgarian commitment to contribute EUR 100,000 to expedite the work on a COVID-19 vaccine and its global deployment. According to the Russian Federation's VNR report, the country provided bilateral aid to countries such as Italy, China, the United States, and Serbia, as well as CIS member states (Commonwealth of Independent States) including Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, and Uzbekistan. Aid included personal protective equipment (PPE), medical equipment, COVID-19 test kits, as well as the assistance of medical personnel such as military doctors and virologists. Given the significant impacts of the pandemic at the global level, countries should report their global actions alongside their domestic ones.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Link the 2030 Agenda to relevant international agreements that support sustainable development to ensure coherency and synergies in implementation.

Beyond coherence with relevant international frameworks, implementation of the 2030 Agenda also depends on policy coherence for sustainable development. Domestic policies have an impact on the realization of sustainable development at home and abroad. In this context, policy coherence for sustainable development is about ensuring that domestic policies maximize their positive contributions and minimize negative contributions to sustainable development globally. While just over half of reporting countries – 24 – referred to policy coherence in their VNR reports in 2019, this number rose to 28 countries (%60) in 2020. Still, the majority of VNR reports continue to refer to policy coherence in the context of domestic policies. Countries continue to tend to point to the challenges they face in realizing policy coherence at the domestic level with some pointing to efforts to ensure coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Eleven countries examined the impacts of their foreign and/or domestic policies on the realization of the SDGs globally, against 12 in 2019. In 2020, four countries (Bangladesh, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, and Uganda) referred to the assessment of only domestic policies on the realization of SDGs globally. Conversely, six countries (Austria, Estonia, Finland, Morocco, Russian Federation, and Slovenia) pointed to the impacts of both their domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally (versus three countries in 2019, 10 countries in 2018 and 11 in 2017). Only one country (Argentina) noted the impacts of their foreign policies – largely in the form of the South-South and Triangular – on the SDGs globally. This compares to eight countries in 2019, 15 countries in 2018 and 17 countries in 2017. Some countries reporting in 2020 provided a systematic analysis of their global contributions. For example,

Austria referred to its support to the establishment of private funds aiming to secure SDGs financing for small and medium-sized companies in more economically challenged countries. Finland mentioned support towards post-conflict reconstruction, the facilitation of repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons, and the recovery of arable land to lower tensions. Morocco pointed to South-South cooperation and support to refugees. As a country that included information on their contributions to the SDGs globally as part of the goal-by-goal analysis, Slovenia added a section on the country's global citizenship, showcasing its contributions, largely through foreign assistance, for each goal.

Overall VNR reporting for 2020 showed an increase in the extent to which countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation. However, there was a slight decline when it comes to policy coherence in terms of analysis of domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Include information on global contributions to the SDGs alongside assessments of progress at national and subnational levels, recognizing the impacts of domestic and foreign policies.

3.5.3. Recommendations

- **Assess all 17 goals in VNR reports, respecting the indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.**
- **Ensure all dimensions of sustainable development are addressed in SDG implementation and VNR reporting. Linkages and synergies between the different dimensions of sustainable development should be clearly stated in policies, supported through implementation and included in reporting - all to help ensure clear integration.**
- **Link implementation of the 2030 Agenda to relevant international agreements that support 2030 Agenda implementation, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and global agreements on aid and international development effectiveness, including in VNR reporting.**
- **Given the importance of the COVID-19 pandemic to the global context, future VNRs should include reference to international and global commitments on COVID-19.**
- **Provide an assessment of domestic and global dimensions of sustainable development in the goal-by-goal analysis, demonstrating contributions to realizing the SDGs at home and abroad, and supporting policy coherence for sustainable development.**

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4. IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA

This chapter has six sections. The first one focuses on leaving no one behind, and includes aspects such as understanding who is at risk of being left behind, efforts undertaken to address these groups, targeting domestic inequality, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on leaving no one behind. The second section addresses the topic of how 2020 reporting countries have raised awareness on the 2030 Agenda. The third section focuses on the topic of localization. The fourth section broaches the theme of partnerships to realize the SDGs, examining how countries have partnered with civil society, parliamentarians, the private sector, academia and experts, children and youth, other stakeholders (e.g. the media), and development partners. The fifth section of this chapter focuses on means of implementation, which include budgeting for 2030 Agenda implementation, international finance, trade, capacities for 2030 Agenda implementation (e.g. capacity development, technology, systemic issues), experiences in implementation (e.g. best practices, challenges, lessons learned, learning from others), and the impacts of COVID-19 on the means of implementation. Finally, the sixth section of this chapter focuses on measurement and reporting, including how countries have reported on data availability, efforts for data improvement, and national reporting practices on 2030 Agenda implementation. Each one of the six sections is followed by a dedicated list of recommendations.

4.1. **KEY** FINDINGS

4.1.1. Leaving no one behind

- **Reporting on leaving no one behind:** In 2020, 92% of countries mentioned the principle of leaving no one behind. Countries typically provided either robust information throughout their VNR report, or a dedicated chapter on LNOB. All countries (45) reporting in 2020 with full VNR reports identified groups that are being left behind or at risk of being left behind. These include people with disabilities (85%), women and girls (83%), and children and youth (79%).

- **Efforts to LNOB:** More countries noted efforts to leave no one behind are informed by existing data, in comparison to previous years. In 2020, VNR reports for 19 countries (40%) indicated efforts to LNOB as being informed by existing data (compared to 9 in 2019, or 19%, and 13 in 2018). In 2020, 13 countries (28%) mentioned that additional data is requited to leaving no one behind.
- **National policies and plans:** There has been some movement towards incorporating the principle of leaving no one behind in the creation of national sustainable development policies. In 2020, 28 countries (60%) highlighted embedding leaving no one behind or efforts to address inequality and social exclusion at part of overarching development plans, compared to 17 countries (36%) in 2019.

4.1.2. Awareness-raising

- **Awareness-raising activities:** In 2020, information on awareness-raising activities was available for 98% of countries. This compares to 87% in 2019, 83% in 2018 and over 90% in 2017. However, only three countries pointed to the creation of a communications strategy.

4.1.3. Localization

- **Localizing** the 2030 Agenda: Reporting on localization continues to improve, as 83% of countries provided information on their efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda. A greater proportion of countries, 43%, pointed to the integration of the 2030 Agenda into local plans in 2020, (an improvement over 28% in 2019 and 13% in 2018), and 47% referred to coordination between the federal and the local levels.

4.1.4. Partnerships to realize the SDGs

- **Civil society's contributions:** There continues to be a positive trend in terms of countries recognizing the contributions by civil society organizations in their VNR reports. In 2020, 79% of countries provided information versus 68% in 2019, 65% in 2018, and 56% in 2017. There has also been an improvement in how reporting countries showcase civil society organizations' actions and the role they play in 2030 Agenda implementation.
- **The role of other non-state actors:** The majority of countries (89%) reported on contributions by non-state actors, a decline over 2019 (98%). There has been an increase in reporting on the role of parliamentarians (53%, versus 23% in 2019), the private sector (75%, versus 53% in 2019) and academia (55%, versus 28% in 2019). Moreover, 45% of the 2020 VNR reports specifically mentioned the participation of children and youth in SDGs implementation, another increase in the category of partnerships noted in comparison to previous years.

4.1.5. Means of implementation

- **Budgeting for 2030 Agenda implementation:** Same as in 2019, nearly 75% of countries reporting in 2020 have not costed 2030 Agenda implementation. There has been a decrease in the number of countries reporting information on budgeting to 24 countries, or 51% (versus 30 countries, or 64%, in 2019). On the other hand, 2020 experienced an increase in the number of countries reporting on including the SDGs into national budgets: 21 countries mentioned having already incorporated the SDGs into budgeting processes (versus 16 in 2019), and two countries mentioned such incorporation as a plan (versus 14 in 2019).
- **Means of implementation trends:** Reporting on the means of implementation improved overall for information on international public finance (83% of the countries, versus 77% in 2019), capacity development (83% of the countries, versus 68% in 2019), systemic issues (70% of the countries, versus 47% in 2019), best practices (58% of the countries, versus 38% in 2019), lessons learned (53% of the countries, versus 51% in 2019), and learning from peers (15% of the countries, versus 6% in 2019). On the other hand, reporting on the means of implementation declined with regards to domestic resources – 36% of 2020 VNR reports did not mention costing 2030 Agenda implementation, although they have identified sources of finance –, trade (58% of the countries, versus 60% in 2019), technology (79% of the countries, versus 87% in 2019), and challenges (94% of the countries, versus 96% in 2019).

4.1.6. Measurement and reporting

- **National review processes:** In 2020, less countries provided information on follow-up and review at

the national level (63%, versus 85% in 2019) and data availability (45%, versus 76% in 2019). Apart to lesser reporting, countries continue to provide limited reference to when, how and to whom national reporting will occur. Only five countries referred to the role of parliament, same as in 2019.

- **COVID-19 on means of implementation:** Only eight countries (17%) did not make significant reference to COVID-19 in their VNR reports. Among the ones who reported on COVID-19, 25 countries produced a stand-alone chapter, sub-chapter or annex dedicated to the pandemic and its effects on 2030 Agenda implementation. Moreover, 35 countries (75%) reported on the impacts of COVID-19 on the means of implementation.

4.2. **LEAVING** NO ONE BEHIND

The Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines encourage member states to include a chapter on leaving no one behind (LNOB). In 2020, 92% of countries mentioned the principle of leaving no one behind. Countries typically provided either robust information throughout their VNR report, or a dedicated chapter on LNOB. Countries that provided a chapter or sub-chapter on the topic include Benin, Comoros, Costa Rica, Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Seychelles, and Uganda. Leaving no one behind is shown as a cross-cutting topic in the VNR reports of countries such as Austria, Burundi, Brunei Darussalam, and Georgia. In the cases of, for example, Panama and Slovenia, they do not significantly address the LNOB issue in the sections of their VNR reports. Only four countries – Armenia, Barbados, Estonia, and Peru – did not provide any reference to the principle of leaving no one behind.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Prepare a dedicated chapter on leaving no one behind in VNR reports and integrate information on efforts to leave no one behind in the goal-by-goal analysis.

4.2.1. Understanding who is at risk of being left behind

The availability of disaggregated data is critical for informing efforts to LNOB. This issue is well recognized by the international community and across VNR reporting countries as shown by attention to increasing disaggregated data highlighted in VNR reports submitted over 2016-2019. Reporting for 2020 indicates that although countries continue to face challenges in producing disaggregated data to monitor progress on leaving no one behind, there has been some improvement in relation to the VNR reports presented in 2019. In 2020, VNR reports for 19 countries (40%) indicated that efforts to LNOB were informed by existing data (compared to 9 in 2019 and 13 in 2018). In 2020, 13 countries (28%) mentioned that additional data is requited to leaving no one behind. On the other hand, the review of the 2020 VNR reports showed that gender disaggregated data was mostly available or consistently available 57% of the time, which is the exact same figure as in 2019.[33]

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Bangladesh's identification efforts towards leaving no one behind

Bangladesh has identified an extensive array of persons as at risk of being left behind. Marginalized groups and vulnerable populations include transgender persons, persons with specific professions (e.g. tea gardeners, cleaners, domestic aides), Bede (gypsies), beggars and street children, people living in specific areas (e.g. char areas, people living in hilly regions), special needs children, neonate, adolescent girls and boys, HIV/AIDS affected people, people suffering from infectious diseases, people suffering from mental disorders, drug-addicted youths, people injured by road traffic accidents, persons with disabilities, children who have been dropped out from schools, youth not in education, employment or training, female students prone to violence, ethnic communities, and any other marginalized persons and communities.

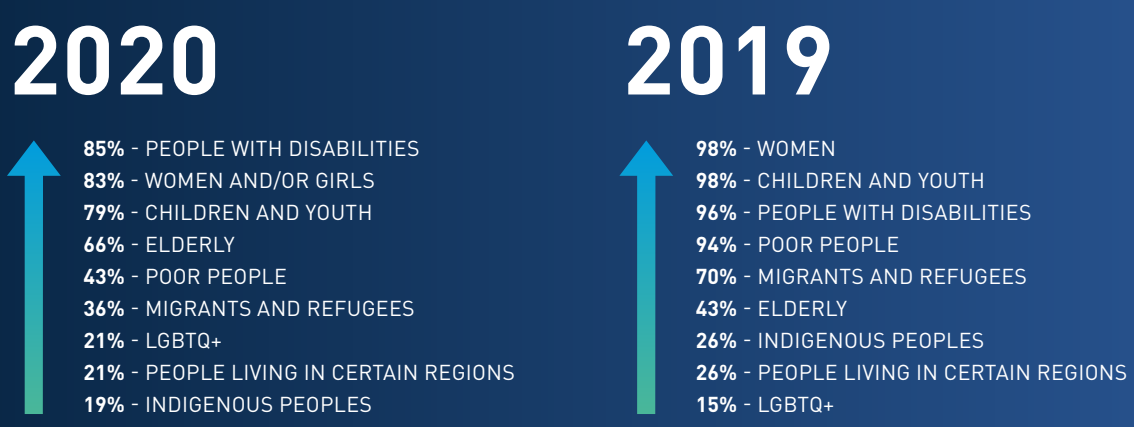
Source: Except adapted from Bangladesh's VNR report.

33. For a more comprehensive overview see the ODI's leave no one behind index which provides an independent assessment of status of the data of leave no one behind.

Regardless of data limitations faced by countries, all countries (45) reporting in 2020 with full VNR reports[34] identified groups that are being left behind or at risk of being left behind. For some of these countries, the identification is implicit, which means that the VNR report does not explicitly mention that particular groups are at risk of being left behind, but rather provide information that allows interpretation to infer that they are vulnerable. Such approach was taken by countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, Estonia, Peru, Slovenia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. The 45 VNR reports identifying vulnerable groups in 2020 compares to 46 countries in 42 ,2019 countries in 2018 and 33 in 2017, suggesting that reporting on the main populations at risk of being left behind has steadily improved. Identifying who is left behind (and why) enables countries to target efforts that work to ensure that all members of society benefit from progress on the 2030 Agenda.

Figure 10 provides an overview of the main groups identified as vulnerable or being left behind in the 2020 VNR reports. It shows that the groups identified as the most at risk of being left behind are people with disabilities (40 countries), women and girls (39), children and youth (37), the elderly (31), poor people (20), migrants and refugees (17), LGBTQ+ (10), people living in certain regions (10), and indigenous peoples (9). The findings for 2020 are in keeping with the vulnerable populations identified in 2018 ,2018 and 2017. In 2019, the VNR reports mostly referred to women (46), children and youth (46), people with disabilities (45), poor people (44), migrants and refugees (33), elderly (20), indigenous (12) and people from particular or rural regions (12) are most at risk of being left behind. In 2018, people with disabilities (34), children and youth (30), women (25), and elderly people (21) are the groups most often cited as being left behind or at risk of being left behind. In 2017, women (28) were cited more often than people with disabilities. Also, in 2017, children and youth were cited 27 times, people with disabilities 21 times, and the elderly on 16 occasions.

Figure 10. Groups most commonly identified as vulnerable in VNR reports



34. This excludes Barbados, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

In comparison with 2019, the 2020 VNR reports saw an overall decline in the number of countries identifying certain groups as being left behind or at risk of being left behind. Although women, children and youth, and people with disabilities continue to be the three topmost groups facing more vulnerabilities, there was a decline in such identification between 2019 and 2020. Other categories, such as poor people, migrants and refugees, Indigenous peoples, and people living in certain regions (e.g. rural regions, mountains, etc.) also experienced a decrease in the countries identifying them as at risk of being left behind. Conversely, more countries reporting in 2020 identified the elderly and the LGBTQ+ community as at risk of being left behind in comparison with the countries reporting in 2019. In addition to the groups identified in Figure 10, seven countries identified people with HIV/AIDS, seven countries identified unemployed people, six countries mentioned convicted people living in or released from detention centres, four countries identified single-parent households, and three countries reported Roma as at risk of or being left behind. Some countries provided additional categories of individuals and groups they identified as being at risk of being left behind, such as people with albinism, stateless persons, ethnic and religious minorities, people with drug addictions, and survivors of domestic or gender-based violence.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: India's civil society involvement in identifying vulnerable groups

India's civil society held a series of national consultations with vulnerable communities around the SDGs. The process was headed by Wada Na Todo Abhiyan, which coordinated the action with both the government (through NITI Aayog) and the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office (UNRCO). According to the civil society report, over a thousand organizations participated in the consultation process, and more than half of them also engaged in the national consultations carried out by the government. Wada Na Todo Abhiyan's civil society report focuses each one of its chapters on a specific group likely to be left behind, and each chapter includes challenges and recommendations to address them. Moreover, the inputs from the civil society consultations were used by NITI Aayog while drafting the VNR report's standalone chapter on LNOB.

Source: Except adapted from India's VNR.

