

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 2021



THE **SIXTH EDITION** IN AN ANNUAL SERIES COMMISSIONED BY CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS



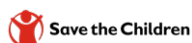
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This report was prepared by Ana de Oliveira, Research and Knowledge Management Officer at Cooperation Canada. It contains analyses from Nicolas Sautejeau (Policy and Advocacy Officer, Action for Sustainable Development), who reviewed 17 VNR-related civil society reports. The report also includes inputs from Bihter Moschini (Senior Research and Program Officer, Arab NGO Network for Development) and Marie José Saade (Program and Research Officer, Arab NGO Network for Development), who reviewed the VNR reports for the Middle East and North Africa region. Moreover, the report contains inputs from Javier Surasky (Area Coordinator, Governance for Development Research, Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional, CEPEI) who reviewed the VNR reports for Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Spain's VNR report. A team of researchers at the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) was responsible for reviewing the French VNR reports and 11 VNR reports in English. The team included Eleonora Bonaccorsi (Junior Project Officer, Geneva 2030 Ecosystem) and Elena Kosolapova (SDG Knowledge Hub Content Editor for Climate Change Policy, Independent Contractor). The report also counted with the support of Carmen Rochette and Sarthak Shivam Sharma, research and member engagement interns at Cooperation Canada. This report is the sixth of its kind, following on earlier reports produced by Cooperation Canada for 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020, as well as a 2016 report produced by Bond, entitled Progressing national SDGs implementation: experiences and recommendations from 2016.



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HIGHLIGHTS

In 2021, the fifteen-year agenda for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership entered its sixth year. While the world continues to grapple with the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is hoped that heads of state and government will meet the commitments to a Decade of Action and Delivery to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while ensuring that no one is left behind. During the United Nations' 76th session of the General Assembly in September 2021, the Secretary General presented the Our Common Agenda report as a vision on the future of global cooperation and a call towards reinvigorating multilateralism in an inclusive, networked, and effective way. In the context of continuing to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need for governments to accelerate actions and promote transformative change to achieve a just recovery. **To this end, the transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda and the global roadmap provided by the SDGs remain critical to achieving equality and sustainability in the process of building forward better.**

For the past six 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.

This report, the sixth edition of *Progressing National SDGs Implementation*, aims to provide useful insights and recommendations to inform these discussions and help guide improved implementation and reporting. The review of the 42 VNR reports submitted to the HLPF in 2021, as well as the analysis of 17 VNR-related civil society reports, show both positive and concerning trends. **The report covers all aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation through an examination of governance arrangements, institutional mechanisms and stakeholder engagement, policies, means of implementation, and reporting. Key findings, good practice case studies, emerging best practices and recommendations are presented throughout this edition.**

Here we highlight the key messages arising from the analysis of 2021 VNR reports. The messages have been numbered for ease of reference, rather than in order of priority, and are further detailed below.

KEY MESSAGES

1. In terms of a whole-of-society approach, fewer countries reported on the inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements for implementation than in previous years. Although more countries referred to formal processes for stakeholder engagement, there have been backslides in reporting on non-state actors' engagement in the VNR process, consultations to define national priorities, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement.
2. The VNR reports continue to be silent on shrinking civic space globally and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists. Conversely, several civil society reports highlight how this has been an issue.
3. Fewer countries reported conducting baseline and gap assessments, selecting national priorities, integrating the SDGs into national policies, and selecting national targets and indicators to inform SDGs implementation. Repeat reporters should still provide information on these matters and comply with the Secretary General's voluntary common reporting guidelines.
4. There have been improvements in 2021 VNR reports' attention to the transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda (i.e. human rights, universality, leaving no one behind, planetary boundaries, inter-generational responsibility). However, backslides were observed in relation to SDGs reporting.
5. Reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda and relevant international agreements showed mixed results, with most countries pointing to climate-related commitments but having a limited focus on agreements for delivery of effective international assistance. More VNR reports revealed an analysis of both domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally, even if fewer countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation.
6. There has been a positive trend in reporting on leaving no one behind, with increases around the identification of left-behind groups, the incorporation of the LNOB principle in national policies and plans, and the impacts of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable. However, challenges remain in terms of data availability, and level of detail and quality of information provided around LNOB.
7. More countries reported on non-state actors' contributions towards 2030 Agenda implementation, with a continuous positive trend in terms of recognizing civil society's role.
8. Countries continue to consistently provide information on most aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation. However, backslides have been observed on awareness-raising activities and budgeting.
9. A downward trend is emerging in terms of countries providing information on data availability, and fewer countries reported on the use of unofficial data to complement information for VNR reports than in previous years. Similarly, fewer countries reported on national, regional, and global follow-up and review processes.
10. There have been declines in terms of reporting on most components of the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines compared with previous years. However, on the areas for which countries did report, most included all the information required.

1. **In terms of a whole-of-society approach, fewer countries reported on the inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements for implementation than in previous years. Although more countries referred to formal processes for stakeholder engagement, there have been backslides in reporting on non-state actors' engagement in the VNR process, consultations to define national priorities, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement.**

The 2021 VNR reports reversed the upward trend with regards to the formal inclusion of non-state actors in **governance arrangements**. While 70% of countries noted such inclusion in both 2019 and 2020, that percentage dropped to 64% in 2021. Even though some countries are repeat reporters, they should still be providing this information as it continues to be in the Secretary General's voluntary common reporting guidelines. The mention of engagement through whether lead councils/committees or technical working groups has equally dropped, which is a negative shift in relation to opportunities for non-state actors to input around strategic direction and coordination. On the other hand, reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement outside governance arrangements increased, with 67% of the countries (versus 47% in 2020) **reporting on formal processes for stakeholder engagement**, such as multi-stakeholder forums, youth councils or annual events. However, information presented in VNR reports does not assess the quality of formal processes for multi-stakeholder engagement. **Countries should develop indicators to measure the extent of non-state stakeholder engagement at the national level.**

In terms of **engagement in the VNR process**, fewer countries (83%) that presented a full VNR report in 2021 referred to some sort of non-state actor engagement to prepare the VNR report, down from 98% in 2020. The practice of directly including non-state actors in drafting VNR reports or providing written inputs has not been frequent in 2021 reporters, and even information on consultations around the VNR preparation dropped to 33% of the countries in 2021, against

57% in 2020. It is understandable that the global COVID-19 pandemic might have impacted engagement, but VNR reports do not necessarily include this explanation. Other backslides were observed around **reporting on consultations to define national priorities** (down from 49% of the countries reporting in 2020 to 31% in 2021), and the **effects of the COVID-19 pandemic** on stakeholder engagement, with 43% of countries providing this information in 2021, versus 53% in 2020.

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2. **The VNR reports continue to be silent on shrinking civic space globally and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists. Conversely, several civil society reports highlight how this has been an issue.**

Only 1 out of the 42 VNR reports presented in 2021 recognized the process of shrinking civic space and its consequences, including barriers to free speech and democratic participation, particularly to women and girls. Conversely, several shadow, spotlight and/or parallel reports prepared by civil society organizations (CSOs) communicate how the closure of civic space is being carried out in their countries, including information on government actions that hinder freedom of expression, assembly, association, and access to information. **The fact that so much information around this topic is being shared through civil society reports but not mentioned by VNR reports is extremely worrisome. It is recommendable that reports prepared by civil society are acknowledged and given status in the HLPF review process.**

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3. **Fewer countries reported conducting baseline and gap assessments, selecting national priorities, integrating the SDGs into national policies, and selecting national targets and indicators to inform SDGs implementation. Repeat reporters should still provide information on these matters and comply with the Secretary General's voluntary common reporting guidelines.**

Another decline was observed in 2021 regarding the percentage of countries (52%) that indicated their approach to 2030 Agenda implementation had been informed by a **baseline or gap assessment** around policies, data, or both. Although some countries might have presented this information in previous VNR reports, they should refer to previously done assessments for comparison purposes and continuous progress tracking. Almost 91% of the countries that reported in 2021 noted the selection of **national priorities**, which represents a decrease in comparison to 2020 (with almost 96% of the countries), though it is still a high percentage. As in two previous years, priorities related to social outcomes and economy were most commonly cited, followed by the environment. Culture continues to be the least mentioned national priority. Similarly, a smaller percentage of countries (93%) reported on integrating the SDGs into their **policies** in 2021, although the trend continues to be positive. Another decrease happened in relation to reporting on the selection of **national targets and indicators**, with 62% of countries providing this information in 2021 (versus 77% in 2020). Repeat reporters should still provide information on these matters and comply with the Secretary General's voluntary common reporting guidelines.

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4. **There have been improvements in 2021 VNR reports' attention to the transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda (i.e. human rights, universality, leaving no one behind, planetary boundaries, inter-generational responsibility). However, backslides were observed in relation to SDGs reporting.**

As in previous years, 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** was the main focus of 2021 VNR reports, while there has also been an increase in the number of countries pointing to **human rights-based approaches, inter-generational responsibility, and planetary boundaries**. However, mentions to

the principle of the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda experienced some backsliding.

There have been decreases in **reporting on all SDGs and on integrated approaches to implementation of the SDGs**. In 2021, only 50% of VNR reports assessed the full set of SDGs, a decrease in relation to 2020, when this figure had been 70%. Reference to appropriate **linkages between the goals decreased**, with 40% of the 2021 reporting countries mentioning such linkages, versus 51% in 2020. The percentage of countries giving equal attention to economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in their VNR reports remained basically the same (50% in 2021, versus 49% in 2020). Overall, there has been a worrisome trend in relation to SDGs reporting.

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5. **Reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda and relevant international agreements showed mixed results, with most countries pointing to climate-related commitments but having a limited focus on agreements for delivery of effective international assistance. More VNR reports revealed an analysis of both domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally, even if fewer countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation.**

Reporting on linkages with relevant **international agreements** point to the recognition of synergies between the 2030 Agenda and other relevant commitments to promote sustainable development. As it had been the case in previous years, countries are most likely to link the 2030 Agenda to the Paris Agreement on climate change, however very few seem to make the connection between realizing the SDGs and delivering effective international assistance. On the other hand, a higher proportion of countries referred to COVID-19-related actions at the international level. In 2021, 26% of the reporting countries made reference to global commitments regarding the pandemic (e.g. ACT Accelerator, CEPI, COVAX, GAVI).

More VNR reports revealed an analysis of both **domestic and foreign policies** on the realization of the SDGs globally in 2021, which is a positive sign. However, fewer countries focused on **policy coherence for sustainable development** as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation in 2021 (50% of the countries, versus 60% in 2020).

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6. **There has been a positive trend in reporting on leaving no one behind, with increases around the identification of left-behind groups, the incorporation of the LNOB principle in national policies and plans, and the impacts of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable. However, challenges remain in terms of data availability, and level of detail and quality of information provided around LNOB.**

Reporting on **leaving no one behind (LNOB)** continues to show a steady upward trend, although the level of detail and quality of information provided are unbalanced. All the countries reporting in 2021 included the principle of leaving no one behind in their VNR reports, but despite this positive trend, findings suggest this has been used as a checkbox activity for some countries, in which cases information provided is somewhat insufficient and/or divergent in view of CSO reports. The quality of information provided, including data availability and the existence of dedicated programs, are essential for (truly) leaving no one behind. In comparison to previous years, fewer countries noted that efforts for LNOB being informed by existing **data**, which suggests that various countries continue to face the challenge of having quality data to LNOB.

All countries reporting in 2021 with full VNR reports (41 countries) identified **groups** that are being **left behind** or at risk of being left behind. These include children and youth (98%), persons with disabilities (95%), women and/or girls (95%), and the elderly (76%). Moreover, more countries reported incorporating the LNOB principle in the creation of **national sustainable development policies and plans**. In 2021, 81%

of the countries highlighted embedding LNOB or efforts to address inequality and social exclusion as part of overarching development plans. In terms of **COVID-19**, a higher percentage of countries (86%) provided information on the specific impacts of the pandemic from an LNOB perspective.

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7. **More countries reported on non-state actors' contributions towards 2030 Agenda implementation, with a continuous positive trend in terms of recognizing civil society's role.**

In 2021, most countries (93%) reported on **contributions by non-state actors**, an increase over 2020 (89% of countries). A positive trend in reporting was also observed regarding partnerships around the **private sector** (86%, versus 75% in 2020 and 53% in 2019) and **academia** (67%, versus 55% in 2020 and 28% in 2019). There has been a slight decrease in reporting on the role of **parliamentarians** as implementation partners (48%, versus 53% in 2020), and on the participation of **children and youth** in SDGs implementation (40%, versus 45% in 2020). There continues to be a positive trend in terms of countries recognizing the contributions by **civil society** in their VNR reports. In 2021, 86% of countries provided this information (versus 79% in 2020, 68% in 2019, 65% in 2018, and 56% in 2017). Countries continue to recognize a wide range of roles played by civil society, although there has been a decrease in reporting on some types of contributions, such as awareness-raising activities, forming coalitions, and providing guidance and/or preparing tools on 2030 Agenda implementation.

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8. **Countries continue to consistently provide information on most aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation. However, backslides have been observed on awareness-raising activities and budgeting.**

VNR reports for 2021 continued the previous years' upward trend around reporting on several aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation. For example, reporting on the **means of implementation improved** for information on challenges (98% of the countries), international public finance (95%), impacts of COVID-19 (91%), technology (90%), systemic issues (88%), capacity development (86%), trade (74%), best practices (69%), lessons learned (62%), and learning from peers (38%). Another increase was observed in reporting on **partnerships** to realize the SDGs, with 93% of the countries recognizing the role of non-state actors and including their contributions towards implementation. Reporting on **efforts at the local level** (or **localization**) shows a steady result (83%), but more countries mentioned Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), instruments that pave the way for sub-national accountability structures. Conversely, reporting on other aspects of implementation experienced **backslides**, such as the case of **awareness-raising activities, and budgeting for 2030 Agenda implementation**, both critical aspects of ongoing implementation.

9. A downward trend is emerging in terms of countries providing information on data availability, and fewer countries reported on the use of unofficial data to complement information for VNR reports than in previous years. Similarly, fewer countries reported on national, regional, and global follow-up and review processes.

A downward trend is emerging in terms of countries providing information on **data availability** (36% of countries in 2021, versus 45% in 2020 and 76% in 2019). While it is welcome that more countries reported on efforts to improve data availability (83%, versus 64% in 2020), it is nevertheless a particularly worrying sign as countries near the half-way point in SDGs implementation. **Efforts must be guided by a clear understanding of progress, bottlenecks, and evidence of what works.** Slightly fewer countries reported using **unofficial data** to build their VNR reports (40% of countries in

2021, versus 43% in 2020). While most countries (85%) reported on **national level follow-up and review processes** in 2019, reporting in 2021 shows that only two-thirds of countries (62%) provided this information, similar to 2020 (63% of countries). On the other hand, more countries presented information on who is responsible for preparing reporting (21% of countries, versus 2% in 2020) and to whom reporting is addressed (17% of countries, versus 2% in 2020), which is a positive trend in terms of transparency and accountability. While fewer countries noted the role of parliamentarians as partners in realizing the 2030 Agenda, more countries did refer to the **part played by parliament in national reporting processes** than in previous years (26% of countries in 2021, versus 11% in both 2020 and 2019, and 4% in 2018). This is a positive trend in terms of how countries are ensuring accountability through elected officials.

10. There have been declines in terms of reporting on most components of the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines compared with previous years. However, on the areas for which countries did report, most included all the information required.

In comparison with the previous year, 2021 VNR reports showed **less reporting** on most components of the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines. In such cases, five components experienced the lowest level of inclusion in the last four years, namely introduction, ensuring ownership of the SDGs, incorporation of the 2030 Agenda in national frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and conclusion and next steps. It is unclear if some of these pieces were missed or excluded due to repeat reporting, but despite information included in previous VNR reports, it remains critical that countries provide updates on all elements of the guidelines.

On the other hand, on the areas for which countries did report, most included all the information required, which is a positive result

with regards to **compliance with guidelines' requirements**. Nevertheless, in more than one third of the cases (6 out of 15 components) the proportions show that countries are farther from fully meeting the reporting guidelines, meaning that some countries still did not sufficiently focus on or did not present enough detailed information. **Apart from member states, other stakeholders should be aware of the Secretary General's guidelines and advocate for its adherence in the preparation of VNR reports.**

opportunity to further strengthen reporting – while making use of comparative analysis with data from previous VNR reports – so that SDGs implementation can continue to progress.

While the HLPF remains the crucial space for VNR presentations and an exchange of views, future HLPF meetings should provide additional opportunities for non-state actors' representation and the inclusion of analysis and reports produced by civil society organizations and experts. In doing so, there can be better linkages between processes of monitoring and accountability around the 2030 Agenda at the local, national, regional, and global levels.

Conclusion

In the process of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, government and stakeholders from the global community should redouble their efforts to address gaps and work towards achieving the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. While an increasing number of countries return to the HLPF to present their second, third, and even fourth VNR reports in 2022, there is

It is our hope that the eight years left until 2030 can comprise more meaningful engagement between different stakeholders leading to greater achievement of our collective efforts towards a sustainable future for our communities and our planet. To feed into this process, this report, and its previous editions, provides in-depth data analysis and recommendations for each element of 2030 Agenda implementation, detailed throughout.