4.2.2. Efforts to leave no one behind

In 2019, 46 countries provided information on efforts to LNOB, versus 41 countries in 2018, and 33 countries in 2017. Though not all countries included a dedicated section on leaving no one behind in their VNR report,[35] all countries presenting full VNR reports except Peru provided information on efforts related to at least one vulnerable group in 2020. This represents a total of 44 countries out of the 47 presenting to the HLPF, including the two ones presenting only main messages. The same situation refers to countries that provided information on efforts to realize gender equality, a decline in relation to 2019, when 46 countries provided such information, versus 40 countries in 2018. Like 2019 and 2018, the review of 2020 reports found a predominance of countries pointing to universal programs such as social assistance and existing specialized programs to LNOB. In 2020, 35 countries pointed to universal programs, 27 countries mentioned existing specialized programs to specific groups, and 25 referred to new specialized programs to specific groups. The creation of new programs is a positive sign that countries are not only relying on existing mechanisms to LNOB, but are also working to develop new initiatives. The combination of universal policies with targeted approaches and strong leadership can be an effective approach to reaching marginalized communities.[36]

It is also worth noting that 28 countries highlighted embedding leaving no one behind or efforts to address inequality and social exclusion at part of overarching development plans compared to 17 countries in 2019 and 10 in 2018, suggesting some movement towards

35. This excludes Barbados, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.
36. Samman, Emma. 2016. 10 Things to Know about 'Leave no one Behind.' London: ODI.

incorporating the principle of leaving no one behind in the creation of national sustainable development policies. Moreover, some countries noted either reference to specific groups as part of national sustainable development policies or the creation of national policies related to targeting specific vulnerable groups such as women, children, migrants and people with disabilities.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Uzbekistan's efforts towards gender equality

Despite the lack of data disaggregated by gender, Uzbekistan's VNR report highlights the country's recent efforts to promote gender equality and considerable shifts in achieving it. In 2019, the Parliament adopted the "Law to Ensure Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women" and the "Law to Protect Women from Discrimination and Violence." The proportion of women in leadership positions grew by 5.3 percentage points from 27.7% in 2015 to 33% in 2019. Women's employment is one of priority areas in Uzbekistan's socioeconomic development, and the VNR report highlights many initiatives to increase it. The proportion of women in the total workforce is currently 45%. The VNR report is also cognizant of areas where further progress in needed.

Source: Except adapted from Uzbekistan's VNR.

In terms of efforts not to leave specific groups behind, most countries reporting in 2020 provided information on actions being carried out. The group mostly covered by actions described in the 2020 VNR reports refers to people living in poverty, with 43 countries (92%) describing approaches to avoid them from being left behind. People with disabilities, and children are the two following groups, covered by actions from 40 countries (85%). Twenty-five countries (53%) referred to efforts to leave no migrants and refugees behind, and 15 VNR reports (32%) provided information on efforts towards ethnic groups. Only 9 countries (19%) mentioned actions not to leave Indigenous Peoples behind. Apart from these, 25 countries (53%) also referred to other groups as being at risk of being left behind and particular efforts to address them.

For example, Ecuador has been forming consultative councils for LGBTQI+ people, and has been providing assistance to public institutions to incorporate the gender approach. According to Brunei Darussalam's VNR report, since 1955, the country has been distributing old age pensions to citizens and residents upon reaching 60 years old, which is part of the country's social safety nets and is in accordance with legislation towards the elderly.

The 2020 data show a continued emphasis on similar approaches compared to 2019 and 2018. Still, overall approaches to LNOB tend to refer to vulnerable groups more generally, including people living in poverty. As shown above, more limited references were found across 2020 VNR reports to efforts related to supporting Indigenous Peoples, ethnic groups, and migrants and refugees. LGBTQI+ communities and people living in rural areas also received limited mention in the VNR reports. Nevertheless, where such less mentioned groups were referenced, countries tended to point to similar strategies for these groups as outlined for the most frequently mentioned ones. Such strategies and approaches include social protection, policies (national and sectoral), legal instruments, cash transfers, employment or training programs, institutions dedicated to specific groups, and improved access to health of education. In addition to these approaches, a limited number of countries also reported awareness-raising related to hate crimes and discrimination against the LGBTQI+ community (for example, in the case of Georgia), training programs to rehabilitate imprisoned persons (such as in the case of Trinidad and Tobago), and improvement of access to treatment for people suffering with drug addiction (for example, in the case of Bulgaria). No specific programs or efforts were reported at the international level.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Niger's strategy to leaving no one behind

Niger's strategy of "les Nigériens Nourrissent les Nigériens" [Nigériens feed Nigériens] and the country's policy of free health care and education up to the age of 16 are good practices to leaving no one behind. Together they support multiple SDGs and have a multiplier effect on achieving a sustainable development that is inclusive.

Source: Except adapted from Niger's VNR.

In 2019 and 2018, VNR reports did not provide enough information on data to leave no one behind to evaluate the outcomes of activities. In the case of the 2020 VNR reports, 35 countries (75%) presented some information on progress. However, such progress is not always backed up with data, as with the case of Argentina, for example, that highlighted ongoing policies aimed to promote equality, but without pointing out concrete achievements. Conversely, lack of data was recognized as a problem by Liberia, whose VNR report mentioned that no comprehensive review of the implementation of the country's social protection policy has been done, although some limited evidence available suggests improvements in terms of food security, health and education, for example. On the other hand, some countries presented more specific figures, such as the Kyrgyz Republic, for example, whose VNR report referred to the level of extreme poverty falling from 2.8% to 0.6%. Apart from these data-related issues in the presentation of results of efforts to LNOB, information on progress is sometimes presented in the goal-by-goal analysis, such as for SDG 1 on no poverty or SDG 5 on gender equality. Countries that took this approach include Bangladesh, Benin, Brunei Darussalam, Estonia, Georgia, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, and Ukraine. Moreover, as in previous years, results and progress presented by countries in 2020 have not necessarily been disaggregated for groups at risk of being left behind. Except data on specific programs, the links between specific policies and actions and the results presented are not always clear.

4.2.3. Targeting domestic inequality

Addressing inequality is a fundamental part of the 2030 Agenda to LNOB and as part of SDG 10 on reduced inequalities. In 2020, 29 reporting countries (62%) provided some information on their efforts to reduce domestic inequalities, which is tied to leaving no one behind. Countries point to national policies, guarantees to non-discrimination including through legal instruments and universal and specialized programs. Some countries, including Bangladesh, Ecuador, Niger, North Macedonia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Zambia highlighted efforts related to social protection to address domestic inequalities.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Efforts to reduce inequality

Comoros is conducting a poverty survey so that the country can have better data, necessary for the effective implementation of the SDGs. Other measures include training women working in different productive sectors (e.g. fishing, livestock, agriculture, handicrafts) and organizing them in cooperatives to ensure effective management of their production. These actions were carried out by the local financial system (microcredit institutions, in particular) and by development partners.

In **Panama**, the "Colmena Strategy" establishes the integrality of the multisectoral action necessary to fight against inequities and asymmetries. It is clearly a cross-cutting policy design issue in the country.

Solomon Islands developed Medium-Term Strategies (MTS) whose objectives are linked to the SDGs and to the principle of leaving no one behind. For example, MTS 5 aims to alleviate poverty, improve provision of basic needs, and increase food security. MTS 7's focus is on supporting the disadvantaged and the vulnerable, and on improving gender equality.

To address SDG 10, **Uganda** referred to the implementation of programs towards the support of social protection, and to the investment in regional economic growth and development. The VNR report also mentioned legislation to support women's ownership of land and access to technologies to enhance agricultural productivity while also reducing intensive work. Country policies will also focus on promoting inclusive growth and creating jobs for the most challenged sections of society.

Source: Except adapted from the VNR reports for Comoros, Panama, Solomon Islands, and Uganda.

4.2.4. Impact of COVID-19 on leaving no one behind

A new category was added in the analysis for 2020 to specifically examine how VNR reports showcased the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the most vulnerable groups. Overall, 32 countries (68%) provided information on the specific impacts of the pandemic from an LNOB perspective. This reporting might positively point to countries' acknowledgment that the most vulnerable are most affected by crises. For those countries that did provide such information, supports focused mainly on strategies to tackle socio-economic impacts, even more than health-related ones. Targeted groups mentioned in the VNR reports include women, children, poor people, elderly, people with disabilities, people living in rural areas, and people who have lost their jobs or had their incomes compromised due to the pandemic. Some countries have further specified people most at risk of being left behind in the specific context of COVID-19. For example, Armenia referred to pregnant women, Bangladesh mentioned transport workers, widowed women and the transgender community, Moldova brought up people susceptible to domestic violence, Peru noted people with pre-existing diseases, and Samoa included people with mental heath issues.

In terms of the efforts listed, reporting countries usually provided detailed information on the actions being carried out to tackle the effects of the pandemic over the most vulnerable. According to the 32 VNR reports referring to COVID-19 and LNOB, countries developed emergency and contingency plans, extended social protection and safety net programs, created special funds to address the pandemic, and provided financial aid to the population and to specific groups. Overall, reporting countries were able to show clear adjustments being made in their current approaches to LNOB. Some have expanded current policies. For example, Argentina provided a bonus for retirees, pensioners, holders of the Universal Child Allowance and the Universal Allowance for Pregnancy. In the framework of an existing program, Bulgaria allocated an additional 22.5 million Euros to focus on older people, people with disabilities, and people with chronic diseases. Other countries sought partnerships. For example, from a joint public-private effort, Costa Rica raised more than a million US dollars to be used to pay off local loans for food and cleaning products. In the case of Kenya, the government developed a contingency plan focusing on the healthcare response with the support from the World Bank, the World Health Organization, UNICEF and other partners. Including major crises under the framework of leaving no one behind in VNR reports is useful to understand how countries adjust their approaches and seek solutions in critical times.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Georgia's communication strategy to leave no one behind during the COVID-19 pandemic

Among Georgia's actions to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the government created a dedicated website (www.stopcov.ge). It was made available in both of the country's official languages (Georgian and Abkhazian) and in two other languages spoken by ethnic minorities (Armenian and Azeri). Moreover, the country created a specific hotline was to safeguard the rights and address the needs of children amid COVID-19.

Source: Except adapted from Georgia's VNR.

4.2.5. Recommendations

- **Ensure policies and programs are informed by and integrate efforts to leave no one behind, including by prioritizing those most in need to consistently reach marginalized communities.**
- **Include a specific chapter on leaving no one behind in VNR reporting and demonstrate how the principle of leaving no one behind is being translated into action in an overarching way.**
- **Provide information on the status of data collection or plans to improve data availability to inform efforts to leave no one behind. This includes information on gender disaggregated data. Ensuring no one is left behind means knowing who is being left behind, by how much, and in what areas.**

- **Highlight existing and planned efforts to leave no one behind, including how policies and program are being adapted, and in particular, new approaches to reach the people who are furthest behind first.**
- **Promote gender equality through international good practice such as gender budgeting, gender-based analysis and mainstreaming into policies and plans, and appropriate legal, policy and institutional frameworks.**
- **Report on the outcomes of efforts to leave no one behind, including by drawing on civil society expertise and citizen-generated data. Clearly present links between specific policies and actions with results, presenting progress for specific marginalized groups.**
- **Target domestic inequality in 2030 Agenda implementation, including in support of SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, and outline the current status of domestic inequality and how it is being addressed in VNR reports.**
- **Include major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts being made to ensure no one is left behind, outlining which groups are being covered and detailing what approaches are being taken.**

4.3. AWARENESS-RAISING

Raising awareness of the 2030 Agenda and educating citizens on sustainable development is an ongoing process critical for establishing a national vision for sustainable development, generating support, and promoting whole-of-society approaches to implementation. In 2020, information on awareness-raising activities was available for 98% of countries. This compares to 87% in 2019, 83% in 2018 and over 90% in 2017. Information was not available on activities only for Barbados, which presented only main messages to the HLPF.

While a range of methods to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda are emerging (Figure 11), two forms of awareness-raising were most commonly cited. Technical workshops and programs with and for stakeholders in government and beyond on 2030 Agenda implementation were mentioned by 16 countries in 2020, versus 12 countries in 2019 and 10 in 2018. The same amount of 16 countries referred to the use of media and social media, while this was done by eight countries in 2019. Events were highlighted by 11 countries (9 noted events in 2019, and 8 did it in 2018). Five countries (versus seven in 2019 and nine in 2018) referred to the VNR process as part of awareness-raising efforts. Same as in 2019, four countries reporting in 2020 noted translation efforts, including local languages, Braille and signs language. While six countries prepared or planned to prepare a communications strategy in 2018, this number dropped to four countries in 2019, and this approach was noted by only three countries in 2020. Only three countries pointed to websites (versus five in 2019), and one (Estonia) mentioned the intention of developing a platform on sustainable development.

Other awareness-raising efforts referred to the inclusion of sustainable development topics in schools' curriculum or materials, such as in the case of Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh and Gambia. Some countries, including Austria, Gambia and Zambia, mentioned work with the local level, and Morocco included consultation with regional councils, while Niger referred to the establishment of local focal points for sustainable development. Consultations were also mentioned by

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Democratic Republic of the Congo's approach to awareness-raising

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the "Sustainable Development Perception Index" is an innovative way of engaging and reaching out to the population. It measures the effectiveness of public policies implemented to achieve the SDG targets in terms of the perception of the population. It also provides the population with an insight into the state of SDGs, particularly with regard to development priorities, while also being an opportunity to understand the population's awareness of the 2030 Agenda.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Democratic Republic of the Congo's VNR report.

India, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea and Uzbekistan. Austria created an award for the best sustainability reports coming from Austrian companies. Although awareness-raising was referred to as an area for ongoing effort and challenge (such as in the case of Costa Rica's VNR report), data suggest that countries are continuously focusing on carrying out and improving work to disseminate knowledge around the 2030 Agenda.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Develop a communication and engagement strategy to continue to raise awareness of and ownership over the 2030 Agenda with a wide range of stakeholders over the course of SDG implementation.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Communications strategies towards awareness-raising

In 2020, three countries referred to the development of communication strategies towards awareness-raising efforts on the 2030 Agenda. In **India**, a communication plan was development in the framework of the VNR process, and included media outreach, the presentation of a short video, and awareness and publicity through social media. In the framework of raising awareness on the SDGs, the National Statistical Committee from the **Kyrgyz Republic** started implementing a communication strategy for SDG statistics, including measures to increase statistical capacity and strengthen interaction. In the case of **Trinidad and Tobago**, the government designed a strategy that included the creation of media (both electronic and print) to disseminate information on the SDGs, and both the VNR process and the country's projects targeting the SDGs were guided by the theme "Connecting the dots to the SDGs."

Source: Except adapted from India, Kyrgyz Republic, and Trinidad and Tobago's VNR reports.

Figure 11. Common methods of raising awareness of 2030 Agenda

4.3.1. Recommendations

- **Develop a communication strategy to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda on an ongoing basis.**
- **Continue to promote innovative ways to raise awareness of the SDGs among the general public, including in partnership with civil society and other non-state actors.**

4.4. LOCALIZATION

Regional and local governments are critical players in delivering locally tailored sustainable development solutions. For 2030 Agenda implementation, localization requires coordination between different levels of government, incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into local plans and policies and often financial support and capacity development for local governments to effectively participate.[37] Rooting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in local priorities and activities at the community level makes the agenda meaningful and practical in the day-to-day lives of citizens. While the 2019 VNR reports did not mention voluntary local reviews, two countries reporting in 2020 referred to this practice, one that paves the way for subnational accountability structures

In 2020, 83% of countries provided information on their efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda, an increase from the 75% seen in 2019, the 65% from 2018, and the 73% from 2017. As was the case in previous years, the VNR reports continue to show wide variance in terms of where countries and their local governments are in terms of localization. Consistent reporting helps to assess the status of localization overall. Some countries presented dedicated sections on localization or showcased initiatives by local governments throughout their reports, whereas others provided more limited space in their VNR report on the topic, or information was unclear, or efforts were not sufficiently detailed, such as in the cases of Honduras and Syria, for example.

Figure 12 provides an overview of the main elements of localization reported in VNR reports.

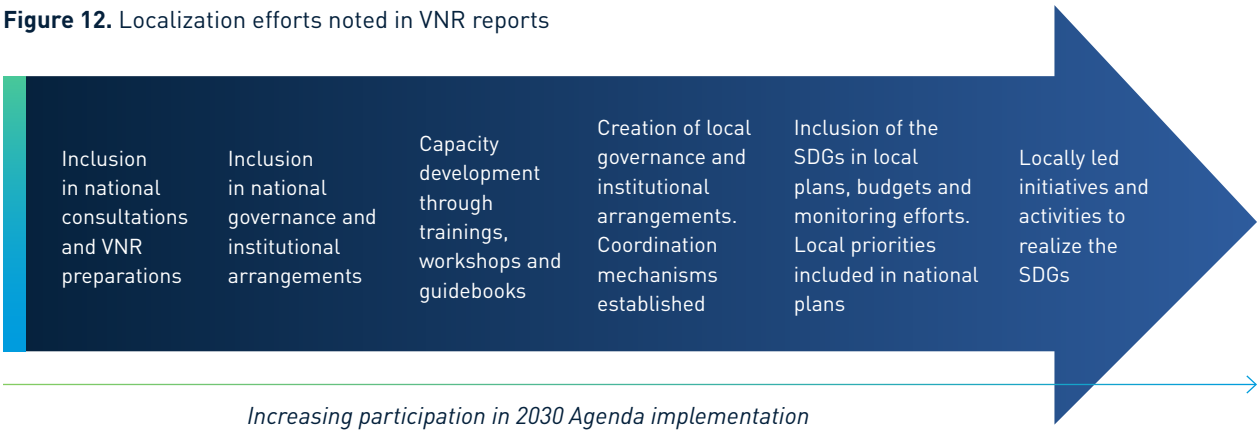
A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Local efforts towards the SDGs in Finland and Uganda

According to the VNR report, Finland's cities conduct extensive work around sustainable development. For example, the region of Åland has integrated the SDGs into core strategies, and many cities and municipalities are developing plans to promote the SDGs. A good practice arising in terms of localization is the presentation of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). For example, the cities of Helsinki, Espoo, and Turku have prepared such reports in 2019 and 2020, and should be followed by other cities in the future. In the case of Uganda, the country's VNR process was informed by the Local Voluntary Review Report produced by residents and leadership of the Ngora District.

Source: Except adapted from Finland and Uganda's VNR reports.