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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 met to review progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While member states have committed to build an inclusive and effective path to achieve the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development, the 2021 HLPF served as an important moment to take stock on the impacts of the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic 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 (2016-2021), there have been 247 VNR presentations, with 47 countries having presented two times,² and 12 countries having presented three times.³ For 2022, 45 countries are planned to present their VNR reports at the HLPF, among which only 12 will be presenting a VNR report for the first time.⁴

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. Second time reporters between 2016 and 2021: Afghanistan, Argentina, Armenia, Bahamas, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, Chile, China, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Honduras, India, Iraq, Japan, Kenya, Laos, Madagascar, Malaysia, Morocco, Namibia, Nepal, Nigeria, Norway, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Samoa, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.
3. Third time reporters between 2016 and 2021: Azerbaijan, Benin, Colombia, Egypt, Guatemala, Indonesia, Mexico, Niger, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Uruguay.
4. First time reporters planned to present a VNR report in 2022: Djibouti, Dominica, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Sao Tome and Principe, Somalia, Suriname, and Tuvalu.

Though not presented as a formal component of the HLPF, civil society organizations (CSOs) and coalitions from around the world also regularly produce their own independent reviews and analysis on their respective governments' implementation of the 2030 Agenda, complementing official processes.⁵ The present report contains analyses of 17 VNR-related civil society reports. When read in parallel with VNR reports, these "shadow" and "spotlight" reports provide additional – and sometimes contradictory – information in relation to country-level implementation. In addition, some topics raised in the civil society reports are not usually covered by VNR reports, such as the matter of shrinking civic space, challenges faced by civil society, different perspectives on government policy and recommendations for improvement, and detailed examples of civil society actions towards 2030 Agenda implementation. Therefore, the perspectives and information brought forth by non-state stakeholders (e.g. civil society, private sector, academia, youth) can provide a broad complementary view on the extent to which (and how effectively) national SDGs implementation is being carried out.

This publication is the sixth 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.⁶

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,⁷ 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 sixth edition includes an assessment of all 42 VNR reports submitted to the HLPF in 2021. Out of the 42, only one country (**Bahamas**) did not submit a full VNR report.⁸ An overview of reporting countries by region and income level is available in Annex 1. As it can be seen below, of the 42 countries that submitted a VNR report in 2021, 24 presented for the second time, and 10 presented their third VNR report.

BOX 1. COUNTRIES REPORTING TO THE HLPF IN 2021

Countries reporting for the 1st time

Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, North Korea, Marshall Islands, Nicaragua, and San Marino.

Countries reporting for the 2nd time (*)

Afghanistan (2017), Bahamas (2018), Bhutan (2018), Cabo Verde (2018), Chad (2019), China (2016), Cyprus (2017), Czech Republic (2017), Denmark (2017), Dominican Republic (2018), Germany (2016), Iraq (2019), Japan (2019), Laos (2018), Madagascar (2016), Malaysia (2017), Namibia (2018), Norway (2016), Paraguay (2018), Spain (2018), Sweden (2017), Thailand (2017), Tunisia (2019), and Zimbabwe (2017).

Countries reporting for the 3rd time (*)

Azerbaijan (2017, 2019), Colombia (2016, 2018), Egypt (2016, 2018), Guatemala (2017, 2019), Indonesia (2017, 2019), Mexico (2016, 2018), Niger (2018, 2020), Qatar (2017, 2018), Sierra Leone (2016, 2019), and Uruguay (2017, 2018).

(*) Numbers in parenthesis refer to first and second reporting years.

5. As one example in this regard, Cf. CEPEI. (2021). Comparative analysis of the Voluntary National Reviews presented by Latin America and the Caribbean countries to the HLPF 2021. Bogota: CEPEI.
6. Details on the methodology, including the analytical framework, used for the assessment of all the VNR reports can be found in Annex 2.
7. For 2021 specifically, Cf. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). (2021). 2021 Voluntary National Reviews Synthesis Report.
8. Although this country did not submit a full VNR report, it has been included in the data presented in this report.

The present 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 current edition also include a comparison with the key trends identified in previous reports, where appropriate.⁹ Similar to the [fifth edition](#), published in early 2021, the sixth edition also includes special reference to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout, as relevant, given the significant effect of

the pandemic on sustainable development progress and attention to this topic in VNR reports.

The report is structured around four sections:

1) Governance, institutional mechanisms and engagement 2) Policies, 3) Implementing the 2030 Agenda, and 4) VNR reporting practices (Figure 1). Further information on the assessment framework, data sources and overall research approach is available in Annex 2.

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



The analysis in the present review is based largely on the VNR reports, and where available, civil society reports.¹⁰ 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.

9. The 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 reports are referred to throughout, however only cited once here for ease of reading. Cf. De Oliveira, Ana; Kindornay, Shannon. (2021). *Progressing National SDGs Implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum in 2020*. Ottawa: Cooperation Canada. / Cf. Kindornay, Shannon; 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. / Cf. 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. / Cf. 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. Similarly, for the 2016 edition of this report, Cf. Cutter, Amy. (2016). *Progressing national SDGs implementation: Experiences and recommendations from 2016*. London: Bond.

10. *Civil society reports* are available for 17 of the countries reviewed in 2021 and can be found under "Civil Society Reports." Reports from Brazil, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Uganda are also available, even if those countries did not present a VNR in 2021. Such civil reports were not assessed in the present analysis.

BOX 2. 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 can therefore offer useful insights for 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 process 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 practices at the country level.





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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 mechanisms, and looks into how governments presenting VNR reports in 2021 make arrangements 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 mechanisms, including how multiple stakeholders have been engaged in defining national priorities and carrying out VNRs. This section also 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 mechanisms

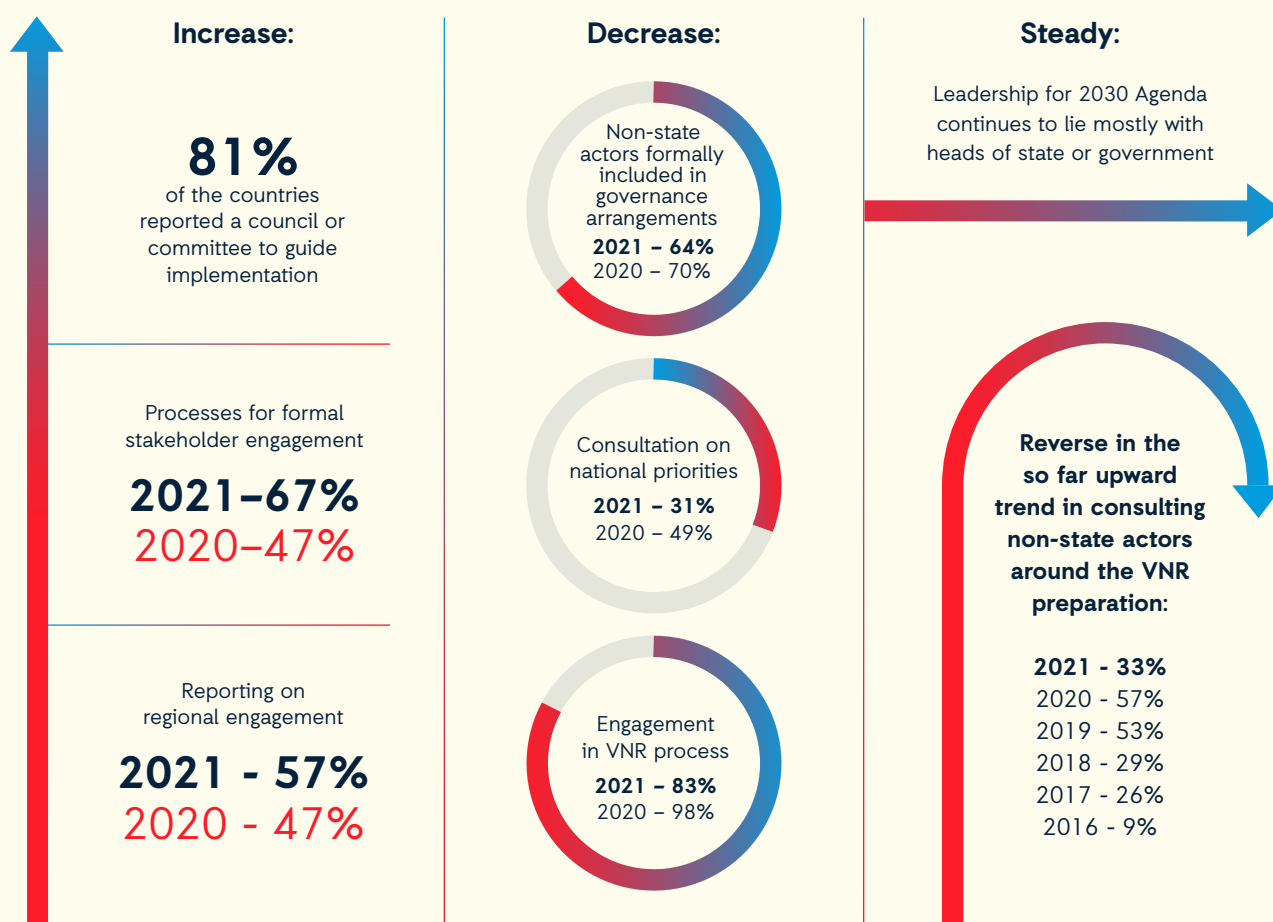
- **Governance trends:** As it has been the case from 2017-2020, most countries reporting in 2021 are making use of new or existing councils, committees or specialized offices to govern 2030 Agenda implementation. This translates into 81% of the total of reporting countries (34 out of 42), and into 92% of the countries that provided governance-related information (34 out of 37). Leadership continues to most commonly reside with the head of state or government (36% of countries).

- **Inclusion of non-state actors:** The 2021 VNR reports reversed the upward trend with regards to the formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements. While 70% of countries noted inclusion of non-state actors in 2019 and 2020, this percentage dropped to 64% in 2021. Moreover, the mention of engagement whether through lead councils/committees or through technical working groups has equally dropped.
- **Peer engagement:** The percentage of countries reporting on how they engage with peers at the regional level on the 2030 Agenda reached the highest figure in a five-year series. For comparison, in 2017, 56% of reporting countries provided this information, 41% did so in 2018, 34% in 2019, and 47% in 2020. For 2021, this percentage reached 57%. Furthermore, 2021 VNR reports reversed the decline observed in previous years regarding regional/special country grouping activities around the 2030 Agenda, with 29% of countries (versus 4% in 2020) mentioning such engagements. Greater regional coordination offers opportunities to share best practices, support and resources with and learn lessons from peers and other stakeholders, including new civil society structures (e.g. regional civil society engagement mechanism, RCEM) emerging at the regional level.

2.1.2. Stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation

- **Multi-stakeholder engagement:** The amount of countries reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement increased in 2021, as 67% of the countries mentioned formal processes for stakeholder engagement, against 47% in 2020 and 60% in 2019. However, information presented in VNR reports does not assess the quality of formal processes for multi-stakeholder engagement. Countries should develop indicators to measure the extent to which stakeholder engagement is being facilitated in relation to SDGs implementation.
- **Civic space:** The VNR reports continue to ignore the issue of closing civic space and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists, even if only 26% of the countries reporting in 2021 have an “open” status when it comes to safeguarding civic space. Conversely, several civil society reports highlight how this has been an issue. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have been used as an excuse by some governments to further close civic space. Recognizing the reality of shrinking civic space is urgent, and countries should work to protect this space while creating an enabling environment for non-state actors.
- **Consultations on national priorities and engagement in the VNR process:** The percentage of countries reporting consultations to define national priorities continued to drop, with 31% of countries in 2021, against 49% in 2020 and 89% in 2019. Moreover, 83% of the countries that presented a full VNR report in 2021 referred to some sort of non-state actor engagement to prepare the VNR report, versus 98% in 2020. The practice of directly including non-state actors in drafting VNR reports or providing written inputs has not been frequent among 2021 reporters, and even consultations around the VNR preparation dropped to 33% of the countries in 2021, against 57% in 2020.
- **COVID-19 on stakeholder engagement:** In 2021, 18 out of the 42 reporting countries (43%) included information on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement, a backslide from 2020, when 53% of the countries had provided that information.

Figure 2. Comparative trends in reporting, 2021 versus previous years



Although civil society reports highlight shrinking civic space as a growing issue, VNR reports are silent on this topic

2.2. Leadership, governance and institutional mechanisms

Governance arrangements and institutional mechanisms are basic building blocks for effective 2030 Agenda implementation. With the 2030 Agenda in its sixth year at the time of reporting (2021), 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. While information on governance arrangements for 2030 Agenda implementation had been available in all full VNR reports¹¹ examined from 2017-2020, in 2021 there were two countries – **Nicaragua** and **Uruguay** – that did not provide any information on either governance arrangements for delivering the SDGs or on leadership on SDG implementation.¹²

11. This excluded the countries that presented only main messages, as it was the case of Barbados in 2020, for example.

12. Bahamas did not present such information either, but this country did not present a full VNR report. As for Uruguay, the country had reported on governance arrangements in previous VNR reports, but did not provide such information in the 2021 VNR report.

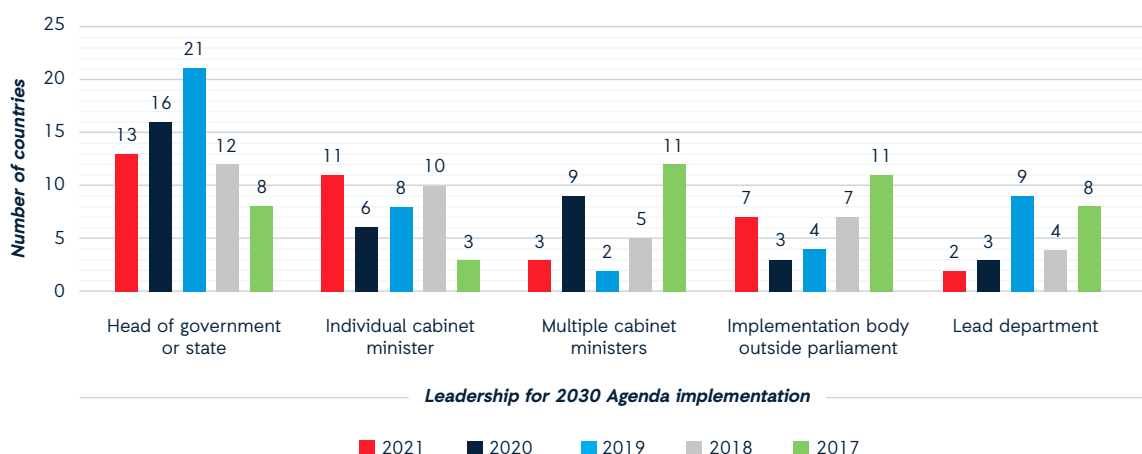
2.2.1. Leadership

Most VNR reports include information on leadership, identifiable through an examination of governance arrangements. VNR reports over 2017-2021 show a range of approaches (Figure 3). In 2021, information on leadership was available most of the time: for 37 out of the 42 countries reporting (or 88%).

In 2021, the most common category of leadership for the 2030 Agenda was a head of state, with 36%

of countries.¹³ The second most common type of leadership was an individual cabinet minister (31% of countries), followed by a body outside parliament (19%), multiple cabinet ministers (8%), and a lead department leading implementation (6%). Among the countries reporting leadership for 2030 Agenda implementation, most leadership arrangements continue to reside with the head of state. The case of **China** is different from other countries included in this analysis, as leadership lies with the Communist Party of China.

Figure 3. Most common sources of leadership for 2030 Agenda implementation



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. In 2021, out of the 37 countries that included information on such topics, 34 (or 92%) are making use of new or existing councils, committees or specialized offices to govern 2030 Agenda implementation.¹⁴ This finding is consistent with those of previous years (2017-

2020), showing that the use of councils, committees or other forms of coordinating bodies continues to be a standard practice with respect to institutional mechanisms. In 2021, 16 countries noted creating a new council, committee or specialized office. Twelve (12) countries noted that implementation occurs through government institutions and four (4) noted the use of a lead department for this purpose. Two (2) countries are making use of existing councils or committees. Two (2) countries referred to implementation through government institutions without referring to the existence of a council, committee or similar governing body.

13. Percentages in this paragraph refer to 36 countries providing information on leadership. Five countries did not provide this information, and one country (China) has not been included in the chart as the country's leadership arrangement falls into a different kind of category. Data includes countries submitting a subsequent VNR report to the HLPF following their first presentation.

14. Countries submitting a subsequent VNR report to the HLPF are included in that percentage. 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.

Information provided by **Namibia** was unclear in terms of the governance structure, as the VNR report mentioned a National SDGs Multi-Stakeholder Committee, without however informing who is engaged in such committee and how it functions. In turn, **China** and **Spain** had other kinds of arrangements, the first having the Communist Party of China as the main governance arrangement, and the second having three different mechanisms making up the governance system for the 2030 Agenda. **Bahamas, Nicaragua, and Uruguay** did not provide information in this regard.

Civil society validity check:

Institutional mechanisms for SDG implementation in Colombia

A spotlight report from Colombia asserts that some of the institutional mechanisms in place for SDG implementation have not been functioning as well as expected. For example, the Inter-institutional Commission has not been transparent regarding its action plans, processes and decisions; and the multi-stakeholder platform currently in place has not yet met since the launch of the SDGs. Regarding an SDG-related policy framework, the SDG strategy has not progressed in its implementation and has had limited impact on guiding policy-formulation processes; while the National Development Plan is not widely implemented at the subnational level and rarely through participative processes.