37. For a report relating localization, the SDGs and the COVID-19 pandemic, see Local and regional governments' report to the 2020 HLPF. 4th report. (2020). Towards the localization of the SDGs: how to accelerate transformative actions in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. Global taskforce of local and regional governments; United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). For results of a project on SDGs and local governments, see Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (2020). VVSG SDG pilot project with local governments 2017-2019: approach and lessons learned. Belgium, VVSG. For an overview of good practice in localizing the 2030 Agenda, see Wayne-Nixon, Laurel, Wragg-Morris, Tanya, Mishra, Anjali, and Markle, Dawson. 2019. Localizing the 2030 Agenda. *Good Practice in 2030 Agenda Implementation Series*. Vancouver and Ottawa: BCCIC and CCIC.

Figure 12. Localization efforts noted in VNR reports



Beyond references to local government engagement in the VNR process or national governance arrangements, VNR reports provided some insights on the status of localization. In 2020, 20 counties (43%) referred to integrating the 2030 Agenda into local plans and policies, an increase from the 18 countries (38%) doing so in 2019 and the 16 countries (35%) making similar references in 2018.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Communities taking ownership of SDGs and development projects in Uganda

Local governments in Uganda promote community-based local development. Through cooperation and small-scale, self-help projects, communities have started to undertake projects without the need of government intervention. Some projects relate to infrastructure, such as community road construction to facilitate transportation of goods to market, children to school and access to health facilities, and the construction of a vocational schools for children to learn practical skills. In another district, communities gave local names to each one of the SDGs, based on the specific meanings they have for the community.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Uganda's VNR report.

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Coordination between national government institutions and local governments was noted by 22 countries reporting in 2020, an impressive increase from the seven countries mentioning such approach in 2019. One country (Nigeria) mentioned subnational coordination as a priority, but the VNR report did not mention specific localization actions being carried out. Reference to local initiatives were presented by 10 countries, the same as in 2018, whereas 2019 had 13 countries making such reference. Four countries referred to capacity development efforts for local government, down from the 12 countries mentioning this in 2019. Three countries noted having integrated local governments into monitoring and evaluation (versus five countries in 2019), with one country (Papua New Guinea) noting that tools for monitoring and evaluation exist at the local level, but they are not being used. Six countries, up from three in 2019 and 2018, mentioned they engaged associations of local municipalities as part of their localization efforts. Likewise, six countries referred to local institutional

arrangements (e.g. local councils or bodies supporting 2030 Agenda implementation). No country (versus two countries in 2019) referred to localization as part of an SDG roadmap, although Benin mentioned mapping SDGs priority targets of each one of its communes. Georgia noted that SDG implementation at the local level is lagging.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Benin's SDGs local mapping and award

Benin's localization efforts led to specification of ten priority targets accompanied by standards for action in its 77 communes. This mapping enables the translation of international commitments such as the SDGs into local contexts and supports policy coherence between different international, national and local levels. Moreover, to stimulate the development of good practices at the local level (communes), Benin established an initiative called "Local Agenda 2030 Competition", which rewards the best local projects that constitute good practices for integrating the SDGs.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Benin's VNR report.

Almost no country reported on the impacts of the COVID19- pandemic in relation to localization. One exception refers to the case of Moldova, whose VNR report mentions that meetings were held with local authorities on measures to be taken at local level to prevent the spread of COVID19-. Such lack of information is worrisome, as outbreaks require a localized response.

4.4.1. Recommendations

- **Include localization as part of 2030 Agenda implementation strategies, strengthen coordination with local governments and local institutional structures, capacities and resources.**
- **Support the translation of the SDGs into local plans, programs and monitoring efforts and ensure local priorities inform national plans.**

4.5. PARTNERSHIPS TO REALIZE THE SDGS

Most countries agree that all stakeholders in society contribute to sustainable development. Accelerate actions are needed by all stakeholders to realize the SDGs by 2030, even more so with the backsliding of progress on sustainable development as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, VNR reports should showcase contributions from a wide range of stakeholders towards the 2030 Agenda.

Among the 2020 reporting countries, 42 out of 47 (89%) provided examples of contributions by non-state actors to 2030 Agenda implementation beyond consultation on priorities and participation in governance arrangements.[38] This represents a decline over 2019, where only one country out of 47 (98%) provided this type of information, versus 85% in 2018. In 2020, Barbados, Burundi, Libya, Syria, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines did not include information on whether non-state actors are engaged in implementation of the SDGs. For those who did so, approaches to showcasing efforts varied. Some countries, such as Uganda, included information on efforts by non-state actors and local governments in the goal-by-goal analysis. Finland included assessments from civil society, the private sector, academia, and other non-state actors on the progresses and backslidings in relation to the country's government's assessment. India used inputs collected by civil society with regards to leaving no one behind. Moldova highlighted the youth participation over other local non-state actors, and Austria's VNR report showed a broad participation of non-state actors at all levels. The inclusion of activities by a wide range of stakeholders provides a national picture of implementation efforts, including and moving beyond government. This approach to VNR reporting respects the principles of inclusivity and participation embedded in the 2030 Agenda.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Submit a *national* report for the VNR that systematically outlines the contributions made by a wide range of stakeholders, not just the national government.

4.5.1. Civil society

Civil society organizations support 2030 Agenda implementation by representing and advocating for citizens and those left behind, contributing to policy development, implementing projects and programs and promoting accountability through independent analysis and reporting, among other things. Reporting on civil society contributions to the 2030 Agenda as increased over 2017-2020 suggesting a positive trend in terms of countries recognizing the contributions by civil society organizations in their VNR reports. In 2020, 79% of countries provided information versus 68% in 2019, 65% in 2018, and 56% in 2017.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Empowering marginalized groups "face to face" in North Macedonia

"Face to Face" is a program run by the CSO Public Association for Research, Communications, and Development in North Macedonia. The program's mission is two-fold: contributing to socio-economic empowerment for marginalized groups (youth from the street, homeless people, persons with disabilities, and people in social risk), and educating the public on topics related to the SDGs. Since 2012, the program publishes the "Face to Face" bimonthly street magazine, an open platform for collaboration, co-creation, multi-stakeholder partnerships, progress, and knowledge activation among social stakeholders as communities, civil society, public institutions, and the business sector. Since the 2030 Agenda adoption, each magazine issue focuses on one SDG and, in early 2019, the publication was rebranded to "Magazine on Sustainable Development."

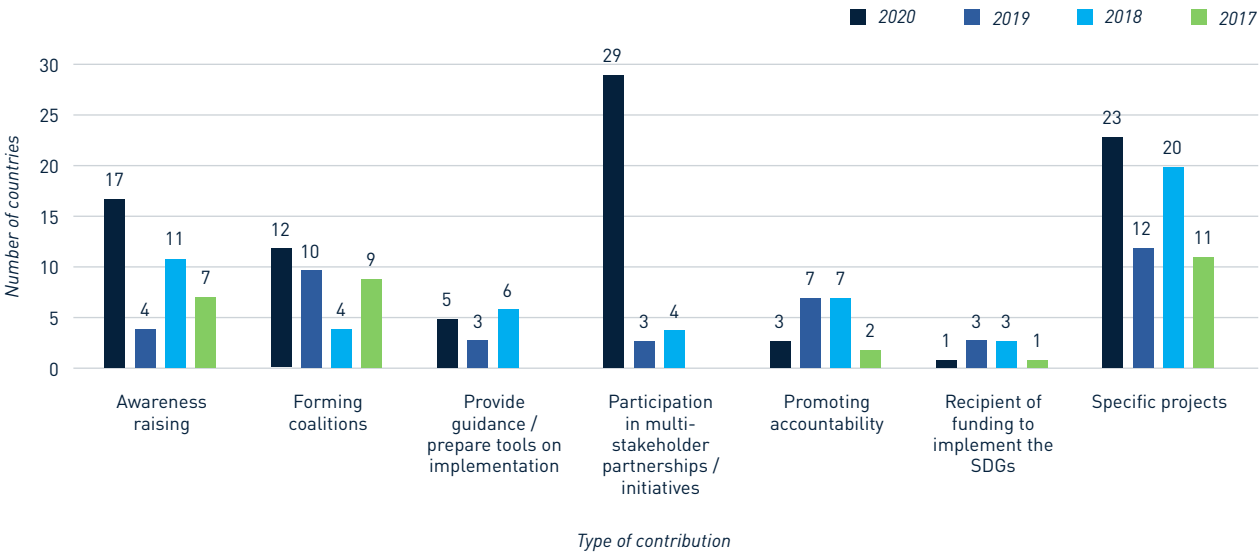
Source: Excerpt adapted from North Macedonia's VNR report.

Figure 13 provides information on the most common activities emerging with respect to reporting on civil society over 2017-2020. Information for 2020 shows a continued emphasis on the role of civil society in implementing individual projects (23 countries) and forming coalitions to support 2030 Agenda implementation (12 countries). The role of civil society in ensuring accountability for 2030 Agenda implementation as declined in relation to previous years, with only three countries mentioning this aspect. Conversely, the number of countries highlighting CSOs' actions towards awareness raising rose substantially, with 17 countries noting this element in 2020. In addition to examples of civil society organizations providing guidance on 2030 Agenda implementation, five countries referred to their role in preparing tools on implementation. For example, Nepal mentioned CSOs' engagement in developing a plan to mainstream the SDGs in the districts level, and their work on skills development and capacity building. Only one country – North Macedonia – referred to civil society organizations as recipients of funding to implement the SDGs, versus three countries in 2019 and 2018. In terms of participation in multi-stakeholder partnerships or initiatives, 29 countries presenting VNR reports in 2020 noted civil society engaging with government, academia, the private sector and other stakeholders in joint efforts.[39]

In previous years, a limited number of countries referred to research, promoting structured dialogue and incorporating the SDGs into institutional operations. While no countries referenced these activities in 2019, there were some mentions in the 2020 VNR reports. Bulgaria, Nigeria, Malawi, and the Russian Federation referred to the conduction of research. Actions carried out by Moldova and by Uganda's civil society pointed to the promotion of a structured dialogue around the SDGs. And Bangladesh's civil society formulated an "NGO's SDG action plan" to map all activities and contributions related to the SDGs. Overall, VNR reports continue to recognize a wide range of the roles of civil society organizations. Although countries reporting in 2018 and 2019 tended to portray narrow perceptions of the roles of civil society organizations in their individual VNRs, there has been some improvement in the 2020 VNR reports, as evidenced a higher number of countries reporting on different types of contributions. Countries should showcase activities carried out by CSOs in order to more fully recognize their role in 2030 Agenda implementation.

38. This section deals with the forms of engagement and participation that have not yet been addressed in the earlier sections of the report looking beyond engagement through consultation and governance arrangements.
39. There might be some discrepancy in terms of data interpretation in comparison to the previous year. For the present report, any partnership or joint initiative or effort involving civil society and other stakeholders were considered, regardless of the VNR report defining them as "multi-stakeholder."

Figure 13. Main civil society contributions highlighted in VNR reports, 2017-2000



Civil society reports and written inputs as part of VNR reports provide useful insights on the challenges civil society organizations face in contributing to the 2030 Agenda. Ranging from 2017 to 2019, civil society reports noted a range of challenges that prevent civil society delivery of the 2030 Agenda, including low levels of awareness of the agenda by the public, civil society and government, limited engagement and coordination with government, poor institutional preparedness to implement the 2030 Agenda by national and local governments, lack of an enabling environment, limited finance, and structural factors such as deeply rooted behaviours and changes in government. Figure 14 provides an overview of the challenges noted in civil society reports for 2020, which are consistent with the challenges highlighted in previous years. Such consistency is worrisome, as it points to a global trend towards closing civic space and a disabling environment for civil society, and suggests that the issues hindering civil society's action towards 2030 Agenda implementation are not being properly addressed in a concerning amount of countries.

Figure 14. Challenges identified by civil society organizations to 2030 Agenda implementation

Data availability and monitoring capacities

Kenya: Lack of quantitative data, limited availability of disaggregated data and evidence, inconsistencies among available datasets, limited data sharing practices.
Kyrgyz Republic: need to develop qualitative and quantitative indicators for each SDG.
Malawi: Mismatch between data collected by government and by CSOs; need to develop a roadmap and a plan for monitoring and evaluation to improve data quality and availability.
Nepal: Lack of baseline data and of sufficient disaggregated data, particularly regarding leaving no one behind.
Zambia: Improve civil society's involvement in monitoring progress and collection of data.

Coordination

Kenya: Weak coordination among government institutions and between government and non-state actors in SDGs implementation.
Kyrgyz Republic: Weak integration/coordination and lack of a multi-stakeholder partnerships; low level of SDGs integration into local strategies/plans.
Malawi: Weak mobilization of resources at the local level.
Nepal: Need for more coordination across the government, including the local level, and more alignment between policies, plans and budgeting.
Nigeria: Limited coordination to reach the rural areas.
Peru: Coordination and articulation with civil society has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
Russia: Lack of a coordinating state structure for the implementation of the SDGs; ineffective procedures and mechanisms of public engagement.
Slovenia: Need for effective long-term support for CSOs' projects/programmes; need to strengthen policy coherence for sustainable development to be open, inclusive and participatory.
Zambia: Lack of accountability, inclusiveness, and participation in policy dialogue.

Quality of engagement

Kenya: Need for transparency and accountability in SDGs implementation; weak environment for civil society in some legislations and policies.
Kyrgyz Republic: weak accountability from the government and other stakeholders for SDGs implementation.
Malawi: Need of empowerment of citizens to ensure accountability; need for more regular engagement of civil society in SDGs-related processes; need of more participation in policy dialogue.
Nigeria: Need for more participatory governance so that citizens, especially youth, can engage effectively.
Peru: Lack of institutional channels to keep the dialogue with the government permanently open.
Russia: Excessive control from public authorities over civil society organizations; increasing awareness of the SDGs not supported by the state.
Slovenia: Lack of a consultative body for civil society.
Zambia: Need to strengthen engagement and collaboration between government and civil society in the development processes around the SDGs.

Capacity of government and civil society organizations

India: Government's capacity in securing the SDGs for the most vulnerable and marginalized communities and ensure that no one is left behind.
Kenya: CSOs require capacity building for SDG's reporting; there is limited data analysis skills among community-based organizations.
Kyrgyz Republic: Insufficient capacity of the public sector.
Malawi: Need for good governance; failure to address corruption.
Nigeria: Need to address insecurity, corruption.
Peru: Lack of ownership; social and political instability; lack of processes or bodies for accountability from the state as the leader for sustainable development implementation.
Russia: Lack of reporting on SDGs implementation; corruption; unfavorable civic space; disabling environment for civil society, which is virtually deprived of the state's capacity to help it attain the SDGs.
Uganda: Lack of capacity to address social and political issues such as organized crime, religious extremism, corruption, illicit financial flows, etc.

Lagging areas of progress

Kenya: Challenges in food security (including food prices, storage, and post-harvest losses), extreme weather events, and gender equality.
Kyrgyz Republic: Gender equality.
Nigeria: Lack of provision of public utilities (e.g. energy, health facilities, potable water, learning materials); gender equality; employment; general access and development in rural areas; leaving no one behind.
Slovenia: Need for a comprehensive analysis and relevant measures for full implementation of the 'leave no one behind' principle.
Uganda: Health (COVID-19 pandemic), equality, education, sustainable use of natural resources.
Zambia: Debt crisis, health (COVID-19 pandemic), climate change, leaving no one behind.

4.5.2. Parliamentarians

Parliamentarians advocate for the priorities and concerns of the citizens they represent and hold governments to account for progress. More countries provided information on the role of parliaments in 2020 than in previous years. Twenty-five countries (53%) reported on efforts by parliamentarians to support SDG implementation, beyond consultations and engagement in governance arrangements in 2020, versus 11 in 2019, 18 in 2018, and 15 in 2017.

The majority of countries (16) noting parliamentarian's actions mentioned the folding of SDG-related activities into regular parliamentary work, which includes committees and budgeting, for example. Among these, Costa Rica prepared, with the support of the United Nations, a roadmap for the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda in Congress. Parliaments in Finland, Gambia, Georgia, and Nepal have undertaken efforts to raise awareness of the SDGs. Argentina, Finland, and India's parliaments have undertaken the writing and dissemination of SDG-related reports, and Seychelles produced a booklet on the role of parliamentarians in SDG implementation. India, Malawi, and Papua New Guinea mentioned parliament being involved in accountability and transparency actions in relation to the SDGs. India, Morocco, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, and Uganda have organized conferences and forums of parliamentarians. Kenya has undertaken efforts to enhance capacity for implementation of the SDGs. Ecuador, Georgia, Kenya, Macedonia, Morocco, Papua New Guinea, Trinidad and Tobago, and Ukraine have adopted SDG-

related legislation. Localization efforts carried out by parliamentarians were referred by Bangladesh, Malawi, and Papua New Guinea.

The activities showcased by parliaments in the 2020 VNR reports are similar to what was reported in previous years, but went beyond in terms of the variety of efforts. Overall reporting on parliamentarians was broader in the 2020 VNR reports, suggesting an important improvement given the role of parliamentarians in ensuring accountability for 2030 Agenda implementation, identifying priorities and approving national budgets.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Including parliament in 2030 Agenda implementation in Kenya

The parliament in Kenya is involved in 2030 Agenda implementation. Its Parliamentary Caucus on SDGs and Business was formed in 2017, mandated to promote sustainable development and socially responsible business. It meets this mandate through activities related to legislation, resource mobilization, oversight and partnerships. The Caucus has invested in capacity development and includes eight Parliamentary Committees. An SDGs Open Day in Parliament was held in 2019 and the Caucus launched a 2019-2023 strategic plan. Parliament has also been engaged in the preparation of the 2019 SDG progress report and the 2019 HLPF.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Kenya's VNR report.