Source: Adapted from Colombia's spotlight report, prepared by CCONG.

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 addition, throughout the years countries have consistently reported the creation of technical and/or substantive working groups or other specialized bodies to support implementation. This

practice continued to be noted in 2021 VNR reports. For example, **Indonesia's** VNR report mentioned that since 2017 the country has established the SDGs National Coordination Team (Tim Koordinasi Nasional or TKN), which consists of a steering committee, an implementing team, a working group, a sub-working group, and an expert team. In **Thailand**, a new working group was established, and it includes the National Statistical Office and the government sector focal points for all 17 Goals. Still another example appears in **San Marino's** VNR report, which mentions an intersectoral working group composed of all the public administration departments that have been assigned responsibility for the various goals and targets of the 2030 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 not available for 36% of countries (15 out of 42) that reported in 2021, which is more than data from 2020 and 2019 showed – that percentage was 30% for both years. A previous analysis showed that over 2016-2019, the formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements was consistently present practice, with 70% of countries reporting to the HLPF noting formal inclusion of non-state actors in high and/or

working-level institutional mechanisms.¹⁵ However, in 2021, figures dropped, as 27 out of 42 countries (or 64%) provided information on engagement with non-state actors. This is negative, as it shows a decline in the so far improving move towards a whole-of-society approach. Moreover, VNR reports consistently fail in providing clear indications of how inclusive governance arrangements entice change in policies and approaches.

Figure 4 presents comparative figures regarding the inclusion of different stakeholder groups in working-level and high-level governance mechanisms in 2020 and 2021. 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.



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 4. Participation in governance and institutional mechanisms for 2030 Agenda implementation



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

As was the case for 2020, in 2021 civil society was the most commonly mentioned stakeholder. However, there was a considerable decrease (from 13 to 8 in 2021) in the reference to civil society's inclusion in technical and working groups. Decreases were also observed in overall mentioning of academia, development partners (including UN agencies), government institutions, parliament, the private sector, and youth. While over 2017-2020, the review of VNR reports had consistently shown progress in terms of formal inclusion of non-state actors, this trend seems to have changed in 2021. Moreover, the exact manners by which engagement occurs (e.g. if stakeholders have voting power) continues to be often unclear, or information is not sufficiently detailed in the VNR reports.

Civil society validity check:

Nature of multi-stakeholder commissions in Mexico

Mexico has specific institutional arrangements in place (National Commission for SDG implementation; 32 subnational bodies for SDG implementation), which however have not been conceived in a fully inclusive manner. A civil society report points out that these multistakeholder commissions have a consultative quality at best – mainly in terms of technical inputs –, and can be seen as a “box-ticking” exercise in order to comply with international requirements rather than structural attempts at fostering inclusive policy dialogue around sustainable development.

Source: Spotlight report prepared by Mexican CSOs.

Compared to 2020, 2021 saw a decrease in the number of countries that pointed to the inclusion of stakeholders in lead councils or committees, particularly academia, development partners (including UN agencies), government institutions, parliament, the private sector, and youth. In 2020, 10 countries pointed to academia, 7 to development partners, 13 to government institutions, 3 to parliament, 14 to the

private sector, and 3 to youth. In 2021, 8 countries listed academics as part of high-level governance mechanisms, 6 referred to development partners, 11 to government institutions, 2 to parliament, 10 to the private sector, and 1 to youth. Conversely, 2021 saw an increase in the number of countries pointing to the formal inclusion of local governments in lead councils or committees over the previous year at 6 countries versus 3 in 2020.

Decreases also occurred in 2021 in terms of stakeholders' inclusion in technical and working groups. Similar trends were observed with regards to academia (down from 7 to 4 in 2021), civil society (down from 13 to 8 in 2021), development partners (down from 7 to 5 in 2021), government institutions (down from 7 to 6 in 2021), parliament (down from 3 to 1 in 2021), the private sector (down from 12 to 5 in 2021), and youth (down from 2 to 1 in 2021). The only increase was in terms of generic references to non-state actors (up from 1 to 4 in 2021), which in turn does not clarify which stakeholders are being involved and thus does not offer much information to the analysis.

Civil society validity check:

Institutional arrangements in Guatemala

From a process standpoint, the spotlight report from Guatemala asserts, even without providing many details, that the institutional arrangements put in place for SDG implementation may be seen primarily as an attempt to boost the image of the government, with limited impact in terms of fostering dialogue or any practical policy implications. The spotlight report also mentions that the government tends to be very selective regarding the type of organizations it engages with. There is also a rhetorical campaign from the government that seeks to delegitimize critical civil society voices and grassroots organizations as important actors as well as to criminalize dissent.

Source: Spotlight report prepared by CONGCOOP.

As shown in previous editions of this report, the analysis of 2021 VNR reports also pointed to a government's commitment to engagement, which is noted when a VNR report does not specify a formalized mechanism of engagement, but there is a well-established precedent for engagement or a promise to engage non-state actors is stated. For example, in **Colombia**, non-governmental actors do not participate in the institutional framework for the national implementation of the SDGs, but the VNR report announces the future creation of a multi-stakeholder platform to work alongside the current SDG Commission, however the private sector is the only one listed to have "permanent invitee" status.

A case study in good practice: Non-state actors' official engagement in SDG implementation governance arrangements in Cabo Verde

Cabo Verde's Ambition 2030 and SDG Thematic Working Groups include a wide array of non-state actors. Such representatives range from civil society to NGOs, as well as include representatives from youth, women, trade unions, private sector, investment promoting institutions, commercial banks, the Stock Exchange, the Superior Council of Chambers of Commerce, the Cabo Verde Chamber of Tourism, the Association of Young Entrepreneurs, the Association of Women Entrepreneurs, the General Directorate for Telecommunications and Digital Economy, the National Directorate for Industry, Trade and Energy, Cabo Verde Trade Invest, the Special Maritime Economic Zone Authority in São Vicente, and the Employment and Professional Training Institute

Source: Excerpt adapted from Cabo Verde's VNR report.

Civil society validity check:

On Cabo Verde's good practice described above

The vast majority of organizations on this list are State-owned and Public-Private Institutions. In the preparation of the VNR, the Government was the main protagonist and only superficially listened to the organizations selected by them. To get an idea, the Platform of NGOs in Cape Verde, which brings together the majority of NGOs in the country, was not invited to participate. It was through my pressure and development partners' support that it was possible to put in place some kind of an autonomous process just a month before the HLPF. Without a clear methodology, the Government, in partnership with the United Nations, made the VNR a purely political instrument, for the promotion of Cape Verde. For the first time, civil society carried out an assessment exercise on the implementation of the main SDGs. We are aware that it was not ideal because we did not have the right methodology and it was not possible to reach all the islands. In the coming years we will specialize and be able to produce our shadow report with quality.

Source: Views from national coalition PLATONG, after consultation for the present report.

Overall, the 2021 VNR reports reverse the so far continued approach to formal inclusion of representatives from major stakeholder groups. This is a negative trend, as that approach would support 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 lower focus on non-state actors in high-level governance mechanisms, which is negative in the sense that there might be less opportunities in place for non-state actors to input into overall strategic direction and coordination.

Moreover, this makes it more difficult to assess the potential impacts that stakeholders' inclusion in formal governance arrangements could have at the national level, including in regard to potential redesigning of policies and approaches based on the hearing of diverse voices.

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 (24 out of 42) provided information on regional activities in 2021, suggesting an increase in terms of countries reporting on this dimension in comparison to four previous years. In 2017, 56% of countries provided this information, 41% did do in 2018, 34% in 2019, 47% in 2020, and 57% in 2021. As with 2020, the 2021 VNR reports also bring interesting examples on regional efforts that specifically addressed implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

With different degrees of detail, 24 countries referred to their contributions at the regional level, which included advancing partnerships and agreements towards the 2030 Agenda and/or specific SDGs, hosting/participating in regional events, engaging in specific SDGs-related groups or frameworks, among others. As some examples, **Egypt** mentioned supporting the Libyan people through a decade long conflict, backing the Lebanese government in the wake of the devastating explosion in Beirut's harbor (both related to SDG 16), and engaging in electrical interconnection projects with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Cyprus, and Greece (related to SDG 9). In Latin America, **Mexico's** VNR report mentions the country's engagement in the HEARTS Initiative in the Americas (of PAHO/WHO) and the Regional Initiative for the Elimination of Malaria in America (of the Inter-American Development Bank) as part of the country's efforts to achieve SDG 3 and SDG 10. In Asia, the "Mekong-Japan SDGs Initiative for 2030" is mentioned in **Japan's** VNR report as an initiative with the countries of the Mekong region (in Southeast Asia) to share efforts towards the achievement of SDGs and jointly resolve issues. Finally, an example from Europe appears in **Germany's** VNR report, which shows regional coordination happening as part of negotiations at the European Union level, such as the European Green Deal initiative with regard to climate and energy, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union with regard to SDG 1, and the Farm to Fork Strategy of the European Commission with regard to SDG 2.

A case study in good practice: Sweden's participation in mutual learning at international level

Sweden has participated in several activities in conjunction with the VNR preparation process in order to share experiences about the process and efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda beyond the scope of the 2021 VNR. These included peer learning dialogues with Colombia and Spain, facilitated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and a virtual study trip to Finland to learn about Finland's experiences of the VNR process in 2020.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Sweden'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.

In 2021, reporting on regional country grouping and participation in special country groups to advance the 2030 Agenda reversed the decline observed in previous years, particularly in 2020, when only

two (2) out of the 47 countries (or 4%) had reported on this topic. In the 2021 VNR reports, 12 out of 42 countries (or 29%) mentioned engagement in special country grouping activities around the SDGs. Such kinds of activities might suggest movements towards regional follow-up and review (e.g. the development of regional frameworks and indicators), peer-to-peer engagement, and collective efforts to promote sustainable development at regional levels. Greater regional coordination offers opportunities to share best practices, support and resources with and learn lessons from peers and other stakeholders, including new civil society structures (e.g. regional civil society engagement mechanism, RCEM) emerging at the regional level.

As some examples, **Sierra Leone** noted being part of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) group, and mentioned that the country's national priorities are in line with the SDGs and in tune with the New Deal and its five Peacebuilding and State building Goals, which are viewed as the global framework for LDCs to walk out of fragility. In turn, **Bhutan** highlighted its preparation for its impending graduation from LDC status in 2023 and for the need to adjust to the loss of LDC benefits. In Latin America, **Colombia** assumed the pro-tempore presidency of three important mechanisms for integrating and coordinating the 2030 Agenda at the regional level: the Andean Community, the Pacific Alliance, and the Forum for the Progress of South America (Prosur).

A case study in good practice: Coordination of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in 6 different VNR reports

Six Small Island Developing States (SIDS), namely Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Cabo Verde, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and the Marshall Islands, presented VNR report in 2021. As a collective, those SIDS highlighted their common vulnerabilities, development

challenges, and new opportunities through a common section in their VNR reports. During a time when certain challenges had become more greatly intertwined and emphasized due to more crises occurring simultaneously, the common vulnerabilities amongst SIDS could then be turned into shared solutions and present new common opportunities. Therefore, SIDS made a commitment to improve their inter- and intra-regional co-operation efforts, in order to more greatly contribute towards sustainable development initiatives and other key achievements.

Source: Excerpt adapted from the VNR reports for Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Cabo Verde, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and the Marshall Islands.

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. Greater regional coordination offers opportunities to share best practices, support and resources with and learn lessons from peers and other stakeholders, including new civil society structures (e.g. regional civil society engagement mechanism, RCEM) emerging at the regional level.**
- **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

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 pre-requisite to effective engagement is an enabling environment¹⁶ for non-state actors to contribute. Some countries that reported in 2021 noted efforts to create an enabling environment through policies that support multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation. These include **Afghanistan, Bhutan, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Namibia, Norway, Sierra Leone, and Thailand.**



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.

world.¹⁸ Moreover, in some cases the 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.¹⁹

A case study in good practice: Norway's recognition of shrinking civic space

Norway stands out among 2021 reporting countries due to the recognition of the process of shrinking civic space and its consequences. The Norwegian VNR report explicitly mentions "shrinking civic space" as one of the factors (alongside hate speech, discrimination, and online harassment) posing barriers to free speech and democratic participation, particularly to women and girls.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Norway's VNR report.

However, countries in general tend not to engage directly with the issue of closing civic space¹⁷ in their VNR reports, the sole exception in 2021 being **Norway**. This gap in VNR reports regarding civic space has been observed for years and is particularly concerning given the increasing trend of closing civic space around the

According to the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), which examines the status of civic space around the world, civic space for 62% of the countries that reported to the HLPF in 2021 is characterized as "obstructed," "repressed" or "closed." This is exactly the same percentage as in 2020. In 2021, this translates into 26 out of 42 countries.

16. "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), GPEDC's Pilot Indicators: Refined methodologies for indicators 1, 2 and 3.
17. "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](#).
18. Cf. De Burca, Deirdre; Mohan Singh, Jyotsna. (2020, July). [Realising the potential of Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda to promote and protect Civic Space](#). Asia Development Alliance (ADA) and Forus. Cf. Rowlands, Lynda; 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. Cf. Brechenmacher, Saskia; 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](#).
19. Cf. De Oliveira, Ana; Kindornay, Shannon; Tomlinson, Brian. (2021, January). [Forus International Scoping Study of National NGO Platforms' Experiences in Promoting an Enabling Environment](#). Paris: Forus. Cf. De Oliveira, Ana; Kindornay, Shannon; Tomlinson, Brian. (2020, December). [Executive Summary: A Scoping Study of CSO Platforms' Experiences in Promoting an Enabling Environment](#). Paris: Forus. Cf. Tomlinson, Brian. (2020, December). [Literature Review: A Scoping Study of CSO Platforms' Experiences in Promoting an Enabling Environment](#). Paris: Forus.

BOX 3. UNDERSTANDING THE STATUS OF CIVIC SPACE IN VNR REPORTING COUNTRIES FOR 2021

CIVICUS's Monitor of civic space has information for all 42 countries that reported to the HLPF in 2021. Only eleven (11) of the countries that reported to the HLPF in 2021 were considered "open," meaning the state enables and safeguards civic space.²⁰ For five (5) countries, civic space is considered "narrowed."²¹ 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. Eight (8) reporting countries were classified as "obstructed."²² 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 2021, eleven (11) reporting countries were in the "repressed" category.²³ 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 2021, seven (7) reporting countries were classified as "closed."²⁴

2.3.1. The status of civic space according to civil society

Although the vast majority of VNR reports continue to ignore the process of shrinking civic space, several civil society reports highlight how this has been an issue. With different levels of detail, shadow, spotlight and/or parallel reports prepared by civil society organizations communicate how the closure of civic space is being carried out in their countries, including information on government actions that

hinder freedom of expression, assembly, association, and access to information. Such body of knowledge raises awareness around the issue of shrinking civic space and how civil society voices are either not being heard or are being silenced. The fact that so much information around this topic is being shared through civil society reports but remains absent in VNR reports is extremely worrisome. Box 4 shows some of the main topics identified by civil society organizations based in 2021 reporting countries with regards to civic space.

20. Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Marshall Islands, Norway, San Marino, Sweden, and Uruguay.

21. Bahamas, Dominican Republic, Japan, Namibia, and Spain.

22. Bhutan, Bolivia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Malaysia, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, and Tunisia.

23. Afghanistan, Angola, Chad, Colombia, Madagascar, Mexico, Nicaragua, Niger, Qatar, Thailand, and Zimbabwe.

24. Azerbaijan, China, Cuba, Egypt, Iraq, Laos, and North Korea.

BOX 4. ISSUES SURROUNDING CIVIC SPACE AS IDENTIFIED BY CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

Censorship

- **Bhutan:** Based on information available in the CIVICUS Monitor, CSO self-censorship is prevalent in Bhutan, so it appears CSOs might refrain from speaking out in order to keep operating freely.

Violence

- **Colombia's** CSO report notes widespread and systematic threats and actual violence against human rights, environmental and Indigenous people's rights activists. In 2020, 969 aggressions against activists were registered, of which 199 were assassinations - a 60% increase compared to the previous year. On freedom to protest, the report also mentions the violent repression shown by police and armed forces during the 2021 social upheaval.
- Regarding the right to assemble, **Guatemala's** CSO report notes that according to figures aggregated by the Unit for the Protection of Human Right Defenders, an excess of 1,000 cases of aggression of human right defenders have been registered only in 2020 - 15 of which were assassinations. This is underpinned by a general tendency towards the criminalization of protest and activism by the government and the judicial system.
- In **Malaysia**, CSOs have played a crucial role when it comes to human rights and a decreasing democratic space. Major concerns for CSO advocates involve deaths within official custody and increasing police accountability. These concerns have sparked a call out for an independent police complaint commission (IPCMC).
- In **Mexico**, the freedom to associate is limited. As the sub-national level, related threats to the freedom to express oneself have been identified, as seen through intimidation and assassination tactics evidenced by the deaths of journalists, human-rights and environmental activists.
- In **Zimbabwe**, groups of human rights defenders and activists are facing greater accounts of being arrested for taking a stand of action. The increased use of force, as well as the act of media violations, abductions, corrupt elections, exclusion of certain people groups, etc. are also taking place. CSO's role around accountability and demands for redress has been neglected, and there is an increasing threat of a shrinking civic space within the country.

References to freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and access to information

- In **Cabo Verde**, although the freedom to associate, express oneself and assemble are legally protected, civil society is not in the necessary position to meaningfully participate in policy-making or the monitoring process linked to the SDGs.
- **Chad** is currently ruled by a Transitional Military Council following the killing of the former President in combat with opposition militias. In this context, freedom of assembly has been somewhat maintained and protests are authorized, although this is only prevalent for certain organizations.
- In **Colombia**, the current legal framework accounts for greater control in areas such as policy formation and control, curtailing civil society's autonomy. Regulations also assimilate CSOs towards the private sector, as that they are required to register their activities to the Chamber of Commerce. This demonstrates unequal access to public resources, imposing taxes, financial and administrative norms. These regulations push CSOs to limit their activities and ultimately undermine their capacity to fulfill their role as political actors.

- In **Denmark**, freedom of assembly may face future restrictions as the Danish police might have the power to remove people from certain areas on the grounds that ‘intimidating’ demonstrations are taking place. This restrictive measure was included in the ‘Draft bill L189’, introduced to the Danish Parliament in early 2021.
- In **Laos**, there are no real examples of freedom of expression or assembly. The CSO report, produced by activists in exile, demonstrates a missing sense of a separation of powers, as well as the lack of an independent judiciary. In Laos, it is forbidden to criticize the political party, the state, and government. Those who wish to voice political views and develop advocacy work are subject to face criminal offences.
- In **Madagascar**, there is a strong centralized presence of political power, and the country is characterized by restrictions to public freedoms, particularly freedom of association and expression, with reports of both human-rights and environmental activists being arrested and prosecuted for their actions. These trends coincide with rampant corruption within the country’s police force and judicial system. CSOs suggest the use of a civil society chart as part of a greater effort to implement better legal protections to further promote necessary freedoms.
- The CSO report from **Spain** demonstrates a decrease in civic space, especially through a law related to public security, which limits freedoms such as those pertaining to assembly, expression, information, and mobilization. The report calls for a cross-cutting strategy and concrete mechanisms for civil society to support and protect human rights and environmental activists, as well as points to the inclusion of civic space-related targets and indicators into SDG-related documents in order to effectively monitor progress.

Other aspects of shrinking/closing civic space

- **Chad’s** CSO report does not specifically mention the quality and scope of the country’s civic space, but the picture that emerges from the way the SDG implementation process is suggests that a lack of institutional channels for participation results in civic space being open for sectorial on-the-ground activities, but not necessarily for advocacy-related actions.
- In **Egypt**, it is rather well-known that the country’s political system is authoritarian, and the enabling environment for CSOs is limited. The CSO report confirms this fact as it demonstrates a lack of necessary participation and policy engagement without sufficient details.
- In **Guatemala**, the CSO report mentions a variety of initiatives that seeks to curtail civic space, specifically the freedom to associate. This was seen through the recent approval of the ‘NGO law’, that will ultimately increase restrictions to the activities of CSOs if they are deemed a threat to ‘public order’.
- **Indonesia** is facing a decline in civil liberties reflected within the laws and regulations that are applied towards criminalizing civil society and restricting their participation in the public sphere and decision-making processes. Reports show that those in power impose both legal and practical constraints on fundamental rights, and several CSOs have made note of backslides in SDGs achievement – particularly around SDG 16 (i.e. curtail of freedoms, criminalization of journalists and civil society) –, and of an increasingly coercive environment for civil society.
- In **Malaysia**, the selectiveness and decreasing civic space reported would demonstrate that the country’s VNR process was inclusive as far as internal modalities (e.g. draft VNR report circulated for CSO inputs), but still fell short of a fully inclusive process in terms of access.
- In **North Korea**, given the nature of its totalitarian political system, there isn’t much civic space to speak of. With that in mind, the CSO report demonstrates that due process guarantees are not respected, and bribes are accepted in order to avoid unlawful arrests. A secret form of police under the State and Security Ministry are tasked with surveilling citizens and informing the Songbun social hierarchy system.
- In **Spain**, the CSO report shows that certain challenges persist, such as migrant rights, gender equality, conceiving and measuring development beyond economic growth, and diminishing threats to civic space.

2.3.2. 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 2021, 28 VNR reports (67%) provided information on processes for stakeholder engagement beyond governance mechanisms, or ad hoc consultations. This shows an increase in comparison to 2020, where the number of VNR reports providing such information was 22 (47%), against 28 VNR reports (60%) in 2019 and 18 VNR reports (39%) in 2018. Even if a formal stakeholder mechanism is not in place in **Colombia**, its VNR report refers to stakeholder participation as a cross-cutting issue and highlights that a stakeholder platform is being built and will be included as part of the national implementation governance.

the international sustainability agenda. In turn, **Japan** mentions two mechanisms, the SDGs Promotion Headquarters and the SDGs Promotion Roundtable Meetings, which have been held twice a year (even if only one meeting was possible in 2020 as a containment measure to the spread of COVID-19) to exchange opinions on Japan's efforts to achieve the SDGs. **Laos's** VNR report referred to different levels: at the national one, the Round Table Process is a platform for multi-stakeholder engagement around policy dialogues having implications for SDGs implementation; and at the sectoral level, working groups ensure stakeholder participation in sectoral consultations to take the SDG-based national development agenda forward. In the case of **Marshall Islands**, the VNR itself is seen as an opportunity to promote stakeholder engagement. In addition, an annual conference engages all the mayors of the 24 atolls to dialogue with the national government and other stakeholders and address issues of concern to people living in the neighboring islands. In turn, **Norway's** VNR report mentions a website that functions as a two-way communication channel in the development of the National Action Plan for Sustainable Development, both providing knowledge about the SDGs in a national context and engage stakeholders and the public in the development of the Action Plan.



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.

Out of the countries that further described processes for stakeholder engagement, the following examples show different kinds of strategies. In **Germany**, the government uses a regular 2030 Agenda dialogue forum involving multiple stakeholders, including youth delegates for sustainable development, to discuss

Civil society validity check:

On the principle of participation in public affairs in Norway

Despite being an open country in terms of civic space, and where a culture of participation and open governance could be expected, a report prepared by civil society in Norway only mentions sporadic and specific points of dialogue and policy engagement, which provides another point of view on the principle of full participation in public affairs.

Source: Civil society report prepared by the Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment.

As noted in a previous section, 2021 VNR reports show a decline in the so far positive trend in terms of non-state actor participation in formal governance arrangements, whether in lead councils or committees or in technical working groups. On the other hand, more countries are reporting on processes of stakeholder engagement. This is positive, 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 2021 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 2021: **Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, Colombia, Denmark, Egypt, Guatemala, Indonesia, Laos, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, North Korea, Norway, Paraguay, Spain, and Zimbabwe.**²⁵ However important the views of civil society are in relation to their national experiences, civil society reports (e.g. spotlight, shadow, parallel reports) continue to lack status in official United Nations' High-level Political Forum (HLPF) and its related processes.

The reports and written inputs by civil society organizations in regards to VNR reports point to challenges including the need for improved coordination and integration, greater transparency and enhanced institutional mechanisms for monitoring and progress assessment, higher quality and more stable spaces for policy dialogue between

civil society organizations and governments around implementation, as well as increased capacity for all stakeholders. More generally, in most countries there is a clear demand for the protection and expansion of civic space in order for civil society organizations to advocate and operate.

A case study in good practice: Sierra Leone's stakeholder engagement towards data collection

During the VNR drafting process, Sierra Leone engaged a broad range of stakeholders not only in consultations and review exercises but also in gathering and contributing data. The country found a creative way to collect data in the absence of adequate institutional capacity.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Sierra Leone's VNR report.

- In the case of **Bhutan's** civil society report, the report notes that the implementation process is mainly government-driven, and it recommends the establishment of a national multi-stakeholder steering committee for SDG implementation, as well as improving the production of data for monitoring and evaluation purposes – although it reports as a positive development the fact that more CSOs were engaged in consultations in the context of the 2nd VNR process.
- Civil society organizations in **Cabo Verde** report that although SDGs are embedded within a National Development Plan that is government-led and encompasses the central and local levels, this plan has not been shared with the wider citizenry. In this context, civil society has not participated in the process – neither at the planning, implementation, nor the monitoring

25. Reports were also available for Brazil, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Uganda, though these countries did not submit a VNR report to HLPF in 2021. Those eight civil society reports have not been examined as part of this review.

- and evaluation phases –, and have only been able to conduct monitoring through initiatives of their own and in partnership with international development partners.
- In **Chad**, civil society reports that there is a growing need for creating multi stakeholder platforms in order to promote policy dialogue, coordination and monitoring between government, civil society, private sector and development partners. Greater internal coordination is also an ongoing challenge being addressed within civil society.
 - The **Colombian** spotlight report asserts that the institutional arrangements put in place around the SDG implementation process have not been transparent regarding action plans, processes and decisions, and that the institutional multi-stakeholder platform promised for SDG implementation has not been actually created. Regarding the policy framework, the report notes that the SDG strategy has not progressed in its implementation and does not really guide policy-formulation processes; and the National Development Plan is seldomly adapted at the subnational level and rarely through participative processes.
 - **Denmark's** civil society report points to the fact that governmental actors' perception of the SDGs seems to be based on the assumption that Denmark is already well on its way to achieve the SDGs – which constitutes a major explanation for the lack of political prioritization that the SDGs have had. This lack of prioritization has been compounded by a lack of transparency and engagement from successive governments and parliaments. That said, the report does note two positive developments: the fact that a National Action Plan is being formulated (although government-led and seemingly not based on a gap analysis); as well as the fact that the Minister of Finance is about to rollout a screening programme in order to assess the impacts of all proposed legislation from an SDG lens.
 - In **Egypt**, civil society calls for increased decentralization in order to enhance needs assessments, planning, fiscal provision and improved participation spaces.
 - **Guatemala's** civil society report pointed out an extensive list of conjunctural and systemic challenges, as well as the fact that the institutional arrangements put in place are overly selective and devoid of substance, given that they do not have any concrete policy implications.
 - **Indonesia** civil society reports that although there is a sound institutional and policy framework for SDG implementation and monitoring, policy coherence and synergies among institutions have not been fully achieved. This is compounded by the declining levels of participation in policy dialogue and monitoring – trends that are amplified at the local level –, as well as a general erosion of the enabling environment for CSOs, especially regarding civic space.
 - In **Laos**, the report from Alliance for Democracy in Laos asserts that SDG implementation in Laos has to interact with a set of political challenges (authoritarianism, rampant corruption, heightened influence from foreign countries), socio-economic challenges (access to healthcare, gender equality, energy access, promotion of SMEs), as well as environmental challenges (dominance of monoculture-based agro-industry and large hydroelectric infrastructure).
 - **Madagascar's** civil society report asserts that institutional weaknesses, political instability, territorial inequalities and corruption, as well as the effects of climate change in agricultural output – a key component of the country's economy – constitute important challenges for sustainable development in Madagascar.
 - In **Malaysia**, civil society commends the increased access to participation in this year's VNR (access to draft VNR report and possibility to provide analytical inputs) and sound policy environment. That said, advancements around participation are mainly linked to the progress assessment process, and they co-exist with increased threats to civic space and a fragmented, siloed-approach to policy-making.
 - The civil society report from **Mexico** highlights the existence of institutional arrangements that tend to exclude civil society, a wider feature of the political system as a whole. Even within

this context though, Mexican civil society's efforts to include their views in the VNR-drafting process have been fruitful. However, it remains unclear whether these inroads into the follow-up and review process will allow qualitative improvements to wider policy dialogue processes around the SDGs.

- In **North Korea**, human rights organizations working from outside the country report that, even though North Korea has started engaging with the international community through global normative frameworks like the 2030 Agenda – specifically the SDGs and climate change –, and it has formulated a set of domestic policy frameworks, the nature of the regime and the structural characteristics of the country in terms of social control, deep environmental degradation and its corruption-riddled socio-economic system pose significant challenges regarding actual implementation.
- According to the report produced by civil society in **Norway**, the SDG implementation process has followed – to a significant extent –, the openness principles that underlie governance arrangements within the Norwegian political system, with civil society being able to integrate their own assessments into the VNR report, and actively participating in building the new institutional arrangements for SDG implementation and monitoring. Norwegian civil society does assert its concern about the environmental effects of the country's development model at home and abroad.
- The civil society in **Paraguay** reports weak institutional arrangements for SDG implementation coordination and monitoring, as those are mainly government-led and sporadic. In the context of this year's VNR process, Paraguayan civil society has started to self-organize for joint monitoring and advocacy (the spotlight report is the first concrete result of this partnership), as well as developing awareness-

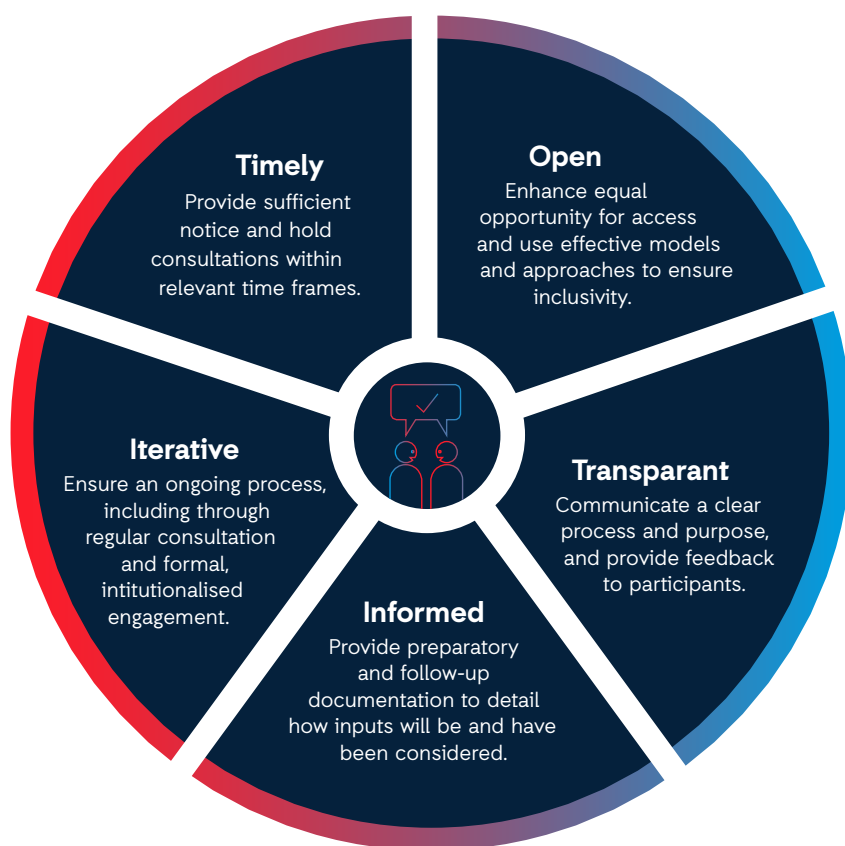
raising and capacity-building materials on the SDGs.

- According to the report produced by civil society in **Spain**, although there has been a somewhat open process for the formulation of a National Sustainable Development Strategy and the main structural transformations and policy levers outlined in the document are sound, the fact that the main institutional arrangements are coordinated by an SDG Secretariat subsumed within the Ministry of Social Rights, has placed the SD Strategy in a secondary position in relation to other planning documents. Civil society thus calls for a supra-ministerial mechanism in order to foster the multi-stakeholder governance system and raise the status of the SD Strategy.
- When it comes to **Zimbabwe**, civil society reports that although they have been able to make some inroads into the VNR process, participation in wider institutional arrangements for SDG implementation is still undermined by information gaps and lack of transparency, lack of accessibility and centralization, which amounts to engagement from civil society being rather informal in nature.

As has been regularly noted in different editions of the present review, 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 previous editions of this report.²⁶ 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.

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

Figure 5. 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.

2.3.3. 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 one-third (31%, or 13 out of 42 countries) of the countries reporting in 2021 noted consultation on national priorities with non-state actors. This represents still another decrease in relation to previous years, as the figures regarding countries pointing to consultations to identify national priorities was 49% in 2020, 89% in 2019,²⁷ 57% in 2018,²⁸ and 69% in 2017.

27. This analysis found a higher number of countries than Kindornay, Shannon; Gendron, Renée (2020) as examples of prioritization carried out through governance arrangements, in addition to broader consultations.

28. However, according to Kindornay, Shannon; 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

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. For example, in the case of **Namibia**, the VNR report mentions extensive consultations with all stakeholders in the setting of policies and priorities, but information is rather vague, making it hard to tell how these consultations take place or more details on process. On the other hand, the **Qatar** National Vision 2030 came as a result of focused consultations that adopted participatory methodology for setting priorities, as many different stakeholders participated in the discussions.

In the cases of **Angola** and **Mexico**, the VNR reports did not set out national priorities. Non-state actors were not engaged in the identification of national priorities in the cases of **Azerbaijan, Dominican Republic, Laos, North Korea, Norway, and Tunisia**. Half of the 2021 VNR reports (21 out of 42) did not provide information on the extent to which national priorities have been set from a multi-stakeholder engagement perspective. Overall, governments tend to understand their VNR process as an opportunity to generate national ownership and select national priorities.