4.5.3. The private sector

The role of the private sector in contributing finance and innovative solutions to development challenges has received a lot of attention in the context of 2030 Agenda discussions – both globally and in many country contexts. In 2020, 75% of reporting countries (35 out of 47) highlighted private sector contributions beyond consultations and engagement in governance arrangements, an improvement in relation to previous years, when only 53% of countries reported such actions in 2019, versus 61% of countries in 2018, and 53% of countries in 2017.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Business networking to promote sustainable solutions in Bulgaria

"CleanTech Bulgaria" is a business network established in 2012 to promote sustainable economic development through clean technology and ecological innovation. A virtual ecological innovation lab has been set up as part of the "EcoInn Danube" project co-financed by the network and the Interred Danube Program, a European Territorial Cooperation project. The project's main objective is to improve cooperation between ecological innovation professionals, emphasizing the development and implementation of green technologies in the Danube region. CleanTech Bulgaria is also the official partner of the two most extensive public-private partnerships in the EU in the field of climate and sustainable energy.

Source: Source: Excerpt adapted from Bulgaria's VNR report.

Table 3 outlines the main activities noted in 2020 and includes a comparison with 2019, 2018 and 2017. Similar to previous years, two of the most prominent activities relate to specific projects, and alignment by the private sector with the 2030 Agenda. However, in 2020, the creation or use of forums to raise awareness and coordinate decreased in relation to previous years, while multi-stakeholder partnerships experienced a high increase.

Table 3. Main private sector contributions highlighted in VNR reports, 2017-2020

Activity	Year, number of countries			
	2020	2019	2018	2017
Specific projects	13	12	12	7
Alignment through corporate social responsibility and/or business practices	14	9	14[40]	5[41]
Creation or use of forums to raise awareness and coordinate	4	6	6	8
Events	2	5	-	6
Research	1	4	4	5
Provision of finance for SDG related activities	7	3	-	-
Multi-stakeholder partnerships	17	2	10	-
Creation of prizes or competitions	3	2	4	-

Two countries in 2018 noted mapping private sector impacts, an activity that was mentioned by two countries in 2020 (Finland, and the Kyrgyz Republic). One country in 2019 pointed to monitoring progress by the private sector on sustainable development, something that was not mentioned in the 2020 VNR reports. Some countries specified the involvement of the private sector in the context of COVID-19. For example, Nigeria noted the mobilization of telecommunications companies to send out text messages raising awareness on the importance of handwashing. In the case of Seychelles, the private sector provided medical supplies and equipment, non-medical goods and services, cash donations to support the government, and produced products such as hand sanitizers.

4.5.4. Academia and experts

Academics and experts contribute to 2030 Agenda implementation through research, project implementation and education initiatives. Reporting on the contributions from academics or experts to SDG implementation increased in 2020 in relation to previous years. While only 13 countries provided information on the role of academics in 2019 (28%) – versus 23 countries in 2018 and 14 in 2017 –, 26 countries reported on this aspect in 2020 (which represents 53% of the reporting countries). This suggests a greater involvement by academic and expert communities in 2030 Agenda implementation.

While the most common examples of academic or expert contributions noted in VNR reports related to research in 2019 (seven countries, versus six countries in 2020), in 2020, countries most commonly referred to expert contributions (13 countries). The same number of 11 countries mentioned engagement of academia/experts in multi-stakeholder initiatives (versus only two countries in 2019), and in the participation in academic networks (versus only three countries in 2019). Three countries noted the creation of courses or incorporating the 2030 Agenda into curricula (versus the same number of three countries in 2019 and four countries in 2018). Contributions to capacity development initiatives were mentioned by five countries in 2020, versus two countries in 2019. In terms of contributing to monitoring and evaluation, three countries mentioned initiatives in this sense from academia and experts, while this was noted by two countries in 2019.

Overall, there has been an increase in the reporting of activities carried out by academics and experts. Such engagement is important in view of partnerships to achieve the 2030 Agenda and should continue to be pursued. One example of going forward initiatives

40. Ten of which were in the form of company-specific commitments.
41. Company specific commitments.

was noted by Papua New Guinea, whose VNR report mentioned the need to enhance research capacity related to the SDGs, especially among university students and staff, the need to streamline the role of universities in research and contribution to SDGs, and to better coordinate efforts to promote interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research approaches.

4.5.5. Children and Youth

The engagement of children and youth as partners in the process of multi-stakeholder implementation of the SDGs was mentioned by 21 VNR reports (45%) in 2020. This was noted by only nine countries (19%) in 2019, and 10 countries in 2018.

The VNR reports mostly (15 countries) mentioned the engagement of children and youth in initiatives focused on them, such as consultations, capacity development, multi-stakeholder discussions, awareness raising campaigns and initiatives, volunteerism, and the design of case studies, best practices, and priorities around the SDGs. The second most mentioned type of engagement was through youth organizations, councils, or networks. Countries that referred to the existence of such groupings were Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Moldova, North Macedonia, Seychelles, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, and Uganda. Finally, the third form of engagement was by the means of specific projects and/or initiatives designed and carried out by children and youth, which was mentioned by Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, North Macedonia, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, and Uganda.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Youth engagement in Solomon Islands

In Solomon Islands, youth had an interesting participation in the implementation of SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) by organizing a film festival on the topic of anti-corruption. Through this action, a youth group was able to engage a number of candidates running in their constituency to sign political and integrity commitments.

Source: Except adapted from Solomon Islands' VNR report.

4.5.6. Other stakeholders

Beyond the stakeholders noted above, a wide range of groups contribute to 2030 Agenda implementation, including volunteers, trade unions, the media, *inter alia.* In 2020, 17 VNR reports referred to stakeholders not previously mentioned in this report. While volunteers were mentioned by eight countries in 2019, five countries (Benin, India, Kenya, Malawi, and the Russian Federation) did so in 2020. Other stakeholders referred to in 2020 were auditor institutions (mentioned by four countries), United Nations agencies (four countries), "citizenship" (four countries), national institutions such as the judiciary and the chamber of labor (three countries), and trade unions (two countries). Only Finland made reference to the media and the marketing industry, which have been working together to develop young people's literacy and skills in the context of a digital world. Comoros highlighted the role of village communities, which are at the forefront of initiatives such as facilitating access to water and energy, reducing the pressure on ecosystems and natural resources, and participating both materially and financially to make various services accessible to the population.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: An initiative from a police department in India

A police department in India developed an initiative called "Police Uncle Tutorial", which focuses on dropouts and more academically challenged students from specific areas of the district where the initiative is being implemented. Several segments of society have been engaged in the project, such as teachers of government schools, elders, social workers, and volunteers, who participate as teachers for the targeted students.

Source: Except adapted from India's VNR report.

4.5.7. Development partners

The Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines ask countries to outline their main priorities for development partner support. In 2020, key areas in which the government requires additional support to realise the SDGs were noted by 27 out of the 47 reporting countries (58%), against 38 of 47 countries (81%) in 2019. Out of these, only Morocco did not provide further details on the type of support required from development partners or, in other words, on how the support is to be provided. The other 26 countries (55%) reporting in 2020 mentioned more specific forms of support, which include financing, coordination, technical assistance, and capacity development. While the 2019 VNR reports had only one high-income country referring to development partners, in 2020 there where three that indicated the need for further capacity building and good practices and lessons learned exchange (Panama), enhanced partnerships (Seychelles), and financial support, tailored international cooperation, and technical support in trade-related issues, including customs (Trinidad and Tobago). As with previous years, countries tended to provide general information on the support they require.

The following areas were mentioned in 2020 as priorities for support:

- goal specific priorities – five countries, versus 12 in 2019, four in 2018 and seven in 2017;
- strengthening systems to collect data and monitor SDG implementation – seven countries in 2020, versus 10 in 2019, five in 2018 and 10 in 2017; and
- support for general plans or SDG implementation – seven countries, versus four in 2019, and five in 2018.

In supporting country priorities, the provision of finance (official development assistance, finance from international financial institutions and South-South cooperation) continued to be the most common role identified by countries (13, the same number as in 2019, versus 12 countries in 2018). Technical assistance, including technology transfer, knowledge sharing, and capacity building were noted by nine countries, while general coordination and partnerships were mentioned by seven countries. Overall, these types of support are consistent with VNR reports from previous years. The role of development partners in 2030 Agenda implementation was also connected with the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries such as Burundi, Georgia, Malawi, and Niger specifically referred to the need of development partners' support for the COVID-19 response and recovery, to address its effects on the SDGs implementation, and into the process of building back from the pandemic.

Finally, the number of countries noting support to carry out their VNR rose again in 2020 over the previous years. In 2020, 25 countries noted support from the United Nations, whereas in 2019 there were 22 countries, versus 14 in 2018 and seven in 2017.

4.5.8. Recommendations

- Support civil society to engage in 2030 Agenda implementation by creating a more enabling environment, including through institutionalized dialogue and consultation, inclusion in formal governance arrangements, finance, and capacity development.
- Integrate the 2030 Agenda into parliamentary work, recognizing the critical role parliamentarians play as citizens' representatives and in ensuring national level accountability for progress.
- Support and develop partnerships with a variety of non-state actors, including academia, the private sector, children and youth, volunteers, trade unions, and the media.
- Where relevant, clearly stipulate and provide details on priority areas for support from the international community, laying out the role development partners can best play to support the acceleration of 2030 Agenda implementation.
- Outline how multiple stakeholders can be involved to address crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

4.6. MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Governments have committed to supporting a diverse range of means of implementation to realize sustainable development. Beyond aspects related to policy coherence and monitoring – captured elsewhere in this report – finance is a critical aspect including national and international dimensions. At the national level, activities include costing, budgeting allocations

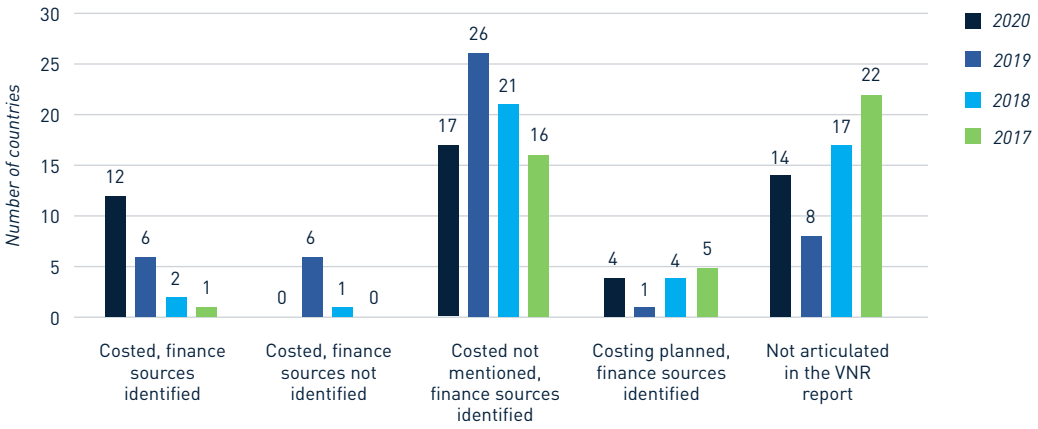
and identifying sources of finance. Domestic public resources, private investment, trade and international public finance contribute to varying degrees. In addition to supporting implementation in their own countries, development partners also have a role to play internationally by supporting developing countries, notably through effective official development assistance (ODA) and South-South cooperation, capacity development, technology transfer and by promoting fair trade, including preferential trade access where relevant. Cooperation to address global systemic challenges such as those related to climate change, peace and security, illicit capital flight and taxation are also included as part of the means of implementation. In addition to reporting on these aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation, countries are also asked to report on best practices, challenges, lessons learned and where they would like to learn from others. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic had implications for all aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation, particularly with regards to means of implementation, as most countries had their resources diverted to address the immediate impacts of the crisis. The present review specifically looked for information on the impacts of COVID-19 on the means of implementation presented by VNR reporting countries.

4.6.1. Budgeting for 2030 Agenda implementation

Costing 2030 Agenda implementation, identifying sources of finance and incorporating the 2030 Agenda into budgets assists countries in preparing realistic implementation strategies, identify financing shortfalls and setting clear expectations regarding needs when working with development partners. Figure 15 provides an overview of whether VNR reports refer to costing for domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda and identified sources of finance for 2017-2020. Reversing the trend from previous years, most countries reporting in 2020 (17 out of 47, or 36%) did not mention costing 2030 Agenda implementation, although they have identified sources of finance. Secondly, 14 out of 47 (30%) did not indicate that they have or plan to cost out implementation. A positive trend, however, continues to emerge with respect to countries that both costed and identified sources of finance, with 12 countries doing so in 2020 (26%). Among these countries, the majority are located in Africa (Benin, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Nigeria, and Uganda), followed by four countries in Asia (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Syria), two in Oceania (Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea), and one in Europe (Finland). No country did so in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Considering all the countries that have identified sources of finance (regardless as if they have costed implementation or not), the figures for 2020 is 33 countries, or 70%. This is the same percentage as for 2019, versus 57% in 2018 and 49% in 2017. Like previous years, for the countries that identified sources of finance, these tend to include domestic resources, private investment, remittances, and where applicable, official development assistance and South-South cooperation. Overall, countries to not cost out 2030 Agenda implementation but do identify sources of finance.

Figure 15. Resourcing the 2030 Agenda



BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Cost out SDG implementation and identify sources of finance. Assess budget allocations for SDG implementation at national and subnational levels and incorporate and clearly denote activities aimed at realizing the SDGs in budgets.

The inclusion of the 2030 Agenda into national (and subnational budgets) ensures that resources are effectively allocated for implementation. Budgetary allocations also give life to government commitments and priorities, making clear the actions that are being undertaken to realize the SDGs. While 64% of the VNR reports for 2019 provided information on inclusion of the SDGs in national budgets or budgeting processes, 2020 saw a decrease to 51% of countries (24 out of 47, versus 30 out of 47 in 2019). In 2018, this figure had been under 46%. Of the 24 countries reporting this information in 2020, two (Micronesia and Uzbekistan) indicated plans to incorporate the SDGs into budgeting processes, compared with 14 countries in 2019, and 10 countries in 2018. This shows improvement in the sense that more countries are actually doing such incorporation, instead of mentioning it as a future plan. Twenty-one countries (versus 16 in 2019) noted that the SDGs are incorporated into national budgets. This is largely through allocations pertaining to national sustainable development plans that are aligned with the SDGs. Countries that have taken this approach include Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda. Although Georgia's VNR report mentioned that budget has been allocated to specific SDGs, it also refers to a plan for improvement, which includes the incorporation of the SDGs into planning and budgeting processes of the municipal and regional levels, and the undertaking of a detailed budget review in view of SDGs implementation. In the case of Zambia, the VNR report referred to an ongoing process of enacting legislation, which should strengthen the coordination between the national development plans and the SDGs in terms of planning and budgeting processes. Armenia and Malawi made reference to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to budgeting for the 2030 Agenda.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Integrating the SDGs into development strategies in Samoa

According to its VNR report, Samoa has budgeted all the SDGs, having allocated resources for their implementation. For every financial year, the country's budget reflects both projects and resource allocation in specific sectors, therefore linking financing and partnerships to relevant SDGs. By integrating the SDGs into its national development strategy, Samoa ensures that their implementation is both contextualized and part of the overall national planning, budgeting, and accountability processes.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Samoa's VNR report.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: SDGs incorporation in Benin's national budget

Regarding SDGs incorporation in the national budget, Benin implemented a programme approach for the preparation of the state budget, which facilitates the taking into account of SDGs and allows a better understanding of the budgetary resources mobilized for sectoral interventions contributing to the advancement of the SDGs. This integration promotes efficiency and effectiveness in financing and implementing the SDGs.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Benin's VNR report.

4.6.2. International finance

nternational public finance, including ODA, other official flows and South-South cooperation remains important contributors to national sustainable development efforts for many countries. The examination of international public finance provides an indication of how development partners see their responsibilities with respect to

supporting the realization of the SDGs globally and in developing countries. Reporting on international public finance improved in 2020 following a decline in 2019. Thirty-nine countries (83%) reported on international public finance, versus 36 countries (77%) in 2019, 44 (96%) in 2018, and 38 (84%) in 2017.

For the nine high-income countries that reported in 2020, seven provided some information on international public finance. Of these, five countries referred to their role as providers (with three specifically mentioning ODA and one referring to South-South cooperation), and two commented of their receival of funds and resources. Barbados and Brunei Darussalam did not provide information on international public finance.

- Austria referred to its role as a provider of support to establish private funds to secure the financing of the SDGs for small and medium-sized companies in more economically challenged countries.
- Estonia noted its target to keep the share of 0.15% of the GNP allocated to development cooperation and humanitarian aid, and to achieve the level of official development assistance (ODA) within 0.33% of the GNP by 2030.
- Finland mentioned its financing several international organizations through ODA, and indicated that other sources and mechanisms of international financing, trade and partnerships can also be effective means of implementation for both developing and developed countries.
- Panama referred to a framework for international cooperation as the benchmark for cooperation between the government and the United Nations system. Panama also highlighted technical assistance, capacity building, and monitoring of the human rights situation, as well as the promotion of South-South / horizontal to integrate and transfer knowledge between nations.
- Seychelles mentioned the implementation of an economic partnership agreement, for which the country received an allocation envelope of EUR 10 million from the European Union.
- Slovenia highlighted its international commitment to increase the share of GNP allocated to ODA to 0.33% by 2030. In 2018, the country allocated EUR 70,758,241 to ODA, of which 35% was used for bilateral development aid and 65% for multilateral development aid.
- Finally, Trinidad and Tobago referred to the establishment of an international development cooperation division within the government to coordinate its relationship with international development agencies, including the United Nations, development banks and other multilateral and bilateral entities. The VNR report also mentions that, as the country is not eligible to ODA, its primary source of funding for the 2030 Agenda implementation is the government, which counts with the support of international financial institutions, bilateral donors and the private sector.

Among low- and middle-income countries, Georgia, Libya, Peru, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Uzbekistan did not report on international public finance. Ukraine did not mention international cooperation at all in their VNR report. Conversely, 32 low- and middle-income countries (68%) provided information on international public finance and covered a wide range of issues related to international public finance and their ongoing needs for such support (Figure 16). The figure below does not show references to ensuring donors meet their ODA commitments. In 2020, only one country (India) noted this. Similar calls were done by one country in 2019, two countries in 2018 and seven in 2017. Only one country (Costa Rica) referred to climate finance, down from two in 2019 and three in 2018. Bulgaria mentioned its process of joining the ERM II (Revised Exchange Rate Mechanism, or 'the Euro waiting room') as a way to improve national macroeconomic policy. North Macedonia mentioned the dual role it plays in international cooperation, acting as a donor and as a recipient of funding and technical assistance. The Russian Republic generally only referred to support provided, not support received.

Figure 16. Issues related to international public finance highlighted by low and middle-income countries

DECLINING AID FLOWS

- Armenia pointed to the low level of foreign direct investment (FDI) and highlighted its importance.
- Liberia mentioned efforts to revert the fall in aid inflows.
- Zambia noted the decline in ODA flow since it was not classified as a highly indebted and poor country anymore.

INCREASING INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC FINANCE RECEIVED

- Honduras and Solomon Islands highlighted importance of external funds received.
- Kenya referred to ODA and the demand for more financial resources and aid.
- Micronesia referred to opportunities to increase ODA.
- Nepal noted efforts to increase financial and non-financial resources.
- Syria called the international community for financial support.

IMPROVING AID EFFECTIVENESS

- Kyrgyz Republic mentioned ODA as one of the funding sources for conservation efforts.
- Malawi mentioned its great dependence on ODA and the need of resources than go beyond ODA provisions.
- Mozambique is restoring and ODA financing database to identify and monitor SDGs financing.
- Samoa mentioned amounts of ODA received and included a significant discussion of GPEDC and aid effectiveness processes.

SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

- Argentina, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Moldova, Morocco, and Niger referred to both South-South and Triangular cooperation.
- Comoros referred to the need to strengthen South-South cooperation.
- Costa Rica included a subchapter on the promotion of South-South cooperation and mentioned amounts received.
- Ecuador placed itself as both a provider and a receiver of South-South cooperation.
- India mentioned the support provided through South-South cooperation.
- Micronesia pointed to specific projects and support in the context of South-South cooperation.

LEVERAGING PUBLIC FINANCE

- Benin organized advocacy discussions to find innovative forms of financing.
- Burundi highlighted the importance of South-South cooperation, bilateral and multilateral cooperation.
- Gambia formed a strategic board to undertake resource mobilization.
- Nigeria and Uganda referred to the growth of foreign direct investment (FDI), ODA and South-South Cooperation.
- Papua New Guinea referred to a financial gap and a mobilization strategy to promote North-South and South-South cooperation, as well as ODA.

4.6.3. Trade

Participation in international trade is a key strategy for realizing sustainable development across countries. Moreover, the international community has committed to establishing a universal, rules-based, fair trading system that enables developing countries to reap the benefits of trade. Different from international public finance, reporting on trade declined once again in 2020, as it had between 2019 and 2018. In 2020, 27 countries (58%) reported on trade, versus 28 countries (60%) in 2019, 35 (76%) in 2018 and 22 (49%) in 2017. Countries tend to note the importance of trade in general terms with a focus on increasing trade overall through integration into regional and global trading systems (12 countries, versus nine in 2019), specific initiatives to strengthen trade such as creating trade strategies and focusing policy (10 countries, versus nine in 2019) and finalizing specific trade deals (two countries, Brunei Darussalam and Liberia, versus also two countries in 2019). Finland and the Russian Federation pointed to efforts to reduce trade barriers, particularly for least developed countries. Panama commented on the impact of COVID-19 as leading to a breakdown of the global supply chain, with both external and internal restrictions, and the reduction of the export of services offered by the Panama Canal.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Trade by sea in landlocked Nepal

Even being a landlocked country, Nepal included information under SDG 14 (Life below water). As a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Nepal has the right of access both to and from the sea. This promotes a smooth and efficient transit that reduces the costs of international trade and therefore contributes to poverty reduction and the promotion of sustainable development.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Nepal's VNR report.

4.6.4. Capacities for 2030 Agenda implementation

In the examination of capacities for 2030 Agenda implementation, the review examines how members refer to capacity development, technology transfer and systemic issues that impact capacities to implement the 2030 Agenda.

4.6.4.1. Capacity development

In 2020, 39 countries (83%) referred to capacity development in some way in their VNR report, an increase from 2019, 2018 and 2017 (32 countries in each year). As with previous years, discussions on capacity development tend to focus on capacities for implementation such as institutional and human resources and monitoring and evaluation. In 2020, the majority of countries reporting on capacity development (23 countries) referred to capacity development in general ways, including both its importance and efforts and initiatives being carried out towards capacity building.

Capacities related to monitoring and data collection were noted – both in terms of challenges but also efforts to improve capacities – by five countries: Argentina, Comoros, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, and Trinidad and Tobago. Another five countries – Armenia, Liberia, Libya, Micronesia, and Uzbekistan – provided analyses of capacity challenges within the goal-by-goal analysis. High income countries such as Austria, Estonia and Finland, and countries that provide South-South cooperation, such as Morocco and the Russian Federation, tended to showcase their efforts to support capacity development in other countries. Morocco also highlighted support received, and so did Moldova. Overall, the issues related to capacity development as reported in VNR reports in 2020 are consistent with reporting in 2019, 2018 and 2017.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Articulate specific capacity constraints to 2030 Agenda implementation and with respect to realizing specific SDGs in VNR reports. Indicate the type of support needed to address capacity constraints.

4.6.4.2. Technology

With respect to technology, SDG 17 on partnerships for the goals includes three targets on technology transfer to developing countries. Less countries reported on technology in 2020 in comparison to previous years. In 2020, information was available for 79% of countries (37 countries), versus 87% in 2019, 80% in 2018 and roughly 75% in 2017. In 2020, all countries reporting on technology made some reference to leveraging technology to implement the SDGs, mostly referring to technology to advance the SDGs domestically. Moreover, countries such as Costa Rica and Peru, for example, discussed technology in terms of environmental management or improving the quality of their environments. Seven countries – Armenia, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Costa Rica, Ecuador, North Macedonia, and Trinidad and Tobago – discussed ways of improving the education system with technology or enhancing learning through the mobilization of technology.

Three countries referred to technology transfers. For example, Nigeria referred to such transfer as a means to improve information and performance management; the Russian Federation's VNR report mentioned the provision of technological and financial aid to other countries, particularly CIS member states, and highlighted examples of such assistance; and Uzbekistan provided examples of cooperation and partnerships with other countries on technology and technology transfer. These three countries mentioning technology transfers in 2020 compare to six countries in 2019, three in 2018, and eight in 2017.

4.6.4.3. Systemic issues

Finally, systemic issues such as global macroeconomic stability, peace and conflict, migration and illicit flows impact the capacity of countries to pursue sustainable development. In 2020, 33 countries (70%) referred to systemic issues, up from 2019 (22 countries, or 47%) and from 2018 (32 countries, or 70%). Twenty-one countries referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as a systemic issue hindering the countries' capacity to realize the 2030 Agenda. Apart from this new and unprecedented challenge, some of the other systemic issues identified in 2020are consistent with the ones mentioned in the 2019 VNR reports. Fifteen countries (versus six in 2019) referred to climate change or environmental degradation as systemic issues. Eleven countries (versus five in 2019) referred to regional instability, terrorist organizations, or otherwise hostile illegal activities on their territories as a systemic issue. Libya and Trinidad and Tobago noted the fluctuations in oil prices as a systemic issue, and Estonia and North Macedonia referred to the migration and refugee crises. In in a comparison with 2018, global economic and financial crises or instability was the most commonly cited issue (nine countries) followed by efforts to combat illicit flows (seven countries).

4.6.5. Experiences in implementation

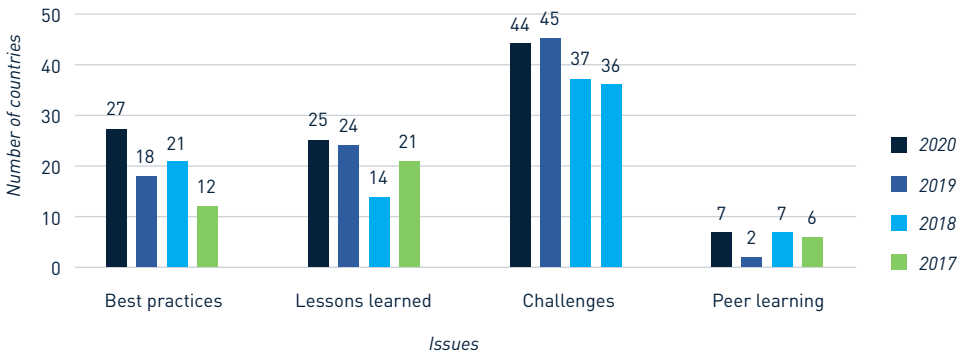
The Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines ask member states to outline their best practices, lessons learned in accelerating implementation, challenges and what they would like to learn from peers. Honest reflection on these elements is critical for the promotion of peer learning and the identification of areas for greater support by domestic and international stakeholders.

Figure 17 shows that there has been improvement in reporting on best practices, lessons learned and peer learning in 2020 over 2019, with slightly fewer countries reporting on challenges. Almost all countries reported on challenges at 94% (44 out of 47 countries). Over half of countries reported on lessons learned (53%) and on best practices (58%). Fifteen percent of countries reported on learning from peers, an increase from the 4% of 2019. Despite such increase, there is still significant room for improved reporting on learning from peers, and to a lesser extent, best practices lessons learned. Reporting on these elements is critical to meeting the learning objectives of the HLPF. Despite the encouragement for member state to include this information throughout their VNR reports, there continues to be a need for the United Nations to explore with member states why there is underreporting on these dimensions, particularly given the focus of the HLPF follow-up and review process on knowledge and lesson sharing.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Report on best practice, lessons learned to accelerate 2030 Agenda implementation, challenges and areas countries would like to learn from peers.

Figure 17. Countries highlighting areas requested in the voluntary common reporting guidelines, 2017-2020



A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Linking SDGs implementation and gender equality national policies in Costa Rica

In Costa Rica, under the leadership of the National Institute for Women, established in 2007, and through multi-stakeholder processes involving the government, the United Nations agencies, civil society, and academia, three significant gender policies were adopted: The National Policy for violence against women of all ages care and prevention 2017-2032, the National Policy for Effective Equality between women and men 2018-2030, and the National Policy for Equality between Women and Men in the training, employment and enjoyment of the products of Science, Technology, Telecommunications and Innovation 2018-2027. All of these are explicitly aligned with the 2030 Agenda. As part of the country's efforts to implement those policies, a characterization study for gender equality was published in 2020, identifying actual gender gaps, specific measures to close them, and providing public financial orientations.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Costa Rica's VNR report.

4.6.5.1. Best practices

The information shared for best practices tends to be detailed across reports particularly through case studies and text boxes, providing a good basis for understanding and learning. More countries presented information on best practices in 2020 compared to previous years, with 27 countries (almost 58%) providing this information versus 18 in 2019 (38%) and 21 in 2018. Like previous years, most countries reporting in 2020 highlighted specific programs or practices related to the realization of specific SDGs. Countries that inserted examples of good practices in the goal-by-goal analysis include Bangladesh, Estonia, Samoa, Seychelles, and Slovenia. Some countries referred to national policies in relation to the SDGs, such as Costa Rica (particularly towards gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence), Georgia and Panama, that mentioned good practices in terms of aligning the SDGs to national plans and objectives. Benin and the Democratic Republic of the Congo mentioned good practices in SDGs indices and targets, and on people's perception on the SDGs. Bangladesh and Russia highlighted good practices being carried out by different stakeholders other than the government.

Many countries reported best practices in relation to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) – such as Estonia, Kyrgyz Republic, and Uganda – SDG 3 (Good health and well-being) – including Kenya, Uganda, and Samoa – SDG 4 (Quality education) – such as Austria, Georgia, Honduras, Niger, North Macedonia, and Russian Federation – SDG 5 (Gender equality) – such as Austria, India, Russian Federation, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uzbekistan – and SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation) – including Kenya and Slovenia. There was also consistent reporting around SDG 13 (Climate action), as countries that include Austria, Bulgaria, Ecuador, Kyrgyz Republic, Niger, Papua New Guinea, and Trinidad and Tobago highlighted good practices related to environmental protection and climate change. Other good practices

were highlighted on topics such as local region development (Honduras), migration and displacement (Kyrgyz Republic), energy, forestry and social protection (Nepal), literacy (Trinidad and Tobago, and Uzbekistan), poverty (India and Panama), religious tolerance (Liberia), agriculture (Papua New Guinea), housing (Uzbekistan), human rights (Slovenia).

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: The Russian Federation's showcasing of multiple stakeholders' best practices

There is a consistent presentation of examples of non-state actor contributions throughout the Russian Federation's VNR report, which includes numerous examples of good practice termed "case studies." The vast majority of these examples highlight SDG implementation efforts by civil society, business, and other stakeholders rather than government.

Source: Excerpt adapted from the Russian Federation's VNR report.

4.6.5.2. *Challenges*

Identifying challenges in 2030 Agenda implementation is an important contribution of VNR reports. Frequently cited challenges across VNR reports signal areas where more support is needed from the United Nations and development partners. Moreover, the discussion of challenges can inform expectations regarding the speed and scale of 2030 Agenda implementation and provide a basis for addressing bottlenecks in individual countries.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Articulate clear and detailed challenges in 2030 Agenda implementation to inform how the country can best be supported by domestic and international communities.

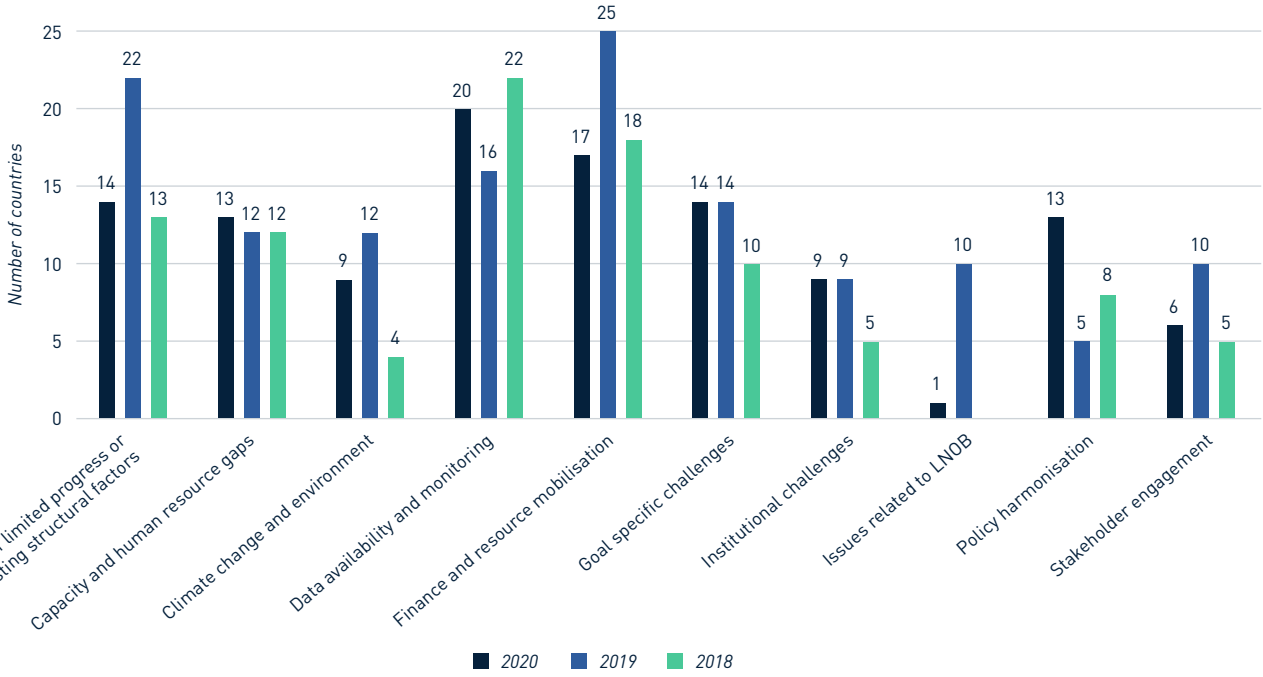
In 2020, 44 countries (94%) identified and reported on challenges to 2030 Agenda implementation. Two out of the three countries that did not present such information had only presented main messages to the HLPF – Barbados, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The third country not reporting on challenges was the Russian Federation, even if identifying challenges in SDG implementation was listed as one of the goals of their VNR report. As it was the case in 2019 and 2018, most countries reporting in 2020 presented implementation challenges as a list of key issues without significant details provided. Greater details tend to be available for challenges identified for specific SDGs. Figure 18 shows the main challenges emerging in 2030 Agenda implementation over 2018-2020.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Presentation of challenges in Kyrgyz Republic and Samoa's VNR reports

The Kyrgyz Republic VNR report brought a consistent presentation of challenges encountered in SDG implementation and next steps. Similarly, in its goal-by-goal analysis, Samoa's VNR report included a section on challenges and one on opportunities. This format is user-friendly and helpful for analyzing any future VNR reports.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Kyrgyz Republic and Samoa's VNR reports

Figure 18. Most common challenges in 2030 Agenda implementation, 2018-2020



Data availability and monitoring emerged as the top challenge in 2020, mentioned by 20 countries. Similarly, data constraints and monitoring progress had been the most commonly cited concern for both 2018 and 2017. Second for 2020 came finance and resource mobilization (mentioned by 17 countries), which had been the most mentioned challenge in 2019, and the second one in 2018 and 2017. Thirdly, in 2020, 14 countries mentioned areas of limited progress, such as poverty and malnutrition, or structural factors, such as war, occupation, corruption, and geographical realities. Another 14 countries referred to goal-specific challenges in 2020. Capacity constraints were cited by 13 countries in 2020, versus 12 countries in 2019 and 2018. Similarly, another 13 countries referred to challenges in terms of policy harmonization in 2020. Countries continue to face challenges related to broader 2030 Agenda implementation, including ensuring institutions are fit for purpose (mentioned by nine countries in 2020), and stakeholder engagement (referred to by six countries in 2020). In 2019, an emerging challenge had been the issue of ensuring inclusivity and meeting the promise to leave no one behind, with 10 countries citing issues related to this topic, whereas in 2020 only India specifically mentioned LNOB among listed challenges. Finally, in 2020 VNR reports, COVID-19 was referred to as a challenge by 17 countries, although a higher number of countries included the pandemic in other parts of their VNR reports.