A case study in good practice: Azerbaijan's investment in younger generations with respect to the SDGs, youth engagement, and creating SDGs ownership

The National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development and ministries organized multiple awareness-raising activities in the period from 2019 to 2020 to bring the SDGs in line with national priorities, with particular focus on youth. These included a series of panel discussions on "Sustainable Youth Development" in 2020 to enhance the role of youth in achieving the SDGs within the project "Sustainable Development Goals for Youth", where discussions addressed "Equal quality education and lifelong learning opportunities", and State support measures to improve access to education for all young people and create equal opportunities for all in line with the principle of "Leaving No One Behind". The Council also organized video conferences on "The role of youth in the liberated territories" and on "Sustainable and personal development of young people in the liberated territories". The Ministry of Youth and Sports held an online international conference on "Sustainable Development and Youth: New Opportunities and Challenges."

Source: Excerpt adapted from Azerbaijan's VNR report.

2.3.4. Engagement to carry out VNRs



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.

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. 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. To support member states to carry out participatory VNRs, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) prepared a 2021 edition of the [Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews](#). A [2022 edition](#) is also available for the 46 countries committed to presenting a VNR report during the 2022 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).

A case study in good practice: Non-state actors' engagement in developing Denmark's VNR report

Denmark's VNR report counted with the active participation of different stakeholders, who contributed with chapters outlining their work towards achieving the SDGs. Parliament, expert panels, civil society (including a youth council), the private sector, academic institutions, regions and municipalities shared how they are taking ownership of the SDGs by highlighting efforts that include success cases, lessons learned, creation of partnerships at the national and international levels, and an extensive array of SDGs-related activities.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Denmark's VNR report.

Civil society validity check:

On Denmark's good practice described above

In addition to this good practice, civil society furthermore had an assessment of Denmark's contribution to each of the 17 SDGs right next to the government's assessment. Denmark was very slow to get the VNR process started but our continuous dialogue with the Ministry of Finance (responsible for the SDGs) paid off as we got two uncensored writing submissions in the main VNR report: 7 pages on "civil society contribution", including lessons learned focuses on Denmark's challenges in the SDG implementation AND our assessment of Denmark's contribution to each of the 17 SDGs (following the structure from the Finish VNR-report last year).

Civil society together with the Danish UN Mission and Ministry of Finance arranged a pre VNR event in collaboration with Norway and two civil society representatives also participated in the official VNR presentation, which was held as a multistakeholder panel presentation at the Ministry of Finance. Civil society (Rasmus Stuhr, Global Focus Chairman and Barwaqo Hussein, LNOB representative) was represented at the Danish VNR presentation – in the pre-recorded video and at the live Q&A. At the presentation, the Minister of Finance gave the final word to our LNOB representative. We were happy to be included, though we had very short time to prepare for the video which made it very difficult to coordinate properly on behalf of "all" of civil society. Other venues for collaborations with the government include:

- The Danish UN Mission took great part in the #Unmute civil society during HLPF, they even did a social media campaign introducing all members from the Danish delegation with quotes.
- The Danish Mission hosted 4 one-

hour delegation meetings during HLPF where they gave updates on declaration negotiations, events, etc. They updated us daily in a WhatsApp joint conversation.

- Danish civil society took the lead in coordinating the CSO question for the VNR presentation. It focused primarily on SDG 12, 13, 14 & 15. We are still hoping that the Minister will answer our question more thoroughly.
- We have established a good and trustful dialogue with the Ministry of Finance after all the above-mentioned happenings and collaboration.

Source: View from Global Focus, after consultation for the present report.

While a positive trend had been emerging towards non-state actor engagement in VNRs as standard practice, the countries reporting in 2021 reversed this upward trend.²⁹ In 2021, 34 out of 41 countries presenting full VNR reports³⁰ (or 83%) provided information on how multiple stakeholders were engaged in the VNR process. In such cases, some countries mentioned making use of both offline and online consultation formats, as it had been the case in previous years. For example, **Thailand** referred to online tools and methods being used in lieu of physical consultations given the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of **Egypt**, a series of online public consultations was conducted to explain the process of preparation and discuss stakeholders' initial feedback, and how they could contribute to the preparations of the VNR report; a tailored template was then sent to each stakeholder to guide their inputs.

A case study in good practice: An innovative way to engage youth in SDG efforts and COVID-19 response in Bhutan

The De-Suung (Guardian of Peace) Programme, a value-based personal development programme to encourage greater citizen engagement in nation-building built on the spirit of volunteerism, advocates for a sense of community, harmony and cooperation. Since its inception, the trainees/graduates or De-Suups have actively engaged in various voluntary initiatives, especially in post-disaster relief operations. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, De-Suups have been providing voluntary services as frontline workers.

Services range from assisting security forces in patrolling border areas, to assisting with coordination efforts for public services, delivery of essential items during lockdowns, facilitating the enforcement of COVID-19 protocols in public places, among other essential tasks. In view of the critical role being played by these volunteers in supporting national efforts to deal with the pandemic, the Accelerated and Specialized Training Programme for De-Suups was initiated with a focus on engaging unemployed youth. Thousands of young Bhutanese signed up to join the programme, and today there are more than 22,000 De-Suups in the country.

Source: Excerpt adapted from the Bhutan's VNR report.

29. In 2020, 44 out of 45 countries (98%) presenting full VNR reports (two countries, Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines were excepted from these figures as they only presented main messages) referred to whether consultations and/or non-state actor engagement in the VNR. In 2019, 45 out of 46 countries (98%) reported engaging non-state actors in the VNR, while this figure had been 43 out of 46 countries (93%) in 2018, and 34 out of 45 countries (76%) examined in 2017.

30. Bahamas is being excepted from these figures as this country only presented main messages, and not a full VNR report.

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 – has not been frequently mentioned in 2021 VNR reports. One example in this sense refers to **Angola**, where engagement happens through an SDG Platform, and where the process of preparation and drafting of the VNR involved both state and non-state actors, who contributed to data collection and review throughout the process. In **Germany**, stakeholders involved in the HLPF drew up their own assessments of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and such position papers have been included in the VNR report's annexes. However, such practices do not appear to have been frequently adopted by 2021 reporting countries.

Civil society validity check:

Inclusion of civil society in the Mexican VNR process

According to a civil society report from Mexico, the main positive development in the realm of monitoring has been that civil society was included formally within the VNR process – after insisting for months. They were also able to conduct wide-ranging surveys in order to collect views and provide collective inputs into the official VNR report.

Source: Spotlight report from the Mexican civil society organizations.

Other strategies of engagement referred to stakeholders being given opportunity to revise the draft VNR report. For example, **Antigua and Barbuda's** government engaged stakeholders in an online review of the draft VNR to solicit feedback and ensure that there was consensus of what the country was going to present at the HLPF. In **Tunisia**, a national workshop was organized to gain stakeholders' support, validate the results of the work of the different groups involved in the VNR process, and discuss the contents of the draft VNR report. In the case of **Niger**, the VNR draft report was validated through a multi-stakeholder national forum. In terms of consultations with different stakeholders, this strategy was specifically mentioned by around a third of the countries (14 out of 42 countries, or 33%, versus 57% in 2020), which include **Antigua and Barbuda, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Guatemala, Laos, Madagascar, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Thailand, and Tunisia**.

Civil society validity check:

An inclusive process in Malaysia

Although broad and meaningful participation mechanisms have not been established and engrained within the Malaysian political system, civil society organizations recognize *"that the 2021 VNR preparation was a very inclusive process with CSOs having access to the draft documents as well as an opportunity to provide input and analysis."*

Source: Excerpt adapted from a civil society report prepared by the Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance.



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.

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

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted countries in various ways. With regards specifically to stakeholder engagement, 18 out of 42 countries (43%) included information on the effects of the pandemic in 2021, against 53% of the countries reporting in 2020. Among those who did report in 2021, most referred

to 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 need of using virtual means to carry out participation and engagement, and to the disruption of planned consultations or other forms of engagement, including meetings being delayed, postponed, or cancelled.

A case study in good practice: Chad's "Summary of the socio-economic impact studies of COVID-19"

Chad conducted an evaluative study on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and its implications for the implementation of SDGs, with direct impact on SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4 and 8. Also, as part of this study, some surveys were conducted to understand the extent to which COVID-19 impacted the living conditions of households. Thus, to cope with the shocks related to the pandemic, the government developed a post-COVID-19 response plan with the support and commitment of all stakeholders. This evaluative study and surveys conducted are an instrument to ensure that the policies and responses developed for the post-COVID-19 recovery are inclusive and leave no one behind.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Chad's VNR report.

on the pandemic impacts, which is less than the 44% of countries mentioning those aspects in 2020. Although **Iraq** did refer to communication challenges, particularly with varying capacities among stakeholders to deal with new communications, the country did not detail the extent or consequences of such issues. In turn, **Bolivia's** VNR report mentioned that the country had to carry out a summary VNR process, and that non-governmental actors have not been involved.

Conversely, in the case of **Zimbabwe**, when face-to-face interviews and public gatherings such as conferences, workshops and focus group discussions could not take place, the country adopted written submissions as the most plausible and viable option to get well considered views from diverse constituencies and continue to employ a whole-of-society approach. According to **Norway's** VNR report, COVID-19 does not seem to have had a significant impact on SDG efforts at the regional management level.

In comparison with the previous year, fewer countries reported on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement in 2021. Although this could show a greater level of adaptation after at least one year into the pandemic depending on the country, such lack of reporting might also point to an opposite direction, in which countries might be overlooking the importance of such engagement, or prioritizing engagement with groups that have access to online tools, which would ultimately exclude a considerable number of stakeholders, or using the pandemic as an excuse to prevent engagement and participation from happening. Any of these scenarios would hamper the path to a whole-of-society approach towards 2030 Agenda implementation.

In 2021, among the key impacts, 9 out of the 18 countries (50%, versus 60% of 2020 reporting countries) that included information on the impacts of COVID-19 on stakeholder engagement mentioned moving into online platforms, virtual meetings, or other forms of online engagement. Conversely, only 6 out of 18 countries referred to planned engagements being cancelled, postponed, reduced, or put on hold, which represents 33% of the countries reporting

A case study in good practice: Germany's sound mechanism for stakeholder engagement and the government's receptiveness to input in a virtual format

Germany engaged in dialogue with civil society, business, trade unions and the research community, as well as the Länder and local authorities, on the drafting and presentation of its VNR from the outset. It did so through the established formats of Germany's high-level preparatory conferences to the HLPF and the 2030 Agenda dialogue forums, which, in light of the pandemic, have been held in virtual formats since spring 2020. Inspired by recommendations from the German Council for Sustainable Development, national HLPF conferences have been held in Germany since 2019. The second and third such conferences, held in December 2020 and April 2021, focused on the 2020-2030 Decade of Action for implementation of the 2030 Agenda and on sustainability in the post-pandemic recovery. Stakeholders from across society had the chance to comment on the inter-ministerial draft of the VNR and to put forward and discuss their positions and proposals. In an annex, the country's VNR report includes major stakeholders' own assessments of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in and by Germany.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Germany's VNR report.

2.3.6. 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 2021 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 the four sections are followed by lists of recommendations.

3.1. Key Findings

3.1.1. Baseline or gap analysis

- **Conducting assessments:** In 2021, a little over half of the reporting countries (52%) referred to having carried out a baseline or gap assessment. This represents a reduction in view of the previous years, as 64% of the countries reporting in 2020 and 79% of the countries reporting in 2019 mentioned having conducted such assessment.

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

- **SDGs integration:** In 2021, 93% of the countries reported on integrating the SDGs into their policies. This is a decrease from the previous year, when 100% of the countries reported similar

approaches, although the trend continues to be somewhat positive when compared to other years (79% of countries in 2019, and 50% of countries in both 2018 and 2017).

- **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 2021 VNR reports, and there has been an increase in the number of countries pointing to human rights-based approaches, inter-generational responsibility, and planetary boundaries. However, mentions to the principle of the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda experienced some backsliding.

3.1.3. Nationalizing the 2030 Agenda

- **National priorities:** Six years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, almost 91% of the countries that reported in 2021 noted the selection of national priorities. This represents a decrease in comparison to 2020 (with almost 96% of the countries), but it is still a high percentage. As in two previous years, priorities related to social outcomes and economy were most commonly cited, followed by the environment. Culture continues to be the least mentioned national priority.
- **National targets and indicators:** In 2021, 62% of the reporting countries provided some information on the selection of national targets and indicators, which represents a decrease in relation to the 77% of countries reporting in 2020.

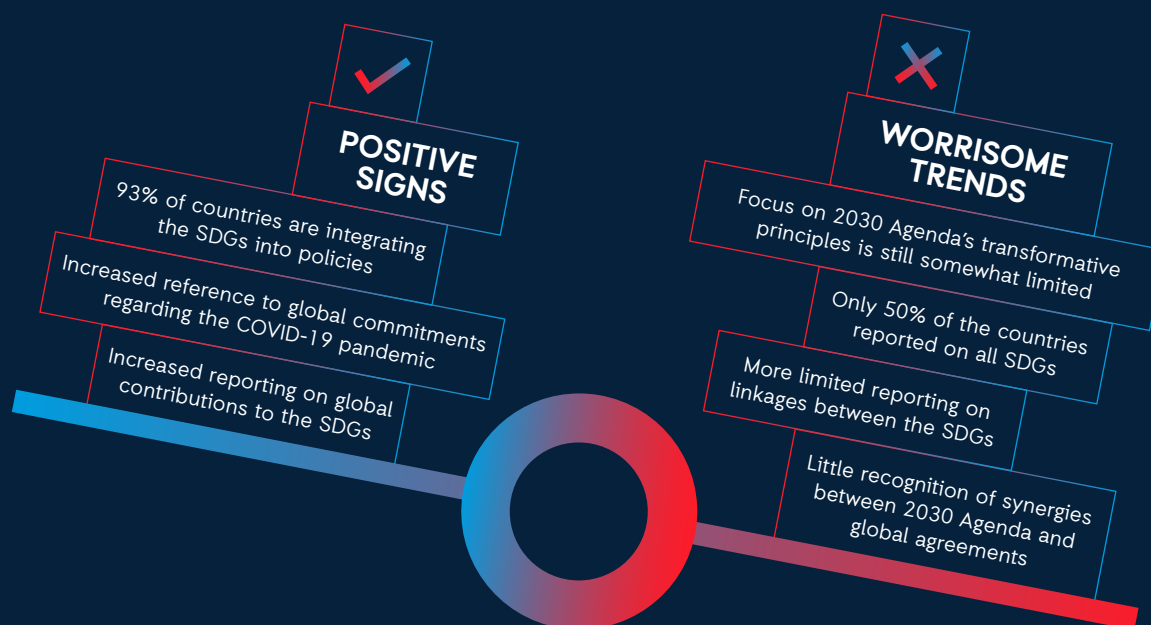
3.1.4. Integration and policy coherence

- **SDGs reporting:** There has been a backslide in reporting integrated approaches to implement

the SDGs. In 2021, 50% of VNR reports assessed the full set of SDGs, a decrease in relation to 2020, when this figure had been 70%. Another decrease happened in terms of referring to appropriate linkages between the goals, with 40% of the 2021 reporting countries mentioning such linkages, versus 51% in 2020. Although there was a slight increase in the percentage of countries giving equal attention to economic, social and environmental dimensions of development in their VNR reports (50% in 2021, versus 49% in 2020), there has been an overall worrisome trend in relation to SDGs reporting.

- **International agreements:** Reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda and relevant international agreements continues to show mixed results in 2021 over 2020, with the Paris Agreement on climate change continuing to be the most frequently cited agreement, and global aid/development effectiveness agendas the least mentioned ones. Such linkages point to the recognition of 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 higher number of countries referred to COVID-19-related actions apart from measures carried out at the domestic level. In 2021, 26% of the reporting countries made reference to global commitments regarding the pandemic (e.g. ACT Accelerator, CEPI, COVAX, GAVI).
- **Policy coherence:** Fewer countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation in 2021 (50% of the countries, versus 60% in 2020). However, more VNR reports revealed an analysis of both domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally in 2021, which is a positive sign.

Figure 6. Worrisome trends and positive signs regarding policies for 2030 Agenda implementation



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. In 2021, slightly more than half of the reporting countries (52%, or 22 out of 42 countries) reported completion of an assessment of either all or some SDGs. This shows a backslide from previous years.³¹ Moreover, among the 22 countries that did report on carrying out a gap analysis or a baseline study, only 13 assessed all the SDGs, which represents 31% of all reporting countries.

In the case of **Cabo Verde** and **Marshall Islands**, the VNR reports suggest an assessment is planned, with the latter referring to baseline data and trends analysis as an area that requires focus to ensure effective implementation of the national plans and relevant SDGs. Overall, 2021 saw a reduction in

the proportion of countries reporting that they had carried out a baseline or gap analysis over previous years. On the other hand, more limited reporting on baseline assessments may result from the fact that the majority of countries (34 out of 42, or 81%) reporting in 2021 were submitting a second or third VNR report to the HLPF.



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.

31. In 2020, 64% of countries indicated they performed an assessment for all or some SDGs. In 2019, 79% of reporting countries provided this information. In 2018, 70% of countries noted that they had carried out an assessment or planned to, while in 2017, the figure was 84%, versus 62% in 2016.