4.6.5.3. Lessons learned

Pointing to lessons learned in VNR reports is another aspect of reporting that supports peer learning. In 2020, 25 countries (53%) highlighted lessons learned, versus 24 (51%) in 2019. Among the countries that provided such information in 2020, 10 emphasized stakeholder engagement for successful 2030 Agenda implementation, compared also to 10 in 2019 and five in 2018. Four countries pointed to lessons learned related to developing appropriate systems for follow-up and review, compared to eight countries in 2019. Three countries highlighted the roles of local governments, versus four countries in 2019. One country pointed to the importance of prioritization under the 2030 Agenda (versus four in 2019), and eight countries emphasized country ownership as critical to success (versus another four in 2019).

In 2020, integrating the agenda into government systems including policies, budgets and monitoring

and evaluation was highlighted by the majority of countries reporting lessons learned – 14 countries, versus four in 2019. With respect to leaving no one behind, two countries highlighted issues related to addressing the needs of vulnerable populations (versus four again in 2019). For example, Georgia highlighted the need to ensure no one is left behind, and Samoa noted the lesson of recognising and engaging the vulnerable groups in a meaningful way. In addition to the issues noted above, Costa Rica mentioned the need of strengthening cooperation with the United Nations system to achieve transformative effects in the social, political, and economic levels. Zambia noted key lessons arising from a performance audit conducted to assess the country's preparedness to implement the SDGs. The lessons learned in the 2020 VNR reports are largely aligned with what was reported in the VNR reports examined in 2019, 2018 and 2017.

4.6.5.4. *Learning from others*

Reporting on what countries are keen to learn from others saw an increase in 2020, with seven countries (15%) providing this information, up from three (6%) in 2019 and equal to seven countries in 2018. Brunei Darussalam mentioned they would benefit from other countries' experiences in the SDGs implementation and welcomed collaboration, including in technical assistance and capacity building. The Democratic Republic of the Congo referred to the elaboration of their VNR report and how they benefited from attending a regional workshop organized with the support of UNDP and KOICA (Korean International Cooperation Agency). As a member and former chair of the Open Government Partnership, Georgia mentioned continuous engagement to both learn and share positive experiences. India referred to the domestic level and localization, mentioning the importance of promoting peer learning among states and union territories. Solomon Islands referred to peer sharing and learning for capacity development of the country's National Statistics Office in order to improve data collection systems. Zambia's VNR report had peer learning as a one-off mention under SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure).

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Specifying areas of interest for peer learning in Bangladesh

In its VNR report, Bangladesh comprehensively specified their areas of interest with regards to peer learning. The county mentioned that good cases from other countries would help Bangladesh to solve challenges. These include the maintenance of sustainability in view of rapidly growing urban demands; ways of improving agricultural productivity while also keeping a sustainable environment; and how to affordably improve the quality of education. The VNR report also recognizes that mitigating the impacts of climate change requires an enhanced collaboration with international partners, particularly in terms of skills and capacity development.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Bangladesh's VNR report.

4.6.6. *Impact of COVID-19 on the means of implementation*

Among the 47 countries presenting VNR reports in 2020, 35 reported on the dimension of the impacts of COVID-19 on the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which represents almost 75% of countries. The majority (27 countries) reported the design and application of national plans, emergency contingency plans or funds, national stimulus packages, and general preventive measures, such as social distancing, the mandatory use of protective equipment such as masks, and the closure of non-essential services. Support to people, reported by 15 countries, was another category highlighted in the VNR reports, which included the population in general and the most vulnerable sectors of society. Another reported action was the provision of support to businesses – particularly small and medium enterprises, including the small trade level of craftsmen and artisans –, which was reported by 14 countries. Eleven countries referred to external collaboration, including the United Nations system, the European Union, and partner countries. The closure of borders or the suspension

of air traffic and limitation of travel was mentioned by three countries (Bulgaria, Kenya, and Slovenia). In terms of infrastructure, Argentina, Bangladesh, and Slovenia referred to the building of hospitals or the setup of mobile hospitals and health facilities.

Still other actions were highlighted by some countries. For example, Bangladesh and Kenya mentioned the establishment of specific committees to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the first one at the local level (city corporation, municipality, district, union), and the second at the national level (Kenya's National Co-ordination Committee on Coronavirus Pandemic, NCCCP). Bulgaria and the Russian Federation referred to the provision of humanitarian aid to foreign partners, actions that can be related to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals). The COVID-19 dedicated chapter in Seychelle's VNR report described both impact and actions taken in different aspects of the three dimensions of the 2030 Agenda. Morocco worked in terms of scenario planning, describing three possible scenarios related to the national economy and its repercussions on SDGs implementation. Libya, Nigeria, and Peru referred to how COVID-19 might limit the possibilities of them effectively implementing the SDGs.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: India's COVID-19 information exchange platform

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, India leveraged digital and information capacity to develop an information exchange platform to be used by the eight countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In addition to this platform, named 'SAARC COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform (COINEX)', India put a digital network in place to deliver medical expertise content to be used for training purposes of healthcare personnel in neighbouring countries.

Source: Excerpt adapted from India's VNR report.

4.6.7. Recommendations

- **Clearly include best practices, lessons learned in accelerating implementation, challenges going forward and where opportunities exist to learn from peers in VNR reports.**
- **Examine national and subnational budgets as an essential part of the implementation process and start integrating the SDGs into them to ensure that resources are allocated for implementation. In doing so, build on the good practice in costing out SDG implementation and identify sources of finance to implement the 2030 Agenda at country level.**
- **Report on all means of implementation, including clearly specifying capacity constraints. Such information is critical for assessing gaps, identifying where greater domestic and international efforts are needed and informing development cooperation frameworks.**
- **Bolster efforts to support development partners' capacity development priorities, including strengthening statistical systems and the capacities of local stakeholders to implement the 2030 Agenda.**
- **Scale up efforts to address systemic issues that impact SDG implementation, in particular international peace and security, illicit and other illegal activities, effects of climate change, and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- **In view of COVID-19, report on how it affected the means of implementation of the SDGs, highlighting actions taken to address the crisis and reduce its impact.**

4.7. MEASUREMENT AND REPORTING

The Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines suggest countries include information on how they intend to review progress at the national level. The guidelines also recommend countries provide information as to how they will report to future HLPFs.

In 2020, 64% of countries provided information on follow-up and review processes at the national level. This reverses the positive trend from previous years in terms of reporting on this dimension of 2030 Agenda implementation. In 2019, 85% of countries discussed measures to report on the national level, versus 67% in 2018 and 72% in 2017.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Provide an account of national level reporting and accountability processes for 2030 Agenda implementation in VNR reports.

The Secretary-General's voluntary common report guidelines strongly encourage repeat reporters to present progress made since their last VNR. In 2020, 20 out of the 47 reporting countries presented a VNR report for the second time, and one (Benin) presented for the third time. All the 21 repeat reporters provided information on their progress since their last VNR report. For example, in the case of Argentina, as there was a change in the political party in government between the two VNR reports, the 2020 one shows both continuities and divergences in politics aimed to implement the 2030 Agenda. Benin presented a balanced view of their current status since the previous VNRs, assessing progress as both satisfactory and unsatisfactory, adequate and inadequate. Ecuador included a specific section showing the actions that have been carried out to accelerate the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Despite the heavy impact of COVID-19, Niger presented progress in relation to the 2018 baseline in the VNR report's goal-by-goal analysis. Uganda reported both progresses and backslidings under specific SDGs, and presented an SDGs matrix with data comparison from 2015 to 2019. Peru presented progress in a very general way.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Seychelles' traffic light system to monitor progress

Seychelles presented progress on specific SDGs' indicators through a traffic light system. Green means that an indicator has been achieved; indicators listed as yellow have "on track" status; and red marks the indicators that are "trailing". Seychelles' traffic light system is accompanied by information on baseline data and progress throughout the years. This information was presented in the VNR report as a statistical annex.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Seychelles' VNR report.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Provide an account of progress made between VNR reports with reference to trends for SDG targets and changes to policies, institutions and partnerships for 2030 Agenda implementation.

In terms of how countries reported on COVID-19, 25 out of 47 (53%) produced a stand-alone chapter, sub-chapter or annex dedicated to the pandemic and its effects on the country's progress on the 2030 Agenda implementation. Among these countries, most have also mentioned COVID-19 in other parts of their VNR reports. Fourteen countries did not necessarily present a dedicated chapter to COVID-19, but referred to the pandemic's impacts throughout their VNR reports. Eight countries did not make significant reference to COVID-19. Among these, there was Austria, Barbados, Finland, and Libya. Estonia did not refer to the pandemic at all. Niger briefly mentioned the adoption of a response plan being implemented with the support of development partners. In the case of Syria's VNR report, the analysis of the implications of COVID-19 and the description of related policies are limited. Ukraine referred to the conduction of a survey to assess risks and challenges amid the pandemic, but the VNR report does not bring much reference to COVID-19 overall.

The case of Peru stands out, as COVID-19 became the main theme of the country's VNR report (with both a dedicated chapter and as an integrated topic throughout the text), taking the place of sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda. This presents an issue in the sense that if these topics – which should be the very focus of the whole VNR processes in view of the HLPF – are not presented, it is hard to follow overall progress on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda implementation. In view of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, good practice would be not to ignore the effects and impacts of the crisis, but to relate them to current overall 2030 Agenda implementation, highlighting areas where more support is needed, showing efforts and solutions to address the challenges imposed by the crisis, and presenting lessons learned from the whole process.

4.7.1. Data availability

Data is important to ensure monitoring and evaluation of 2030 Agenda efforts. While reporting on data availability for 2030 Agenda monitoring had improved significantly in 2019 over previous years, 2020 experienced a decline in this sense. In 2020, 21 countries (45%) provided information on data availability. In 2019, 36 countries (76%) provided clear information on data availability for SDG monitoring, versus 18 countries in 2018 and 14 in 2017.

Like previous years, there is no consistent method countries use to measure and report on data availability making it difficult to provide an overall assessment of data availability for 2030 Agenda monitoring based on VNR reports. In addition, countries often do not provide information on the specific data they lack. Some countries providing an overall percentage on data availability and others note data gaps for specific SDGs.

Table 4 provides a year-by-year comparison of data availability according to the reporting countries' calculations. The data presented does not attempt to reconcile the differences in how countries calculate data availability. Rather the table provides an indication of where countries situate themselves in terms of data availability, and further demonstrates the need for countries – regardless of their income level – to strengthen data availability for SDG monitoring. The information presented in the table is based on available data, proxy data, or partial data according to information in VNR reports. For 2020, 11 countries reported that data was available for less than 50% of SDG indicators, which represents an improvement in relation to 2019, when over half of the reporting countries (25) had less than 50% of data available. Panama experienced a decrease in data availability from 2017 (in a range of 31-40%) to 2020 (ranging from 21-30%). The same happened with Nigeria, which ranged between 41-50% in 2017 and declined to 21-30% in 2020. Niger declined from 51-60% in 2018 to 31-40% in 2020. Conversely, Benin saw gains in terms of data availability according to reporting in 2018 versus 2020, moving from availability 41-50% to between 71-80% of indicators. Peru did not present information on data availability in 2020, though it had in 2017.

Table 4. Data availability for global SDG indicators

Percentage	COUNTRIES			
	2017	2018	2019	2020
11-20%	Guatemala	Paraguay	-	-
21-30%	Azerbaijan, the Maldives	Jamaica	Cambodia, Croatia, Eswatini, Fiji, Iceland, Iraq, Mauritius, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palau, Serbia, Tonga, Vanuatu	Honduras, Nigeria, Panama
31-40%	Japan, Panama, the Netherlands	Bahamas, Dominican Republic	Algeria, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kazakhstan, Liechtenstein, Turkey	Gambia, Mozambique, Niger, Zambia
41-50%	Belgium, Italy, Nigeria, Peru	Benin, Egypt, State of Palestine	Côte d'Ivoire, Kuwait, Oman, Saint Lucia, Tunisia	Kyrgyz Republic, Morocco, Syria, Uzbekistan
51-60%	Denmark	Ecuador, Niger, Spain, Uruguay, Viet Nam	Lesotho, Mongolia, Philippines, Tanzania, Timor-Leste	Costa Rica
61-70%	Indonesia	Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Lithuania, Senegal	Indonesia, Israel, Rwanda, South Africa	Finland
71-80%	Bangladesh	Hungary, Mexico	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Guatemala, United Kingdom	Benin, Ecuador, Libya, Malawi, Moldova
81-90%	Malaysia	-	-	Austria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya

As noted in the section on leaving no one behind, information on disaggregated data is not well reported in the VNR reports. Yet, this information is important for establishing baselines and informing evidence-based approaches to policy-making and programming. While only 12 countries in 2018 noted the need to improve disaggregated data, this figure jumped to 30 in 2019. In 2020, 13 countries pointed to the need of additional data to leave no one behind. Five years into reporting on the 2030 Agenda, this suggests a continuous recognition – although at a lesser extent in comparison to 2019 – by governments that efforts to LNOB will require improvements to the availability of disaggregated data. Countries not always provided more information regarding the forms of disaggregated data required, but they should report better on what forms of disaggregated data are needed (e.g. gender, age, region, disability, income or socio-economic status, ethnicity or social group, migration status, housing).

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Kenya's open data platform

Kenya's Open Institute collaborated with local governments (at the counties level) to enhance counties' capacity to produce high quality, timely and reliable disaggregated data. From such collaboration, an online platform was developed to foster citizen engagement and a source of open data. Through the Open County Platform (www.opencounty.org), county management teams can follow data related to development in a more systematic way. The platform is also an efficient channel for citizens to engage and provide feedback.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Kenya's VNR report.

4.7.2. Improving data availability

Thirty out of the 47 reporting countries (64%) in 2020 indicated efforts to improve data availability. This is a decline in relation to 2019, when all 47 reporting countries reported the same, versus 31 countries in 2018. As seen in Figure 19, the three most cited ways to address data availability in 2020 VNR reports were improving capacity (11 countries, versus nine in 2019), building of a statistical plan (nine countries, versus five in 2019), and building or expanding on data (seven countries, versus 11 in 2019). Less countries (4) referred to developing or modernizing indicators in comparison to 2019 (eight countries), and the same number of countries (5) in 2020 and 2019 mentioned institutional changes to strengthen statistical systems. For example, the government of Panama created the Technical Bureau of Statistics and Social Indicators, and Ukraine established a special unit within its statistics service's structure to provide information support for SDGs monitoring.

Still other types of efforts were mentioned in 2020 VNR reports. Armenia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo referred to the use of data from different (non-governmental, or non-national) sources as a way of improving data availability. India promotes a healthy competition among its states towards the achievement of the SDGs: primarily through the SDG India Index and Dashboard, states collect data and present them on indicators in a disaggregated way. Nepal's VNR report mentioned that its 2021 national census will be aligned with the SDGs and should address specific issues related to data generation, disaggregation and gaps. Although Austria's VNR report stated that several groups of experts are working to close data gaps and further break down existing data sets, it is unclear which exact means are being used to attain this objective.

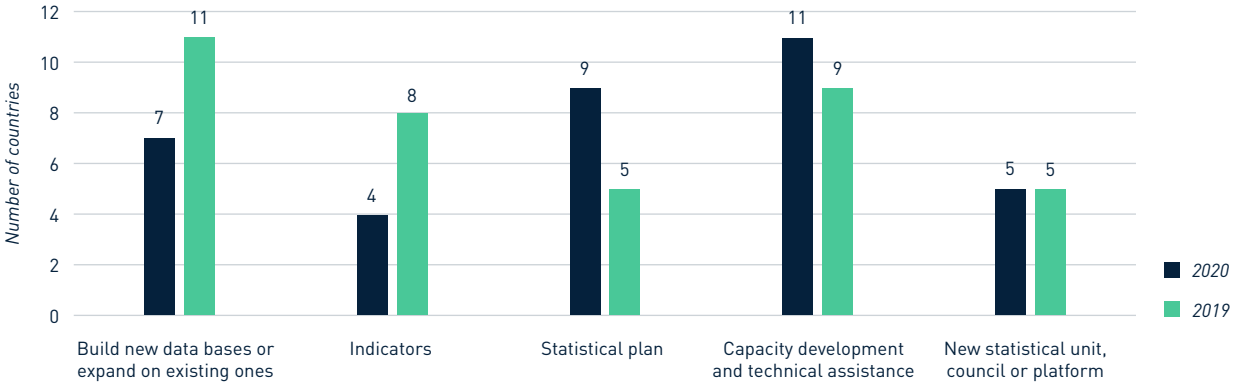
A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Zambia's efforts to improve data availability

Zambia worked to improve its Central Statistical Office's statistical capacity. This body, now called Zambia Statistics Agency (ZamStats), embarked on strengthening statistical capacities through a national strategy (NSDS, 2019 -2024). Moreover, national ownership of the SDGs improved after the adoption of Zambia's "Monitoring and Evaluation Policy" (2019), which also contributes to improve accountability. Such policy aims to support capacity enhancement for collection, management and dissemination of information on development indicators, including the SDGs.

Source: Excerpts adapted from Zambia's VNR report

The efforts noted in 2020 are consistent with 2019, though with more focus on capacity development, which aligns more to efforts carried out by countries presenting VNR reports in 2018 and 2017. Reporting in 2018 and 2017 also provided greater attention to improving coordination, resource mobilization and data dissemination, which have not been largely mentioned by countries reporting in 2020.

Figure 19. Efforts to improve data availability



4.7.3. National reporting on 2030 Agenda implementation

Reporting at the national level ensures visibility of the 2030 Agenda and encourages a country-level follow-up and review process. In 2020, 29 countries (63%) provided some information on national level reporting, a decline in relation to the 40 countries (85%) presenting this in 2019. The lack of data on national reporting, including how countries report, when, and to whom, is worrisome in terms of transparency and accountability. Countries should better inform their progress to attain the SDGs both at the national level (being accountable to citizens) and the international level, including at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).

While 18 countries (38%) indicated their national reporting process or mechanism was in development in 2019, this was only pointed out by Papua New Guinea and Uzbekistan in 2020, which might suggest that more countries currently have reporting mechanisms in place. In 2020, 16 countries (34%) pointed to regular national reporting, versus 19 countries (40%) in 2019. Of these, seven countries (the same as in 2019) referred to the intention of reporting annually. These countries include Bangladesh, Finland, Malawi, Micronesia, Nepal, Slovenia, and Ukraine. VNR reports were not always clear on who would prepare reports, with the exception of Slovenia, that mentioned government bodies appointing contact persons for monitoring the 2030 Agenda and the preparation of a list containing all SDGs indicators and contact persons. Another aspect over which VNR reports are usually unclear is to whom reporting would occur, except for Austria, whose VNR report mentioned that the federal government will regularly inform parliament on the progress being made in SDGs implementation.

Twelve countries (versus eight in 2019) listed the presence of coordination bodies in reporting, and seven countries (versus two in 2019) highlighted the use of a national statistics bureau or national evaluation council as the writers of or contributors to national reporting. Only five countries – Malawi, Papua New Guinea, Seychelles, Uganda, and Uzbekistan – noted involvement of parliamentarians (compared to five in 2019, and two in 2018). A dashboard, platform or dedicated website for online national reporting was noted by 13 countries (28%) in 2020. This number is in keeping with findings from 2019, when 12 countries (26%) commented on using or developing online platforms, and 2018, with 11 countries reporting the same.

While in previous years VNR reports did not refer to regional-level follow-up and review processes, Nepal and India mentioned monitoring and reporting actions at the local level. Moreover, as previously mentioned

in the present report, Finland and Uganda referred to the presentation of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). Finally, while in 2019 no countries provided information on planned HLPF reporting for the future, Finland mentioned its decision of reporting on the progress of achieving the 2030 Agenda through VNRs every four years, and Nigeria referred to a planned presentation of another VNR report in 2022-2023.

BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Link accountability for progress on 2030 Agenda implementation to regular, planned parliamentary reviews.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: The role of Malawi's parliament and national auditing institution

Malawi's VNR report outlined efforts towards annual national reporting on the 2030 Agenda as well as the role of parliament and the national auditing institution in follow-up and review.

Source: Excerpts adapted from Malawi's VNR report

Some of the 2020 reporting countries provided information on national auditing institutions. These include Finland, Malawi, Solomon Islands, and Uganda. The role of audit offices, including through support, overseeing monitoring, and auditor's reports assists overall accountability for national reporting on 2030 Agenda implementation, and connects the reporting processes to parliament. Finally, VNR reports usually lack information about citizen engagement in follow-up and review processes. In 2020, only five countries – Comoros, Finland, India, Malawi, and Samoa – made some reference to stakeholders such as civil society and general citizens being engaged in national reporting.

4.7.4. Recommendations

- **Report on data availability, including disaggregated data, and country efforts to improve data availability – given the importance of data for SDG monitoring and accountability, as well as leaving no one behind.**
- **Link reviews of progress for 2030 Agenda implementation to parliamentary oversight mechanisms in order to ensure accountability at the national level. Supreme auditing institutions can be key players in national follow-up and review processes.**
- **Spell out plans to review progress at the national level and be accountable to citizens for progress on the 2030 Agenda beyond reporting to the HLPF. This should include consulting with non-state actors and articulating plans for future HLPF reporting. These elements are important for ensuring accountability for progress on the 2030 Agenda, identifying gaps in implementation, allowing for course correction and ensuring transparency in reporting processes.**
- **Include an assessment of progress on 2030 Agenda implementation in VNR reports to the HLPF, particularly with reference to the status of implementation in previously submitted VNR reports.**

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5. REPORTING ACCORDING TO THE VOLUNTARY COMMON REPORTING GUIDELINES

5.1. **KEY** FINDINGS

5.1.1. Use of the voluntary common reporting guidelines

- **Overall guidelines compliance:** The review of VNR reports shows increased compliance with reporting against the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines over 2016 to 2019, with a steadier situation between 2019 and 2020.
- **Guidelines' components:** All countries presenting full VNR reports in 2020 provided full or partial information on all components of the guidelines. This proportion compares to 75% in 2019, showing that countries are more compliant with the Secretary-General's instructions.
- **Structural issues:** There was a substantial increase in the quality of information provided on structural issues in 2020, which reverses the trend from 2018 and 2019.
- **Increases and declines in reporting:** An equal number of components of the guidelines saw increased and decreased reporting in 2020 in comparison to the previous year, with the most significant gains seen in reporting on structural issues and methodology for the VNR. Declines include reporting on creating ownership, and on integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development from 2019.

5.2. **VOLUNTARY** COMMON REPORTING GUIDELINES

The United Nations Secretary-General proposed a set of voluntary common reporting guidelines to help countries frame their VNR reports to the HLPF. The guidelines have evolved over time with an updated handbook for reporting in 2020. VNR reports submitted for the following year will also have a new set of guidelines (2021) to better incorporate how countries should report against the impacts of a global crises

such as COVID-19 and how to build back together, and to further clarify information that should be provided for countries submitting a subsequent report to the HLPF. The guidelines are voluntary however and countries ultimately decide how to present their findings.

WHAT IS IN THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S VOLUNTARY COMMON REPORTING GUIDELINES?

- **Opening statement** by the Head of State or Government, a Minister or other high-ranking Government official.
- **Highlights** presented in a one-to-two-page synthesis overview of the review process, status of SDG progress and how the government is responding to the integrated and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda and working to leave no one behind.
- An **introduction** that sets the context and objectives for the review, outlines the review cycle and how existing national reports were used. The policy architecture for implementation and policy tools to support integration of the three dimensions, as well as linkages to relevant international agreements could also be mentioned.
- Presentation of the **methodology for the review**, outlining the process for preparation of the national review.
- **Policy and enabling environment**
  - **Creating ownership** of the SDGs with an outline of efforts towards all stakeholders to inform them on and involve them in the SDGs. This section can address how specific groups have been engaged.
  - **Incorporation of the SDGs in national frameworks** understood in terms of the critical initiatives countries undertook to adapt the SDGs and targets to its national circumstances, and to advance their implementation. This section should include challenges in implementation, and their cause, and refer to efforts taken by other stakeholders.
  - **Integration of the three dimensions** through a discussion of how the three dimensions of sustainable development are being integrated and how sustainable development policies are being designed and implemented to reflect such integration. Could include analysis related to the HLPF theme.
  - Assessment of how the principle of **leaving no one behind** is mainstreamed in implementation. Includes how vulnerable groups have been identified, efforts to address their needs, and particular attention to women and girls.
  - **Institutional mechanisms** described in terms of how the country has adapted its institutional framework in order to implement the 2030 Agenda. Would be useful to include how the country plans to review progress and can note where support is provided by United Nations Country Teams in the preparation of national SDG reports.
  - Relevant **structural issues** or barriers, including external constraints that hinder progress. Transformative approaches to addressing these challenges can be highlighted.
- A brief analysis of progress on all **goals and targets**, including whether a baseline has been defined. Discussion can also include trends, successes, challenges, emerging issues, lessons learned and actions to address gaps and challenges. Countries completing a subsequent VNR are encouraged to describe progress since the previous review.
- Presentation of the **means of implementation**, including how means of implementation are mobilized, what difficulties this process faces, and what additional resources are needed. The section can include reference to financial systems and resource allocation to support implementation, the private sector, the role of technology, concrete capacity development and data needs and the role of multi-stakeholder partnerships.
- **Conclusion and next steps** include the plans the country is taking or planning to take to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Can also outline how implementation will be reviewed at national and subnational levels. Countries can also provide a summary of the analysis, findings and policy implications. Lessons learned from the VNR could be highlighted.
- **Annexes** that can include an annex with data, using the global SDG indicators as a starting point and adding priority national/regional indicators and identifying gaps. Additional annexes can also showcase best practice or comments from stakeholders.

5.3. **USE** OF THE GUIDELINES

All the VNR reports presented in 2020 were reviewed against the guidelines to identify which of the suggested components are being addressed by countries. Figure 21 provides an overview of trends, outlining countries that:

- have fully met the guidelines for a component indicated in green;
- partially met the guidelines by referring to the component but not most aspects requested in the guidelines, indicated in yellow; or
- did not include the component at all, indicated in red.

As shown in Figure 21, most countries provided the information – in full or partially – as recommended by the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines. Reversing the trend from 2018 and 2019, there was a considerable increase in the number of VNR reports presenting information on structural issues in 2020. In comparison to previous years, VNR reports have not particularly changed in terms of overall compliance with the guidelines. Reporting increased in six components listed in the guidelines in 2020 compared to 2019, with the most significant gains seen in reporting on structural issues, followed by information on the methodology for the VRN (Figure 20). Declines were seen in also six components: inclusion of a statement by a Head of State or Government, introduction, creating ownership, incorporating the SDGs into national frameworks, integrating the three dimensions, and institutional mechanisms. The proportion of countries including annexes remained the same over 2019 and 2020. In the case of conclusions and next steps, no accurate assessment could be done, as for 2020 the guidelines merged both components, which used to be separate in 2018 and 2019.

Figure 20. Trends in reporting against the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines over 2019-2020

INCREASED PROPORTION OF COUNTRIES REPORTING ON/ INCLUDING

- Highlights (6 percentage points)
- Methodology for the VNR (13 percentage points)
- Leave no one behind (6 percentage points)
- Structural issues (34 percentage points)
- Goals and targets (2 percentage points)
- Means of implementation (5 percentage points)

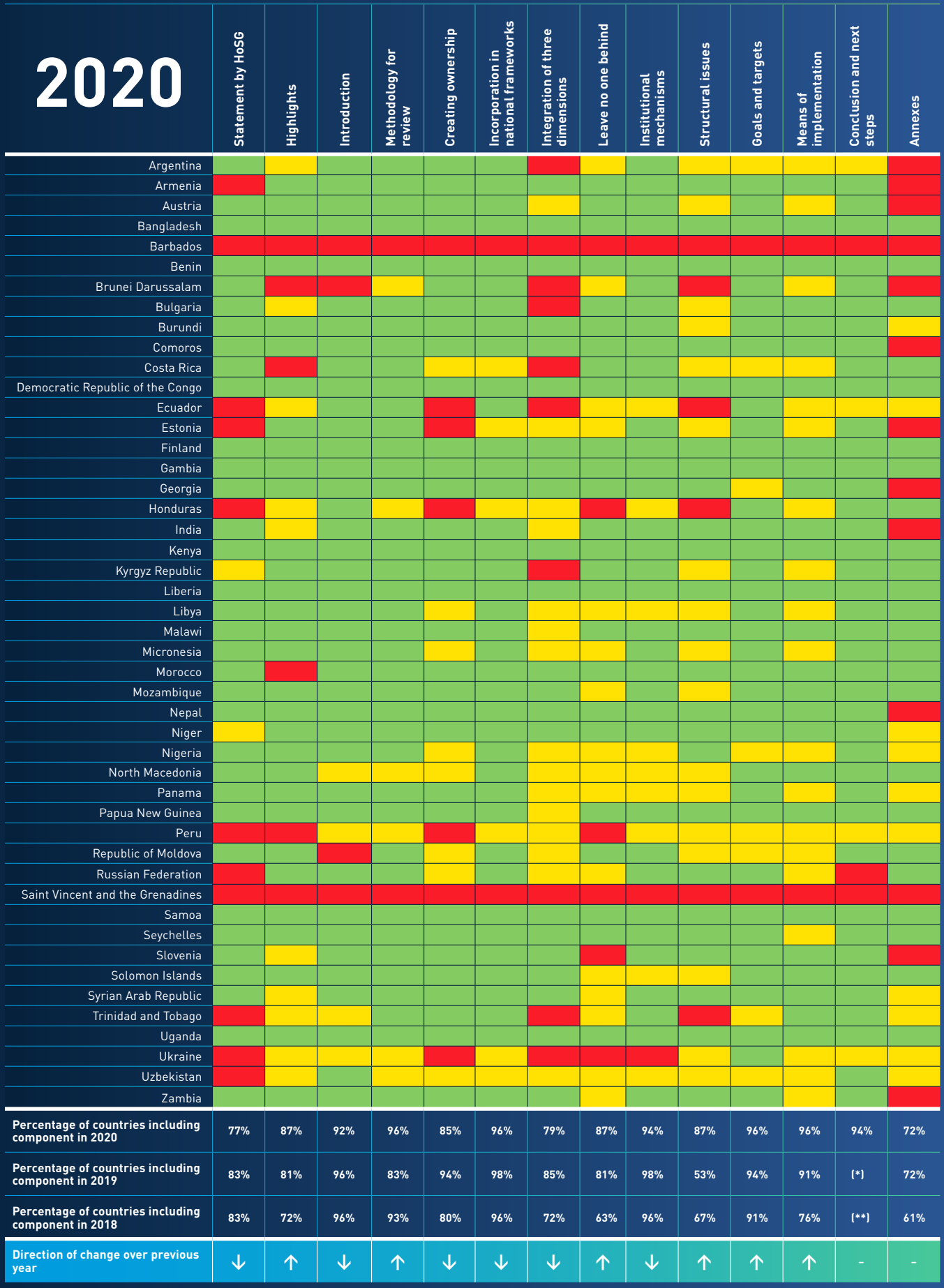
CONSISTENT REPORTING ON

- Annexes

DECLINED PROPORTION OF COUNTRIES REPORTING ON/ INCLUDING

- Statement by a Head of State or Government (6 percentage points)
- Introduction (4 percentage points)
- Creating ownership (9 percentage points)
- Incorporating the SDGs into national frameworks (2 percentage points)
- Integration of the three dimensions (6 percentage points)
- Institutional mechanisms (4 percentage points)

Figure 21. The extent to which countries incorporate elements of the SG common reporting guidelines, 2020



	Statement by HoSG	Highlights	Introduction	Methodology for review	Creating ownership	Incorporation in national frameworks	Integration of three dimensions	Leave no one behind	Institutional mechanisms	Structural issues	Goals and targets	Means of implementation	Conclusion and next steps	Annexes
Percentage of countries including component in 2020	77%	87%	92%	96%	85%	96%	79%	87%	94%	87%	96%	96%	94%	72%
Percentage of countries including component in 2019	83%	81%	96%	83%	94%	98%	85%	81%	98%	53%	94%	91%	(*)	72%
Percentage of countries including component in 2018	83%	72%	96%	93%	80%	96%	72%	63%	96%	67%	91%	76%	(**)	61%
Direction of change over previous year	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	-	-

(*) 2019 – Conclusion 77%, Next steps 79% (**) 2018 – Conclusion 74%, Next steps 80%

Overall, most countries presenting VNRs in 2020 fully meet the Secretary-General's reporting guidelines. Figure 21 shows a majority of "fully met" assessment (green), as opposed to "partially met" (yellow) in all the 14 components. In nine components, the proportion of countries fully meeting the guidelines in relation to those that met them partially was over 75%. However, the difference between fully and partially meeting a guideline was less prominent in five components. In the case of the annexes component, roughly one third of the countries (32%, or 23 versus 11 countries) meeting the guidelines did it only partially, whereas for the four other components (integration of the three dimensions, leaving no one behind, structural issues, and means of implementation) that figure increased to about 40% of countries only partially meeting the guidelines.[42] Such differences may suggest that countries are not sufficiently focusing on these matters, or are not presenting enough detailed information.

A CASE STUDY IN GOOD PRACTICE: Benin's VNR report structure

Benin presented its third VNR report in 2020. The report was well structured and followed the guidelines provided by the Secretary General, referencing all the elements indicated in the guidelines.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Benin's VNR report.

5.4. Recommendations

- **Follow, as much as possible, the guidelines as proposed by the Secretary-General to ensure that all elements of SDG implementation are captured and facilitate comparison of shared challenges, good practices and lessons learned.**
- **Continue to include the methodology for the VNR, with details that articulate how the drafting process occurred, timing, how stakeholders were engaged, and lessons learned. This will provide greater clarity on what was done, and how other member states can draw from the experience of different countries.**
- **Make use of the guidance provided by the Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews to better assess and report on integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in VNR reports.**
- **Report on the means of implementation as instructed in the guidelines, including domestic finance, resource allocation, budgeting, international public finance, trade, capacity development, technology and partnerships.**
- **Provide a detailed assessment of the forward-looking agenda, outlining where the country needs to go and the steps to get there, based on gaps and lessons learned to date. This should include next steps in terms of follow-up and review with concrete commitments to be fulfilled by states, strengthening the VNR process and clarifying what stakeholders can expect in the years following VNR reporting at HLPF.**
- **Report on data availability, including disaggregated data, with reference to global and national level indicators, in the statistical annex. This will provide a better picture of countries' overall capacity to monitor SDG implementation.**
- **For 2021 reporting, take all guidelines updates into consideration, including instructions focused on second or third time VNR presentations, and on building back together from COVID-19.**

42. Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in 2020 VNR reports: 22 countries fully met the guidelines, 15 only partially. Leaving no one behind: 25 countries fully met the guidelines, 16 only partially. Structural issues: 24 countries fully met the guidelines, 17 only partially. Means of implementation: 26 countries met the guidelines in full, 19 only partially.