In terms of the content of assessments, out of the 22 countries that conducted assessments for either all or some of the SDGs, 19 provided information on what had been assessed, although the degree to which assessments were detailed varied. The most common

type of assessment noted in VNR reports related to examining data and/or baselines, with 8 out of 19 countries, or 42%, which is similar to 2020, where this percentage had been 40%.³²

Figure 7. Types of baseline or gap assessments listed in 2021 VNR reports



As noted in previous *Progressing National SDGs Implementation* reports, some VNR reports for 2021 that included an assessment of policies also provided 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. For example, **Angola** mentioned that an assessment based on the Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA) system shows that the national development plan's programs are aligned with 78 SDG targets, out of a total of 150, which represents an overall alignment of 52%. However, in many cases of the 2021 VNR reports, although some of the data showed that assessments had been carried out, information on how aligned policies were or how much data was available is not detailed.

A case study in good practice: Reporting on targets in Qatar

The VNR report from Qatar presents, for some of the SDGs monitored, targets analysis that displays signs showing decrease, on track, fluctuating, measures adopted and, when it is the case, no data availability. Each graph presents the reader with a general understanding of the targets' situation and supports straightforward comprehension.

Source: Based on Qatar's VNR report.

32. For comparison purposes, in 2019 VNR reports, 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.

A considerable small number of countries included SDG gaps in 2021. Out of 42 reporting countries, only 9 (or 21%) included this information, which is a considerable decline in comparison with the 64% of countries that provided information on SDG gaps in 2020. Although information on gaps in terms of progress for 2030 Agenda implementation is sometimes presented in the goal-by-goal analysis for some countries, this information is not necessarily or explicitly linked to the assessments carried out, or showcased as results of the assessment.

A case study in good practice: Cyprus' online platform to engage civil society and NGOs

Cyprus is currently developing an online platform to engage civil society and NGOs in the 2030 Agenda. The website (www.initiative2030.gov.cy) is aimed at allowing for SDG-related actions to be mapped, as well as to raise awareness of civil society and NGOs, education institutions (schools and universities), local authorities, the private sector, and the wider public sector around the SDGs.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Cyprus's VNR report.

In terms of COVID-19, while the 2021 VNR reports continued to recognize the pandemic's impacts, most reports did not describe implications for baselines or gap analyses. **Chad** mentioned that the economic situation remains weak, and that the COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the macroeconomic outlooks, and **Sierra Leone** referred to financial constraints due to the pandemic, without however clarifying if and how such situations affected the conduction of assessments.

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. The review of VNR reports seeks to understand how governments have incorporated the SDGs as well as the guiding principles of the 2030 Agenda.

A case study in good practice: Norway's clear presentation of evidence of change at policy level

Norway's VNR report presents measures to advance the SDGs through key policy initiatives in the period from 2016-2021 (since its first VNR) in a consistent manner for every Goal.

Source: From Norway's VNR report.

Civil society validity check:

On Norway's good practice described above

The 2021 VNR report is much improved from the 2016 report, and we are satisfied with the inclusion of key policy initiatives categorized under each goal. However, we have advocated for a distinction between existing and new policy initiatives and an analysis of the gap between existing policy and the targets and goals for the SDGs.

In our view, Norway's efforts to meet the SDGs are based on a siloed approach and both the VNR and the National Action Plan, presented in June 2021, lack a holistic and integrated approach. Many of the policy initiatives are the result of a multi-stakeholder dialogue, since there are hearings in parliament and a strong culture of dialogue between government and stakeholders in Norway. However, there is weak multi-stakeholder dialogue regarding an integrated approach for implementing the SDGs. In the VNR, stakeholders are included in different chapters, but the other chapters are mainly government-formulated.

The reporting on policy coherence for sustainable development is a welcome addition to the VNR report the government presented at HLPF but the quality of the reporting is poor and is not based on indicators or any other systematic reporting regime. To make progress and implement the SDGs in Norway, a more systematic and integrated approach to identifying challenges, measure and report on policy coherence for sustainable development is key. In conclusion, we recognize the improvements in the VNR report, but we believe that the improvements are insufficient to use the VNR report for improving Norway's effort to meet the SDGs in a substantial way. To improve, the government

should start by building efficient structures for multi-stakeholder engagement in the implementation of the SDGs.

Source: Views from the Norwegian Forum, after consultation for the present report.

In 2021, the majority of the countries (93%) reported integrating the SDGs into national policies.³³ Exceptions were **Bahamas**, that did not present a full VNR report and therefore such information is unavailable, **Nicaragua**, that mentions national plans (for human development, fighting poverty, and addressing climate change) without however linking them to the 2030 Agenda, and **San Marino**, whose VNR report suggests a planning stage, as a working group set up in 2020 aims to draw up an intervention plan to achieve the SDGs.

Among the 39 countries that provided information around SDG integration, 37 countries (or 95%) reported having incorporated the SDGs into national development plans and related policies and frameworks. Among these, 15 also included the use of a national SDG implementation strategy. Conversely, **Japan** and **North Korea** noted the creation of a national strategy to implement the SDGs without referring to national development plans. Overall, although these findings for 2021 show a considerable increase in relation to 2020, where 72% of the countries reported having incorporated the SDGs into national development plans and related policies and frameworks,³⁴ the overall amount of countries reporting SDG incorporation (regardless of which kind) dropped from 100% to 93%.



Best practice spotlight

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

33. For comparison purposes, 100% of countries reported integrating the SDGs into their policies in 2020. This figure was 79% of the countries reporting in 2019. Only half of countries reported similar approaches in both 2018 and 2017.

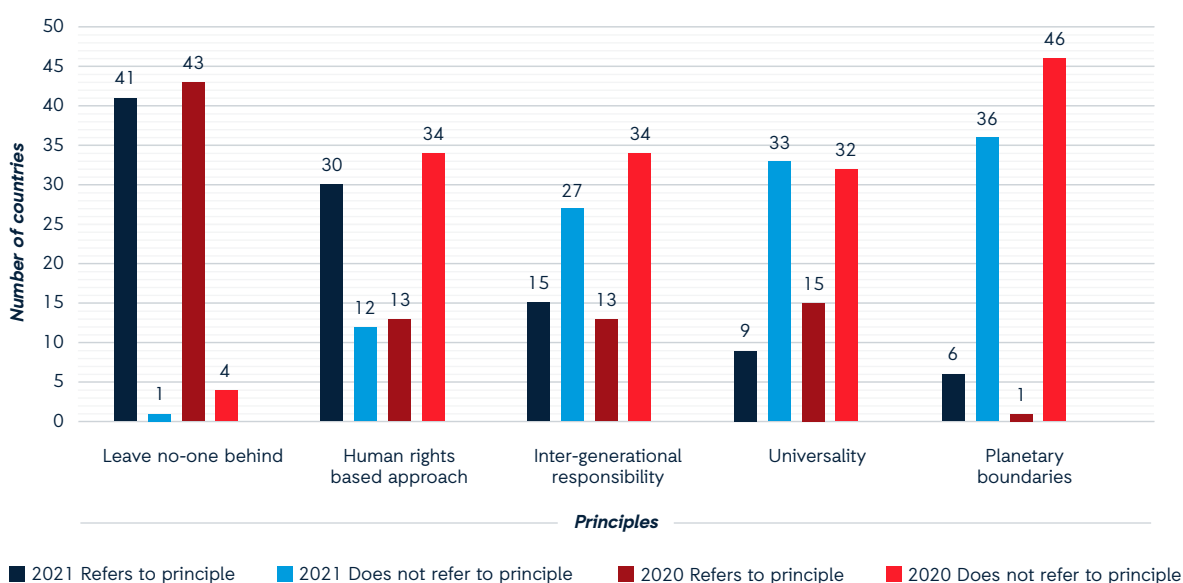
34. This translated into 34 out of 47 countries reporting in 2020.

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.³⁵

As shown in Figure 8, the principle of leaving no one behind continues to be well established and referred to in 2021 VNR reports, with 98% of the countries (41 out of 42) mentioning the principle – the sole exception being **Bahamas**, that did not present a full VNR report and did not refer to leaving no one behind in its main messages. This finding points to an increase in relation to 2020, when almost 92% of the reporting countries (43 out of 47) referred to leaving no one behind.³⁶ The second most mentioned principle in 2021 was human rights-based approach, with 71% of the countries (30 out of 42) referring to this principle, as opposed to only 28% of the countries (13 out of 47) reporting in 2020.³⁷

Figure 8. Reference to 2030 Agenda principles



In 2021, although some countries did not explicitly refer to the human rights-based approach principle, the majority of the VNR reports had a least a strong human rights focus. However, in some cases, references to human rights are few and general, as with the cases of both **Guatemala** and **Uruguay**, for example, where such references are not enough to

allow identifying a human-based approach or considering human rights as a cross-cutting issue in those countries' 2030 Agenda implementation efforts. In turn, the VNR reports from **China** and **North Korea** make no mention to human rights whatsoever, which is extremely worrisome.

35. Other principles are captured in the sections that follow through the examination of integration, stakeholder engagement and partnerships.
 36. For comparison purposes, the percentage of countries mentioning leaving no one behind in previous years was 98% in 2019, 89% in 2018, and 87% in 2017.
 37. The percentage of countries referring to human rights-based approach was even lower in 2019, with only 8% of the countries (4 out of 47) mentioning this principle. In 2018, the percentage was 13% (6 out of 46 countries), and in 2017 it was 23% (10 out of 43 countries).

Civil society validity check:

Human rights violations in North Korea

Regarding reforestation and afforestation efforts carried out in North Korea, a civil society report notes conflicting issues regarding the need to tackle reforestation and the systemic way it has been carried out: *The land taken up for replanting trees means that North Koreans are unable to farm which affects the right to food. Additionally, it also violates labour rights, as it is often the most vulnerable groups who are mobilised to participate in nation-wide tree planting schemes, including children and women. Research has shown that North Korean children have to shoulder the costs of planting trees in the wintertime by schools and teachers; unpaid workers, women and soldiers are also mobilized to carry out nationwide afforestation efforts.*

Source: CSO report from North Korea, A human rights-based approach to the SDGs report.

In 2021, the third most mentioned principle of the 2030 Agenda was inter-generational responsibility, to which 32% of the countries (15 out of 42) made reference, up from 28% of the countries (13 out of 47) reporting in 2020.³⁸ In terms of the principle of universality (the fourth most mentioned principle), 21% of the countries (9 out of 42) reporting in 2021 mentioned it, down from 32% of the 2020 reporters (15 out of 47).³⁹ Finally, as it had been in previous years, the principle of planetary boundaries was the least referred to in 2021, even if with a considerable increase to 14% of the countries (6 out of 42), in comparison with only 2% of the countries (1 out of 47) reporting in 2020.⁴⁰



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.

With regards to the nine planetary boundaries identified by the Stockholm Resilience Center⁴¹ (or planetary limits as stated by the VNR reports from the **Dominican Republic, Spain, and Sweden**), more countries seem to be recognizing this principle as constituent of the 2030 Agenda and therefore informative of actions to be carried out towards implementation. In the case of the **Czech Republic** and **Germany**, the principle has been mentioned only generally, and in **Denmark's** VNR report, the principle appears in a civil society-written text related to SDG 8. For **Sweden**, the VNR report includes summary conclusions from Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), and in the case of the city of Helsingborg, one of the conclusions of the VLR is that the city is to be a place where people's quality of life is high but environmental impact is low and resource use is within planetary limits.

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. However, as shown in Table 1, compared to 2020, the countries reporting in 2021 more frequently mentioned all the principles, with the sole exception being the principle of universality. Such increase in the reference to 2030 Agenda principles is a positive trend.

38. For inter-generational responsibility, the percentage was 38% of the countries (18 out of 47) reporting in 2019.

39. The percentage for 2019 was 17% of the countries (8 out of 47), and in 2018 it was 35% of the counties (16 out of 46).

40. Planetary boundaries was equally mentioned by only 2% of the countries (1 out of 47) reporting in 2019, and by 6% of the countries (3 out of 46) reporting in 2018.

41. 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.

Table 1. Percentage of VNR reports mentioning 2030 Agenda principles in 2021 and 2020

Principle	2021	2020
Leaving no one behind	98%	92%
Human rights-based approach	71%	28%
Inter-generational responsibility	32%	28%
Universality	21%	32%
Planetary boundaries	14%	20%

A case study in good practice: Protection of human rights in San Marino

San Marino's VNR report shows a strong human rights focus, with international human rights frameworks directly applicable in the domestic context, as per the country's Constitution. San Marino's foreign policy, traditionally based on so-called "active" neutrality, seeks to promote dialogue, peace and human rights. Importance is attached to the elimination of the death penalty all over the world, the defense of freedom of religion and belief, the protection of the rights of children and women, with particular attention to the prevention of domestic violence and the protection of victims, as well as the promotion of democracy and the rule of law. Domestically, human rights education is incorporated in school curricula.

Source: Excerpt adapted from San Marino's VNR report.

- **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

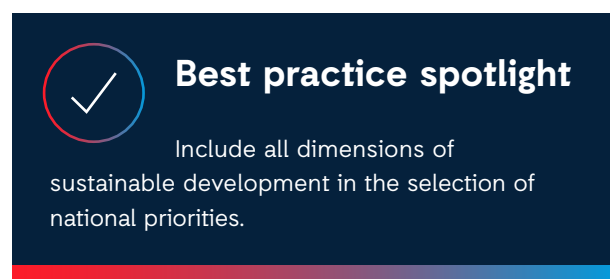
While successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires that governments work towards realizing all SDGs, governments are expected to implement the 2030 Agenda in line with their national context and priorities. This means identifying national (and local) priorities, targets and indicators through 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 others.

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.**

3.4.1. Priorities

Six years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, 38 out of the 42 countries (almost 91%) that reported in 2021 noted the selection of national priorities. This represents a decrease in relation to 2020, when 45 out of 47 countries (almost 96%) referred to selecting national priorities.⁴² In 2021, **Angola, Cuba, Iraq, and Mexico** were the ones not selecting national priorities, although **Iraq's** VNR report points out to the country's establishment of development priorities in its five-year national development plans. As it was the case in 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, as it was the case of **Niger's** VNR report, that identified 43 targets and 66 indicators as priorities. Another example refers to COVID-19 – for instance, **Antigua and Barbuda** included equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines as the country's immediate attention concerns.



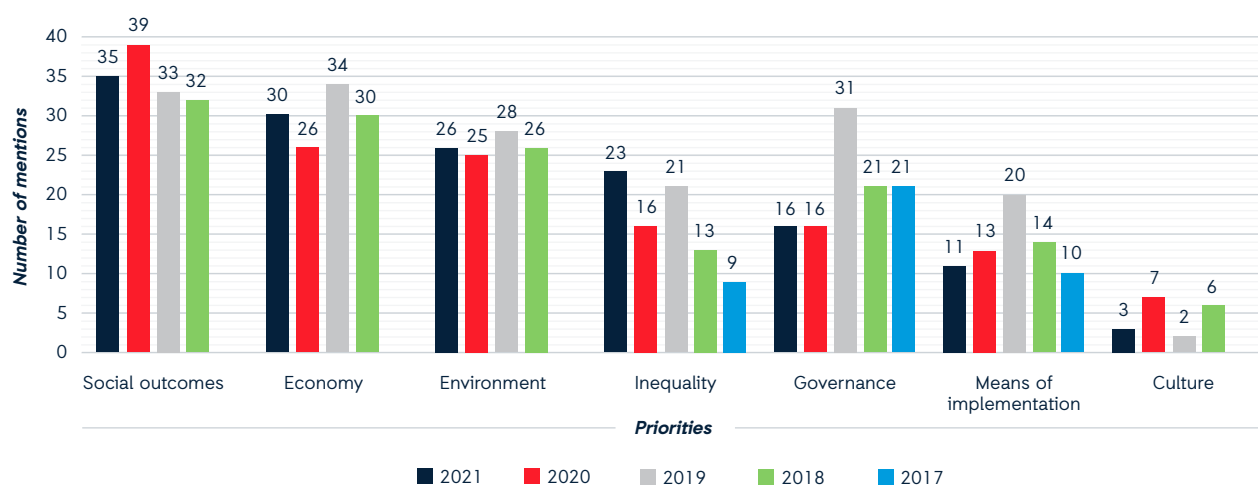
Out of the 38 countries selecting national priorities in 2021, 37 provided more details on such priorities, with the sole exception of **Colombia**, that had presented such details in previous VNR reports, but did not do so in its third one (presented in 2021). Among those countries, the majority did not consistently refer to specific SDGs, as it had also happened with the countries reporting in 2020. Those who did so in 2021 include **Afghanistan, Bahamas, Chad, Czech Republic, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Madagascar, Niger, San Marino, and Tunisia.**

Overall, the comparison with previous years (Figure 9) showed mixed results in the countries' references for most priority areas.⁴³ However, in 2021, the most commonly cited priorities continue to be those related to social outcomes (35 countries) and economy (30 countries), as it has been the case since 2018. A slightly higher number of countries prioritized the environment in 2021 in comparison to 2020, but environment has continuously been the third priority for countries since 2018. The number of countries prioritizing inequality issues increased in 2021 in relation to 2020. In terms of countries reporting governance issues as a priority, numbers are stable from 2020 to 2021, but governance had been a higher priority for those reporting between 2017 and 2019. Eleven (11) countries pointed to issues related to the means of implementation (or SDG 17) in 2021, showing this continues not to be seen as a priority for most countries since 2017. Finally, only a minimal number of countries pointed to culture as a priority overall, which is unfortunate, but consistent with previous years.

42. This compares to 89% of countries reporting in 2019, and 76% of countries reporting in both 2018 and 2017.

43. Information for 2017 is incomplete or unavailable for four (4) of the priorities categories, and therefore comparison is only possible for that year with regards to inequality, governance, and means of implementation.

Figure 9. Priorities for 2030 Agenda implementation



A case study in good practice: Culture as a national priority

Antigua and Barbuda's Medium-Term Strategic Development Strategy (MTDS) includes four sustainable development dimensions, one of them being "improved health of the natural environment and sustained historical and cultural assets."

Among the national priorities and strategic areas highlighted in the country's national sustainable plan, **Marshall Islands** identified "social services and cultural identity."

In the case of **Zimbabwe**, "youth, sport and culture" appears as one of the national priorities outlined in the country's national development strategy 2021-2025.

Source: Excerpt adapted from the VNR reports from Antigua and Barbuda, Marshall Islands, and Zimbabwe.

information in this regard, **China** mentioned taking the pandemic (referred to as an "epidemic" in the VNR report) head on and improving public health. In the case of **Cyprus**, the government's top priority was the protection and health of the citizens, coupled with the support of both social and economic fallouts of the pandemic. According to **Japan's** VNR report, a plan was set with four priority areas to accelerate SDG-related efforts, the first being "Countering infectious disease and preparing for the next crisis", and the second being "Business for building back better and growth strategies through innovation."

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 2021, 62% of countries (26 out of 42) provided some information on the selection of national targets and indicators, which represents a decrease in relation to the 77% of countries in 2020.⁴⁴ Most countries reported selecting both national targets and indicators – 20 of the 26 countries that provided information. This is a decline over 2020, when the figures were 34 out of the 36 countries that reported identifying both targets and indicators.⁴⁵

In terms COVID-19, some of the 2021 VNR reports noted how the pandemic impacted national priorities. As some examples, among those who provided

44. In 2019, this percentage was 60%.

45. In 2019, 17 out of 29 countries reported identifying both targets and indicators. In 2018, only seven (7) countries provided such information.

Out of the referred 26 countries, 6 reported only having developed national indicators, and none mentioned the development of targets only. **Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Bhutan, Egypt, Japan, Qatar, Spain, and Thailand** (or 9 out of the 42 reporting countries) did not provide information on the selection of national targets and indicators. Information available in the VNR reports for **Bolivia, China, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, San Marino, and Sierra Leone** (7 out of 42 countries) was unclear on whether the countries had developed national targets and indicators.

A case study in good practice: Zimbabwe's effective implementation of climate-smart agriculture practices towards the SDGs

The government has recently launched Pfumvudza - a farming system that seeks to climate proof agriculture. Pfumvudza is a crop production intensification approach under which farmers ensure the efficient use of resources (inputs and labour) on a small area of land to optimize its management. The Pfumvudza farming practice is also a climate change mitigation action as it uses the concept of minimal soil disturbance which ensures that soil carbon is retained in the soil. A total of 2.2 million vulnerable households will benefit from the input schemes (Presidential, Pfumvudza and Command Agriculture). Furthermore, under Pfumvudza, farmers are being trained by extension workers to adopt Conservation Agriculture (CA), which is a Climate Smart Agriculture Practice. The preliminary 2nd round crop assessment statistics show that Pfumvudza contributed 40% of total cereal crop production for the 2020/21 season.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Zimbabwe's VNR report.

Civil society validity check:

On Zimbabwe's good practice described above

As the SDGs Reference Group we also acknowledged the policy in our Spotlight report (under SDG 2 progress) - and we generally applaud government and development partners like FAO for initiating such a program which we believe will build reliance [sic] for farmers and move towards food security for more households. The project is in its infancy and geared towards being rolled out (the government just announced 2022 National budget speaks to expanding the program). As the CSOs Reference Group, we however have not undertaken any specific analysis in terms of how inclusive it is, but there is evidence already to show how households who were involved in the program have marked positive results in their fields. One cannot rule out the influence of partisanship in the identification of beneficiaries, but at the moment cannot speak authoritatively on that in the absence of an analysis having been undertaken.

Source: Views from CSO Reference Group on the SDGs, a civil society coalition, after consultation for the present 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 High-level Political Forum (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. In 2021, the HLPF theme was “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions

of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.” The focused goals were SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 2 (Zero hunger), SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (Climate action), SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals).

In 2021, 21 out of the 42 countries (50%) provided information on all 17 SDGs (Table 2), which represents a decrease in relation to the 33 out of 47 countries (70%) consistent with previous reviews of VNR reports. In 2021, this was the case of landlocked **Afghanistan, Bolivia, Chad, Paraguay, and San Marino.**

Bahamas only presented main messages to the HLPF and made no specific reference to any SDG in its presentation. **China, Guatemala, and Spain** did not provide a goal-by-goal analysis, but rather an analysis based on country priorities. **Guatemala**, however, linked its analysis and review to specific SDGs, which are mainly the ones of the 2021 HLPF theme, with the exception of SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals). **Laos** included an extra SDG formulated by the country, SDG 18 (Remove the UXO (unexploded ordnance) obstacle to national development).



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46. In 2019 and 2018 the percentage was 59% of the reporting countries.

Table 2. Goal-by-goal reporting in the 2021 VNR reports

SDG coverage	Countries			
All SDGs examined (21 countries)	Angola Antigua and Barbuda Cabo Verde Cuba Cyprus Czech Republic	Denmark Egypt Germany Indonesia Japan Marshall Islands	Mexico Namibia Nicaragua North Korea Norway Sweden	Thailand Tunisia Zimbabwe
Limited set of country-selected SDGs (10 countries)	Bolivia Chad Colombia	Dominican Republic Iraq Laos	Madagascar Paraguay San Marino	Sierra Leone
SDGs covered by the HLPF theme examined (7 countries)	Afghanistan Azerbaijan	Bhutan Malaysia	Niger Qatar	Uruguay
No specific goal-by-goal analysis but rather analysis based on country priorities (3 countries)	China Guatemala Spain			
SDGs examination not articulated in the VNR report (1 country)	Bahamas			



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.

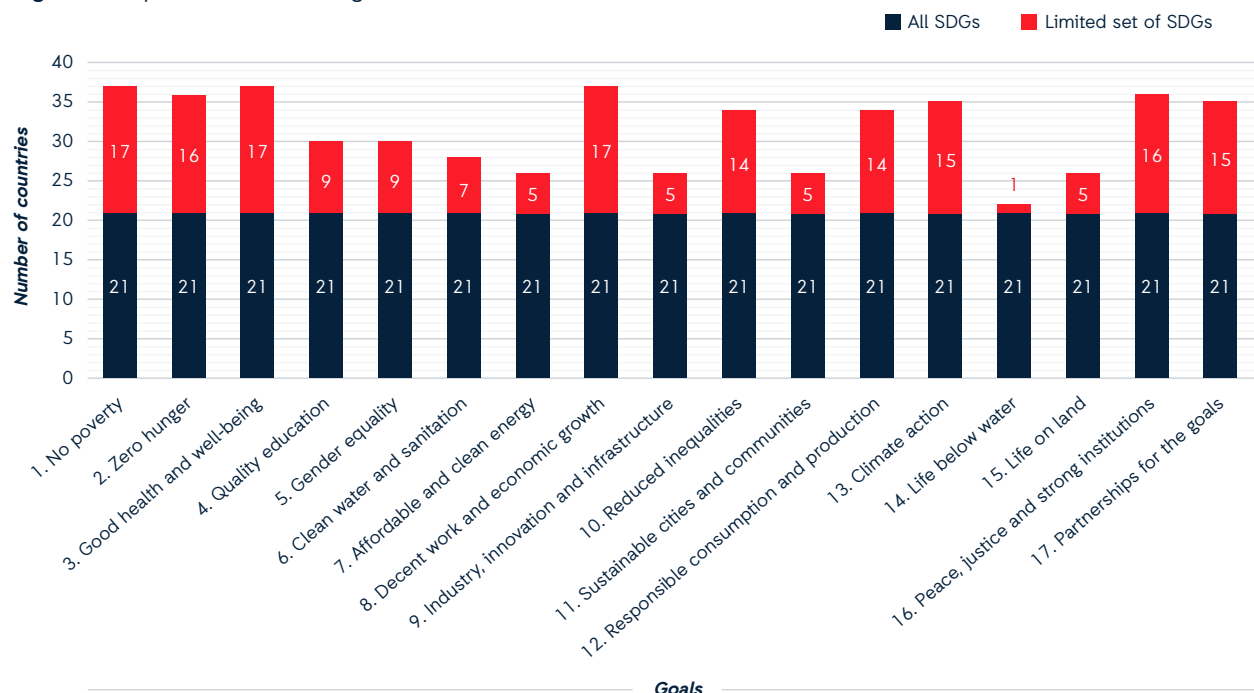
Figure 10 provides an overview of the goals most cited in VNR reports according to the approach taken to the goal-by-goal analysis. SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 2 (Zero hunger) and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) were the most present in VNR reports that did not present an analysis covering all

SDGs. On the other hand, SDG 14 (Life below water) appeared in only one VNR report (from **Madagascar**) not presenting an all-SDGs set of analysis.

The 2021 review shows a decrease in VNR reports towards greater detail in the examination of SDGs, targets and indicators. Twenty-eight (28) out of the 42 reporting countries (or 67%) provided a detailed examination, a decrease from the 79% of 2020.⁴⁷ Detailed examinations tend to include overall information on the status of a particular SDG, efforts to accelerate implementation, successes and challenges. Eleven (11) countries provided only summary-level information, while three (3) countries (**Bahamas, China, and San Marino**) did not provide details of the implementation of specific SDGs in their VNR reports and main messages.

47. In previous years, the percentages had been 89% in 2019, 65% in 2018, and 64% in 2017.

Figure 10. Specific SDG coverage



A case study in good practice: Malaysia's SDG Trust Fund

Malaysia has committed to enhancing its financial structure to further enable a more comprehensive approach towards financing various SDG programmes and projects. For this, annual budgets will be completely aligned to the SDGs, and an SDG-focused fund – MySDG Trust Fund – will be established. This fund will provide a secure avenue for stakeholders to contribute to attaining the SDGs in both a systematic and sustainable manner. All companies, individuals, and groups, in and outside Malaysia will be re-assured that all efforts and contributions will be used by finance programmes and projects that align with national strategies and key priorities under the SDGs. With the implementation of the MySDG Trust Fund, more SDG programmes and projects held by multi-stakeholders will be more greatly highlighted.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Malaysia'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 2021 VNR reports found a decline with regards to the number of countries making applicable linkages to all three aspects of sustainable development between the goals. Seventeen (17) out of the 42 2021 reporting countries (or 40%) made references to applicable linkages, versus 51% of countries reporting in 2020.⁴⁸ This result negatively indicates that countries may not be working towards ensuring integration in their approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation.

48. For comparison purposes, the percentages had been 25% in 2019, 37% in 2018, and 49% in 2017.

A case study in good practice: Concrete examples of integration and policy coherence in Cyprus' VNR report

In its goal-by-goal analysis, Cyprus VNR report refers to applicable linkages between the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental), as well as the indivisible nature of the SDGs agenda. For example, under SDG 2 (Zero hunger), the VNR report refers to the environmental impacts of agricultural production; under SDG 4 (Quality education), it outlines action plans and policies towards gender equality; under SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy), it presents data on the population unable to keep home adequately warm due to their poverty status. These and other examples presented in Cyprus' VNR report show good practice in terms of integration and policy coherence around the 2030 Agenda.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Cyprus's VNR report.

Apart from the decrease in the number of countries referring to linkages between the goals, 2021 VNR reports showed only a slight increase in the number of countries giving equal attention to all three dimensions of sustainable development. Figure 11 provides an overview of the extent to which countries examined all three dimensions of sustainable development.⁴⁹ Twenty-one (21) countries, or 50%, placed equal emphasis on the three dimensions of sustainable development in 2021.⁵⁰ Nine (9) countries addressed all three dimensions of sustainable development but placed greater importance on the social. Conversely, one country (**China**)'s VNR report had a more limited focus on the social dimension of sustainable development. In turn, **Egypt** addressed all dimensions of sustainable development but put greater emphasis on the economy, while no countries placed a more limited focus on economic. In terms of the environmental dimension, no country put more emphasis on it, while nine (9) countries gave more limited attention to the environment. Overall, the review of VNR reports over 2017-2021 suggests a worrisome decline in terms of the extent to which countries are reporting integrated approaches to implementing the SDGs.

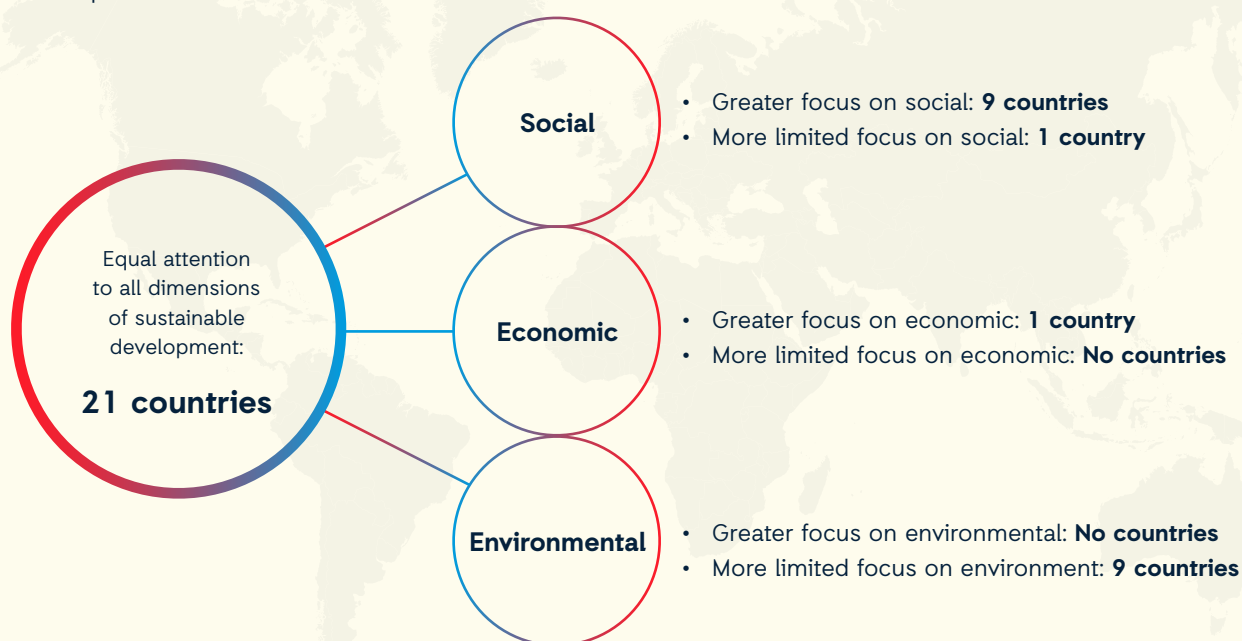


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49. Bahamas is excluded from Figure 11 as it did not present a full VNR report and did not provide information on this matter.

50. In previous years, these percentages were the following: 23 countries (or 49%) in 2020, 27 countries (or 57%) in 2019, 29 countries (or 63%) in 2018, and 33 countries (75%) in 2017.

Figure 11. Attention to social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in 2021 VNR reports



3.5.2. Policy coherence for sustainable development

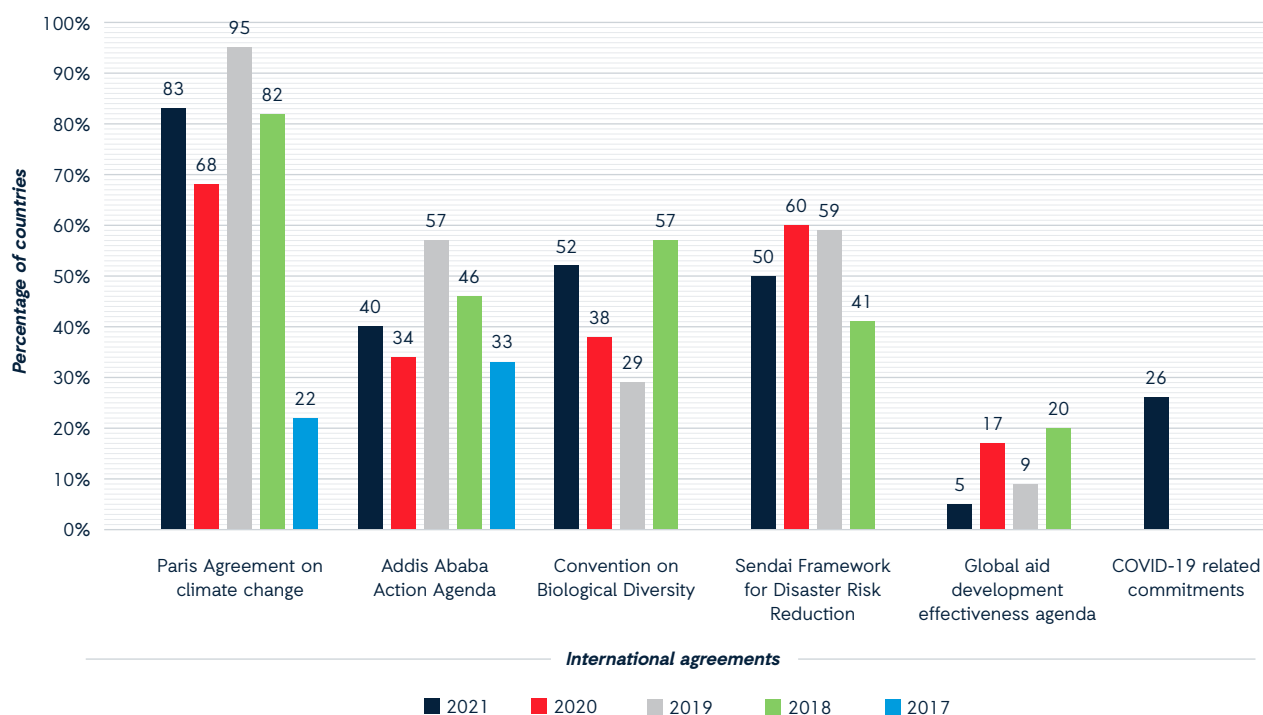
The review of VNR reports looks at the extent to which countries make linkages to international agreements related to the 2030 Agenda and policy coherence for sustainable development. There are many international agreements and frameworks that support implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The review examined 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](#).⁵¹ 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, such as the [Access to COVID-19 Tools \(ACT\) Accelerator](#), the [Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations \(CEPI\)](#), [COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access \(COVAX\)](#), and the [Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization \(GAVI\)](#). Figure 12 shows linkages to international agreements related to the 2030 Agenda between 2017 and 2021, according to VNR reports.⁵²

51. The Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting [guidelines for 2021](#) had encouraged countries to make specific reference to these agreements (and others) in the introductory section of the VNR reports. Same goes for the revised [guidelines for 2022](#).