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6. CONCLUSION

As the global community moves forward with accelerating efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda in the Decade of Delivery and Action, VNRs continue to offer an opportunity to strengthen national level accountability and demonstrate accountability for 2030 Agenda implementation on the global stage. VNRs are much more than just reports. Countries continue to value the VNR process and use it as more than just a means to an end, recognizing the value of VNRs in generating national ownership and momentum to realize sustainable development. In 2020, countries were faced with the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, which profoundly impacted the world's population's health, countries' economy, and their shared progress towards sustainable development. Apart from providing more detailed information on their VNR processes – with some including specific sections outlining what had been learned from the VNR process – countries also included information on the impacts of the pandemic on 2030 Agenda implementation and the efforts being carried out to address such impacts. From 2020 onwards, countries still need to accelerate action, but now with the additional challenge of just recovery.

As countries look to reporting in 2021, this report has identified good and best practice in 2030 Agenda implementation. The report highlights areas of emerging standard practice and progress, including with respect to more inclusion of non-state actors in lead councils or committees responsible for 2030 Agenda implementation, and more integration of the SDGs into national policies. Reporting on partnerships, including civil society, and recognizing the guiding principles of the 2030 Agenda appeared as positive traits in 2020 VNR reports. Nevertheless, the review raises questions on the extent to which member states are analyzing domestic and foreign policies to realize the SDGs globally, flagged more limited reporting on consultations to define national priorities, and highlighted limitations in reporting on follow-up and review processes at the national level, and on closing civic space.

Furthermore, this report has outlined lessons from the 2020 VNR process and, in addition to the reports covering 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, civil society has developed

detailed feedback and recommendations based on extensive engagement. As the review moves forward, it should include forums for meaningful participation by civil society and other stakeholders. This includes setting minimum standards for their institutionalized participation and efforts to strengthen major groups and other stakeholder engagement mechanisms.

Revisions to the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines for reporting in 2021 have sought to further strengthen the value of VNR processes and reporting, making clearer references to how to prepare subsequent VNRs for second and third-time reporters, promoting a cycle report approach. The HLPF can be further strengthened by continuing to examine how VNR reporting can be improved, including by following the recommendations outlined in this report, given that the VNRs serve as an essential mechanism for the 2030 Agenda implementation accountability and are the cornerstone for SDGs follow-up and review at the regional and global levels. Presentations and discussions at the HLPF require more time, space, and opportunities for civil society to meaningfully participate and engage with governments on the content of VNR presentations. Considering the existing global framework, this year revisions to the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines also call to reporting states to include information on how governments are linking COVID-19 recovery plans with the 2030 Agenda implementation processes. The guidelines also beckon for a more assertive human-rights based approach in the 2030 Agenda national implementation analysis.

Opportunities for exchanging of views on independent assessments, including reports from civil society and expert analysis, would enable member states to benefit from a wider pool of knowledge. Action in these areas is essential if the original vision of the positive and constructive follow-up and review mechanisms outlined in the 2030 Agenda is to become a reality. In addition to strengthening the quality of discussions at the HLPF, regional forums should also be supported as critical opportunities for peer-to-peer learning among member states, focusing on trends and challenges in implementation.

This review highlights bright spots and worrisome trends in 2030 Agenda implementation, recognizing the critical need to accelerate action to leave no one behind. The good and best practices and recommendations presented throughout this report are meant to help guide countries and other stakeholders in their efforts at national and global levels. As countries move into the Decade of Action and Delivery and on the path to just, equitable and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, these recommendations can serve as the basis for accelerating action for a sustainable future.

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7. CONSOLIDATED BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHTS

7.1. **GOVERNANCE,** INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND ENGAGEMENT

7.1.1. Leadership, governance and institutional arrangements

- Establish technical and/or substantive working groups or other specialized bodies for 2030 Agenda implementation. This shares responsibilities and enhances support towards implementation.
- Formally include non-state actors in governance arrangements. This contributes to inclusivity, and a whole-of-society approach in 2030 Agenda implementation and the promotion of partnership.
- Engage with peers to promote learning, establish collaborative initiatives to realize the 2030 Agenda and review progress on implementation.

7.1.2. Stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation

- Establish an enabling environment through the creation of appropriate legal, regulatory and policy frameworks that support non-state actors to contribute to sustainable development and set out how multi-stakeholder engagement and partnership will occur.
- Establish and report on formal mechanisms to ensure regular, inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement on 2030 Agenda implementation in line with good practice for ensuring effective and inclusive engagement.
- Support capacity development of civil society, including grassroots organizations representing marginalized communities, to participate in opportunities for stakeholder engagement and promote accountability for 2030 Agenda implementation.

- Ensure inclusivity and participation in the nationalization of the SDGs, including the creation of national targets and indicators, in line with the principles of the 2030 Agenda.
- Solicit verbal and written inputs from all stakeholders in the preparation of VNR reports and provide stakeholders with an opportunity to review and comment on the first draft through public consultation.
- Include non-state actors in institutional mechanisms responsible for the VNR and drafting the VNR report, and advocate for civil society reports to be given recognition and status in the United Nations' High-level Political Forum (HLPF) process.

7.2. **POLICIES** FOR 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION

7.2.1. Baseline or gap analysis

- Assess policies, data availability and baselines to inform prioritization and nationalization of the 2030 Agenda and ensure an evidence-based approach to implementation. When submitting a subsequent VNR report, indicate if and how relevant assessments have been updated.

7.2.2. Incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks

- Integrate Agenda 2030 priorities into national policies and frameworks and develop a roadmap to accelerate implementation.
- Explicitly link the implementation of each SDG to relevant national and international human rights frameworks. Establish policies and institutions to ensure a human rights-based approach to sustainable development in 2030 Agenda implementation.

7.2.3. Nationalizing the 2030 Agenda

- Include all dimensions of sustainable development in the selection of national priorities.

7.2.4. Integration and policy coherence

- Provide a detailed assessment of all 17 SDGs, with appropriate linkages to all dimensions of sustainable development and reference to domestic and global efforts to realize the 2030 Agenda.
- Link the 2030 Agenda to relevant international agreements that support sustainable development to ensure coherency and synergies in implementation.
- Include information on global contributions to the SDGs alongside assessments of progress at national and subnational levels, recognizing the impacts of domestic and foreign policies.

7.3. **IMPLEMENTING** THE 2030 AGENDA

7.3.1. Leaving no one behind

- Prepare a dedicated chapter on leaving no one behind in VNR reports and integrate information on efforts to leave no one behind in the goal-by-goal analysis.

7.3.2. Awareness-raising

- Develop a communication and engagement strategy to continue to raise awareness of and ownership over the 2030 Agenda with a wide range of stakeholders over the course of SDG implementation.

7.3.3. Partnerships to realize the SDGs

- Submit a *national* report for the VNR that systematically outlines the contributions made by a wide range of stakeholders, not just the national government.

7.3.4. Means of implementation

- Cost out SDG implementation and identify sources of finance. Assess budget allocations for SDG implementation at national and subnational levels and incorporate and clearly denote activities aimed at realizing the SDGs in budgets.

- Articulate specific capacity constraints to 2030 Agenda implementation and with respect to realizing specific SDGs in VNR reports. Indicate the type of support needed to address capacity constraints.
- Report on best practice, lessons learned to accelerate 2030 Agenda implementation, challenges and areas countries would like to learn from peers.
- Articulate clear and detailed challenges in 2030 Agenda implementation to inform how the country can best be supported by domestic and international communities.

7.3.5. Measurement and reporting

- Provide an account of national level reporting and accountability processes for 2030 Agenda implementation in VNR reports.
- Provide an account of progress made between VNR reports with reference to trends for SDG targets and changes to policies, institutions and partnerships for 2030 Agenda implementation.
- Link accountability for progress on 2030 Agenda implementation to regular, planned parliamentary reviews.

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8. CONSOLIDATED RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1. **GOVERNANCE,** INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND ENGAGEMENT

8.1.1. Leadership, governance and institutional arrangements

- Clearly establish leadership and governance structures to support 2030 Agenda implementation and lay out lines of accountability between various national stakeholders.
- Formalize non-state actor engagement in governance structures to realize the 2030 Agenda. This includes lead councils or committees and technical working groups.
- Identify opportunities to realize the 2030 Agenda domestically and globally through engaging more formally in regional level initiatives and with like-minded countries. Such engagement offers opportunities to share best practice with and learn lessons from peers.
- Support a positive public narrative around civil society and its participation in policy-making and development processes.

8.1.2. Stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation

- Follow good practice in multi-stakeholder engagement by ensuring that approaches are timely, open and inclusive, transparent, informed and iterative.
- Support an enabling environment for multi-stakeholder engagement through the legislation, regulation and the creation of policies that set out how engagement will occur.
- Create and report on formal mechanisms to ensure regular and inclusive stakeholder engagement.
- Engage diverse stakeholders in the selection of national priorities and partner with non-state actors to reach the furthest behind.
- Develop a range of opportunities for multi-stakeholder engagement in VNRs including through

online and in-person public consultation, soliciting inputs to and feedback on draft reports, and inclusion of non-state actors as partners in carrying out the review and drafting the VNR report.
- Ensure that stakeholders continue to be engaged even in light of challenging situations (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic) by promoting resilience and finding alternative ways through which to secure participation.

8.2. **POLICIES** FOR 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION

8.2.1. Baseline or gap analysis

- Conduct an assessment that identifies gaps in existing policies and programs, examines data availability, and sets out baselines from which to measure progress and assess where additional efforts are needed.
- Articulate how the assessment was conducted and provide a summary of the gaps identified for each goal.
- For countries presenting a subsequent VNR report to the HLPF, identify where progress has been made since initial policy and data assessments and provide information on changes between reporting years at national and subnational levels and for the furthest behind.

8.2.2. Incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks

- Fully integrate the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national and subnational plans and strategies based on an evaluation of existing policies, approaches and progress to identify gaps, adapt policies and target areas where further progress is needed especially for the furthest behind groups.
- Operationalize the principles of the 2030 Agenda in approaches to implementation recognizing the universal, human rights-based and interlinked nature of the agenda. VNR reports should demonstrate how approaches to sustainable development are transformative based on the principles of the 2030 Agenda and not just the SDGs.
- Ground plans and strategies in human rights, including by linking activities to international and national human rights commitments and establishing appropriate institutions and mechanisms to support a human rights-based approach to sustainable development.
- Undertake actions with reference to and respect for planetary boundaries and responsibilities towards future generations, including avenues for intergenerational partnerships.

8.2.3. Nationalizing the 2030 Agenda

- Identify national sustainable development priorities that address all dimensions of sustainable development, recognizing the interlinkages between society, the economy, the environment and governance.
- Develop national targets and indicators through an inclusive and participatory process to complement global targets and indicators.
- In order to generate national ownership of the VNR process, present VNR reports for debate at the national level (e.g. in national parliaments and official multi-stakeholder sustainable development councils/commissions) before presenting at the international level (e.g. United Nations' High-level Political Forum).

8.2.4. Integration and policy coherence

- Assess all 17 goals in VNR reports, respecting the indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.
- Ensure all dimensions of sustainable development are addressed in SDG implementation and VNR reporting. Linkages and synergies between the different dimensions of sustainable development should be clearly stated in policies, supported through implementation and included in reporting - all to help ensure clear integration.
- Link implementation of the 2030 Agenda to relevant international agreements that support 2030 Agenda implementation, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and global agreements on aid and international development effectiveness, including in VNR reporting.
- Given the importance of the COVID-19 pandemic to the global context, future VNRs should include reference to international and global commitments on COVID-19.

- Provide an assessment of domestic and global dimensions of sustainable development in the goal-by-goal analysis, demonstrating contributions to realizing the SDGs at home and abroad, and supporting policy coherence for sustainable development.

8.3. **IMPLEMENTING** THE 2030 AGENDA

8.3.1. Leaving no one behind

- Ensure policies and programs are informed by and integrate efforts to leave no one behind, including by prioritizing those most in need to consistently reach marginalized communities.
- Include a specific chapter on leaving no one behind in VNR reporting and demonstrate how the principle of leaving no one behind is being translated into action in an overarching way.
- Provide information on the status of data collection or plans to improve data availability to inform efforts to leave no one behind. This includes information on gender disaggregated data. Ensuring no one is left behind means knowing who is being left behind, by how much, and in what areas.
- Highlight existing and planned efforts to leave no one behind, including how policies and program are being adapted, and in particular, new approaches to reach the people who are furthest behind first.
- Promote gender equality through international good practice such as gender budgeting, gender-based analysis and mainstreaming into policies and plans, and appropriate legal, policy and institutional frameworks.
- Report on the outcomes of efforts to leave no one behind, including by drawing on civil society expertise and citizen-generated data. Clearly present links between specific policies and actions with results, presenting progress for specific marginalized groups.
- Target domestic inequality in 2030 Agenda implementation, including in support of SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, and outline the current status of domestic inequality and how it is being addressed in VNR reports.
- Include major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts being made to ensure no one is left behind, outlining which groups are being covered and detailing what approaches are being taken.

8.3.2. Awareness-raising

- Develop a communication strategy to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda on an ongoing basis.
- Continue to promote innovative ways to raise awareness of the SDGs among the general public, including in partnership with civil society and other non-state actors.

8.3.3. Localization

- Include localization as part of 2030 Agenda implementation strategies, strengthen coordination with local governments and local institutional structures, capacities and resources.
- Support the translation of the SDGs into local plans, programs and monitoring efforts and ensure local priorities inform national plans.

8.3.4. Partnerships to realize the SDGs

- Support civil society to engage in 2030 Agenda implementation by creating a more enabling environment, including through institutionalized dialogue and consultation, inclusion in formal governance arrangements, finance, and capacity development.
- Integrate the 2030 Agenda into parliamentary work, recognizing the critical role parliamentarians play as citizens' representatives and in ensuring national level accountability for progress.
- Support and develop partnerships with a variety of non-state actors, including academia, the private sector, children and youth, volunteers, trade unions, and the media.
- Where relevant, clearly stipulate and provide details on priority areas for support from the international community, laying out the role development partners can best play to support the acceleration of 2030 Agenda implementation.
- Outline how multiple stakeholders can be involved to address crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

8.3.5. Means of implementation

- Clearly include best practices, lessons learned in

accelerating implementation, challenges going forward and where opportunities exist to learn from peers in VNR reports.

- Examine national and subnational budgets as an essential part of the implementation process and start integrating the SDGs into them to ensure that resources are allocated for implementation. In doing so, build on the good practice in costing out SDG implementation and identify sources of finance to implement the 2030 Agenda at country level.
- Report on all means of implementation, including clearly specifying capacity constraints. Such information is critical for assessing gaps, identifying where greater domestic and international efforts are needed and informing development cooperation frameworks.
- Bolster efforts to support development partners' capacity development priorities, including strengthening statistical systems and the capacities of local stakeholders to implement the 2030 Agenda.
- Scale up efforts to address systemic issues that impact SDG implementation, in particular international peace and security, illicit and other illegal activities, effects of climate change, and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In view of COVID-19, report on how it affected the means of implementation of the SDGs, highlighting actions taken to address the crisis and reduce its impact.

8.3.6. Measurement and reporting

- Report on data availability, including disaggregated data, and country efforts to improve data availability – given the importance of data for SDG monitoring and accountability, as well as leaving no one behind.
- Link reviews of progress for 2030 Agenda implementation to parliamentary oversight mechanisms in order to ensure accountability at the national level. Supreme auditing institutions can be key players in national follow-up and review processes.
- Spell out plans to review progress at the national level and be accountable to citizens for progress on the 2030 Agenda beyond reporting to the HLPF. This should include consulting with non-state actors and articulating plans for future HLPF reporting. These elements are important for ensuring accountability for progress on the 2030 Agenda, identifying gaps in implementation, allowing for course correction and ensuring transparency in reporting processes.
- Include an assessment of progress on 2030 Agenda implementation in VNR reports to the HLPF, particularly with reference to the status of implementation in previously submitted VNR reports.

8.4. REPORTING TO THE HLPF

- Follow, as much as possible, the guidelines as proposed by the Secretary-General to ensure that all elements of SDG implementation are captured and facilitate comparison of shared challenges, good practices and lessons learned.
- Continue to include the methodology for the VNR, with details that articulate how the drafting process occurred, timing, how stakeholders were engaged, and lessons learned. This will provide greater clarity on what was done, and how other member states can draw from the experience of different countries.
- Make use of the guidance provided by the Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews to better assess and report on integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in VNR reports.
- Report on the means of implementation as instructed in the guidelines, including domestic finance, resource allocation, budgeting, international public finance, trade, capacity development, technology and partnerships.
- Provide a detailed assessment of the forward-looking agenda, outlining where the country needs to go and the steps to get there, based on gaps and lessons learned to date. This should include next steps in terms of follow-up and review with concrete commitments to be fulfilled by states, strengthening the VNR process and clarifying what stakeholders can expect in the years following VNR reporting at HLPF.
- Report on data availability, including disaggregated data, with reference to global and national level indicators, in the statistical annex. This will provide a better picture of countries' overall capacity to monitor SDG implementation.
- For 2021 reporting, take all guidelines updates into consideration, including instructions focused on second or third time VNR presentations, and on building back together from COVID-19.