52. Information was not available for some of the components in 2017. Comparisons with that year's results were made whenever possible.

Figure 12. Linkages to international agreements related to the 2030 Agenda



Overall, reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda and relevant international agreements shows some improvement in 2021 over 2020, although there were declines in references to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the global aid/development effectiveness agenda. In the first case, 50% of the countries reporting in 2021 noted the framework, a reduction from two previous years.⁵³ In the second case, only 5% of the countries (specifically **Afghanistan** and **Czech Republic**) referred to agreements on aid/development effectiveness, the smallest percentage in all the comparable years.⁵⁴ Still with respect to financing the 2030 Agenda and other means of implementation, VNR reports in 2021 showed some increase in relation to 2020 in terms of references to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. Forty percent (40%) of VNR reports referred to that agenda in 2021, versus 34% in 2020.⁵⁵

The Paris Agreement on climate change continues to be the most commonly cited agreement in VNR reports. In 2021, 35 out of the 42 reporting countries

(83%) mentioned the agreement, and the remaining 7 countries (17%) provided information on how they were addressing climate change, even if they did not mention the Paris Agreement. Such percentages represent an increase in comparison with 2020 and 2018.⁵⁶ As with previous years, 2021 VNR reports tend to point to national climate policies, efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, renewable energy and improved energy efficiency, efforts to reduce vulnerabilities to climate change and disasters, and mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Some countries also referred to education, adaptation, and conservation initiatives. In addition, a number of countries referred to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including **Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Laos, Marshall Islands, North Korea, and Norway**. **Afghanistan's** VNR report also mentioned the country being party in 16 multilateral environmental agreements different from the Paris Agreement,

53. Regarding the Sendai Framework, results were 60% of countries in 2020, 59% in 2019, and 41% in 2018.

54. In terms of the global aid/development effectiveness agenda, results were 17% in 2020, 9% in 2019, and 20% in 2018.

55. Percentages regarding references to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda were 57% of the countries reporting in 2019, 46% in 2018, and 33% in 2017.

56. With regards to the Paris Agreement, results from previous years were 68% of reporting countries in 2020, 95% in 2019, 82% in 2018, and 22% in 2017.

including the Basel Convention, the Rotterdam Convention, the Stockholm Convention, the Montreal Protocol, the Minamata Convention, the Vienna Convention, and the Kyoto Protocol. In terms of other environment-related agreements, the review found that 52% of the countries reporting in 2021 referred to the Convention on Biological Diversity, an increase from two previous years.⁵⁷

A case study in good practice: Antigua and Barbuda, a green island

Following Hurricane Irma in 2017, Barbuda adopted a “green island concept,” boosting alternative energies, particularly solar and wind energies, organic agriculture, and food safety as its main features. Protected agriculture and specially designed smart greenhouses are the two pillars on which the country builds resilience, readiness, and sustainability.

Through the “green island concept,” Barbuda promotes innovative products and technologies such as rational mechanization, germplasm selection, the application of water resources efficiency methods, and small ruminants raising under intensive systems. New value-added will be achieved by processing and packaging products such as jams, juices, preserves, coconut oil, and animal feed. The approach also focuses on product transportation to markets, developing new air and seaports. The program’s final goal is to establish an environmentally friendly “agro-industrial complex of production, processing, storage, packaging, and marketing over the next five years.” The Barbuda recovery fund, private investors, bilateral assistance, development partners, and donor agencies are funding the program.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Antigua and Barbuda’s VNR report.

In terms of COVID-19, more VNR reports referred to outward-facing responses to the pandemic, a positive change in relation to 2020, when reporting countries tended to focus on domestic responses. While no countries explicitly referred to global commitments in this area in 2020, 11 out of the 42 countries reporting in 2021 (or 26%) mentioned adapting their approaches to foreign assistance or commitments to global initiatives, including the ACT Accelerator, CEPI, COVAX, and GAVI. Countries referring to one or more of those commitments include **Bahamas, China, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Paraguay, Qatar, Spain, Sweden, and Uruguay**. 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 development⁵⁸ is about ensuring that domestic policies maximize their positive contributions and minimize negative spillovers to sustainable development globally. The number of countries referring to policy coherence to sustainable development in 2021 dropped in relation to both 2020 and 2019, with half of the countries (21 out of 42 countries) mentioning that concept.⁵⁹

57. With regards to references to the Convention on Biological Diversity, percentages from previous years were 38% of the reporting countries in 2020, 29% in 2019, and 57% in 2018.

58. This directly refers to Target 17.14 (Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development) and 17.14.1 (Number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development), although VNR reports may broach the topic of policy coherence in other parts of their VNR reports, and not only in the analysis of SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals).

59. Percentages related to policy coherence for sustainable development were 60% in 2020 and just over half of reporting countries (51%) in 2019.

Moreover, the majority of VNR reports continues 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 (such as in the case of **Spain**, for example), with some pointing to efforts to ensure coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda (such being the case of **Czech Republic** and **Laos**, for example). However, some countries referred to the international level. For example, **Colombia** and **Cuba** made considerations around internal/external policies coherence, even if their main focus was on national policies. Conversely, the VNR reports of countries that include **Angola, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe** provide a more global-related understanding of policy coherence to sustainable development, in which this concept is related to different levels of policy areas (local, regional, national, international).

Civil society validity check:

Policy coherence in Denmark

According to civil society's views integrated in Denmark's VNR report, the country has not integrated the principle of "Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development" (PCSD) in a systematic way, neither in its implementation of the SDGs, neither in the 2017 action plan for the SDGs, nor by adopting a specific action plan for PCSD. In terms of recommendations, civil society mentioned centering the principle of PCSD in Denmark's forthcoming SDG action plan, and conducting systematic analyses regarding policies' consequences and potential negative spill-over effects for developing countries.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Denmark's VNR report, civil society contributions.

In 2021, 19 countries (or 45%) examined the impacts of their foreign and/or domestic policies on the realization of the SDGs globally, up from

23% in 2020 and 26% in 2019. Among the 2021 reporting countries, **Chad** was the only one referring to the assessment of exclusively domestic policies on the realization of SDGs globally, compared with 4 countries in 2020. Conversely, 3 countries (**Azerbaijan, Bhutan, and Sweden**) only noted the impacts of their foreign policies on the SDGs globally, up from only 1 country doing so in 2020.⁶⁰ In 2021, most of the countries assessing their policies on SDGs outcomes (15 out of 19 countries) pointed to the impacts of both their domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally, which is a positive increase in relation to previous years.⁶¹

Some countries reporting in 2021 provided a systematic analysis of their global contributions. For example, **China** mentioned having lifted more than 700 million people out of poverty in over 4 decades, contributing to over 70% of global poverty reduction. **Cyprus** referred to having 4 times more asylum seekers than the European Union average, and mentioned its current preparation of integration mechanisms promoting the rights of migrants.

Indonesia referred to partnering with other countries towards the implementation of systems to fight illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and advance SDG 14 (Life on water). In the case of **Malaysia**, the VNR report refers to efforts towards maintaining regional and global peace and security by premising its foreign policy on collective security cooperation through multilateralism and support to UN Peacekeeping Operations.⁶² In turn, **Namibia** mentions the benefits of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), estimating and increase in exports towards all African sub-regions, and offering industrialization opportunities through regional integration and trade.

Overall, VNR reporting for 2021 showed a decrease in the extent to which countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation. Conversely, there was a considerable increase when it comes to policy coherence in terms of analysis of both domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally.

60. This compares to 8 countries in 2019, 15 countries in 2018, and 17 countries in 2017.

61. These numbers were 6 countries in 2020, 3 countries in 2019, 10 countries in 2018, and 11 countries in 2017.

62. In terms of foreign-related aspects, under SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), Malaysia's VNR report mentions businesses being able to "attract 2 unicorns (home-grown or foreign)" [sic], p. 72.



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 2021 reporting countries have raised awareness on the 2030 Agenda. The third section focuses on the topic of efforts at the local level (or localization) and includes a new assessment⁶³ around the mentioning of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) in the VNR reports. The fourth section broaches the theme of partnerships to realize the SDGs, and examines 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

- **Efforts to leaving no one behind (LNOB):**
Fewer countries noted that efforts to leave no one behind are informed by existing data,

63. New in relation to previous years' *Progressing National SDGs Implementation* reports.

in comparison to previous years. In 2021, 16 countries (38%) mentioned that additional data is required to leaving no one behind, and only 10 countries (24%) indicated efforts to LNOB as being informed by existing data – a backslide from the 40% of countries reporting in 2020.

- **Reporting on LNOB:** In 2021, 100% of countries mentioned the principle of leaving no one behind (versus 92% in 2020). Countries either provided information throughout their VNR report, or included a dedicated chapter or section on LNOB. All countries reporting in 2021 with full VNR reports (41 countries) identified groups that are being left behind or at risk of being left behind. These include children and youth (98%), people with disabilities (95%), women and/or girls (95%), and the elderly (76%).
- **National policies and plans:** More countries have been incorporating the principle of leaving no one behind in the creation of national sustainable development policies. In 2021, 34 out of 42 countries (81%) highlighted embedding leaving no one behind or efforts to address inequality and social exclusion as part of overarching development plans, compared to 60% of countries in 2020 and 36% of countries in 2019.
- **Impact of COVID-19 on LNOB:** In 2021, 26 out of 42 countries (86%) provided information on the specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from an LNOB perspective. This shows an increase in relation to 2020, when 68% of countries had provided such information.

4.1.2. Awareness-raising

- **Awareness-raising activities:** In 2021, information on awareness-raising activities was available for 79% of countries, down from previous years (98% of countries in 2020, 87% in 2019, 83% in 2018, and over 90% in 2017). However, a higher number of countries pointed to the creation of a communications strategy.

4.1.3. Efforts at the local level / Localization

- **Localizing the 2030 Agenda:** Reporting on efforts at the local level (or localization) shows a steady result, as 83% of countries provided information on their efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda (same

percentage as in 2020). Conversely, a smaller proportion of countries (31%) pointed to the integration of the 2030 Agenda into local plans in 2021 (down from the 43% of 2020), and a lesser percentage of countries (38%) referred to coordination between the federal and the local levels (down from 47% in 2020).

- **Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs):** More countries mentioned VLRs in 2021 (36% of countries, versus 4% in 2020 and none in 2019). As an instrument of localization, VLRs pave the way for subnational accountability structures.

4.1.4. Partnerships to realize the SDGs

- **The role of non-state actors:** In 2021, the majority of countries (93%) reported on contributions by non-state actors, an increase over 2020 (89% of countries). An increase in reporting was also observed regarding partnerships around the private sector (86%, versus 75% in 2020) and academia (67%, versus 55% in 2020). Conversely, there has been a decrease in reporting on the role of parliamentarians as partners in realizing the 2030 Agenda (48%, versus 53% in 2020), and on the participation of children and youth in SDGs implementation (40%, versus 45% in 2020).
- **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 2021, 86% of countries provided this information (versus 79% in 2020, 68% in 2019, 65% in 2018, and 56% in 2017). Countries continue to recognize a wide range of roles played by civil society, although there has been a decrease in reporting on some of the types of contributions, such as awareness-raising activities, forming coalitions, and providing guidance and/or preparing tools on 2030 Agenda implementation.

4.1.5. Means of implementation

- **Budgeting for 2030 Agenda implementation:** Countries reporting in 2021 reversed the so far positive trend with respect to countries that both costed implementation and identified sources of finance. While 26% of the countries provided this information in 2020, only 17% did so in 2021. On the other hand, 2021 experienced an

increase in the number of countries reporting on including the SDGs into national budgets: 62% of countries mentioned having already incorporated the SDGs into budgeting processes (versus 51% in 2020), and 4 countries (or 10%) mentioned such incorporation as a plan (versus 2 countries, or 4%, in 2020).

- **Means of implementation trends:** Reporting on the means of implementation improved in all aspects apart from domestic resources, which remained stable – 36% of countries reporting in both 2021 and 2020 did not mention costing 2030 Agenda implementation, although they have identified sources of finance. Information availability for other components of means of implementation increased, as follows: international public finance (95% of the countries, versus 83% in 2020), trade (74% of countries, versus 58% in 2020), capacity development (86% of countries, versus 83% in 2020), technology (90% of countries, versus 79% in 2020), systemic issues (88% of countries, versus 70% in 2020), best practices (69% of countries, versus 57% in 2020), challenges (98% of countries, versus 94% in 2020), lessons learned (62% of countries, versus 53% in 2020), and learning from peers (38% of countries, versus 15% in 2020).
- **COVID-19 on VNR reports and on means of implementation:** Only 2 countries did not make significant reference to COVID-19 in their VNR reports in 2021, which translates into 93% of countries producing either a stand-alone chapter (or sub-chapter or annex) or integrating information around the pandemic and its effects on 2030 Agenda implementation throughout the VNR reports. Moreover, 91% of countries (versus 75% in 2020) reported on the impacts of COVID-19 on the means of implementation.

4.1.6. Measurement and reporting

- **Data availability:** In 2021, fewer countries provided information on data availability (36% of countries, versus 45% in 2020, and 76% in 2019), but more countries (83%, versus 64% in 2020) stated efforts currently in place towards improving such availability. Conversely, slightly fewer countries reported using unofficial data to build their VNR reports (40% of countries in 2021, versus 43% in 2020).

- **National review processes:** Fewer countries reported on follow-up and review processes at the national level (62% of countries reporting in 2021, versus 63% in 2020, and 85% in 2019). However, more countries presented information on who is responsible for preparing reporting (21% of countries, versus 2% in 2020) and to whom reporting is addressed (17% of countries, versus 2% in 2020), which is a positive trend in terms of transparency and accountability. More countries referred to the role of parliament in national reporting processes in 2021 than in previous years (26% of countries in 2021, versus 11% in both 2020 and 2019, and 4% in 2018).

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 2021, 100% of the reporting countries mentioned the principle of leaving no one behind (versus 92% in 2020). Most countries either provided information throughout their VNR reports (with variable levels of robustness), or a dedicated chapter or section on LNOB (extensions varied as well). Some representative examples in 2021 include the VNR reports from **Cabo Verde, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Norway, Sierra Leone, and Sweden**.

Conversely, despite having referred to the LNOB principle, **North Korea** dedicated it only one paragraph, which also contains the only mentions to LNOB in the whole VNR report. In the cases of **Iraq** and **Qatar**, there was no dedicated chapter to LNOB, and **Afghanistan** only presented a very short chapter around this issue. Moreover, the principle was only briefly referenced in three places in **San Marino's** VNR report, and Bolivia made very limited mentions to it. Such examples show that although there has been a continuous upward trend in including the leaving no one behind principle in VNR reports, findings suggest this has been used as a checkbox activity for some countries. The quality of the information provided, including data availability and the existence of dedicated programs, are essential for (truly) 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 2016-2020. Reporting for 2021 indicates a decline in relation to previous years, which suggests countries continue to face challenges in producing disaggregated data to monitor progress on leaving no one behind. In 2021, VNR reports from only 10 out of 42 countries (24%) indicated that efforts to LNOB were informed by existing data.⁶⁴ Conversely, 16 out of 42 countries (38%) mentioned

that additional data is required to leaving no one behind.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the review of the 2021 VNR reports showed that gender disaggregated data was mostly available or consistently available in 60% of the time, up from previous years.⁶⁶

Regardless of data limitations faced by countries, all countries reporting in 2021 with full VNR reports⁶⁷ (41 countries) 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 provides information that allows interpretation to infer that they are vulnerable. Such approach was taken by countries such as **Angola, Bhutan, Bolivia, Colombia, Marshall Islands, and North Korea**. As shown in Figure 13, the 41 VNR reports identifying vulnerable groups in 2021 (98% of the total reporters) compare to 45 countries in 2020 (96%), 46 countries in 2019 (98%), 42 countries in 2018 (91%), and 33 countries in 2017 (77%), 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.

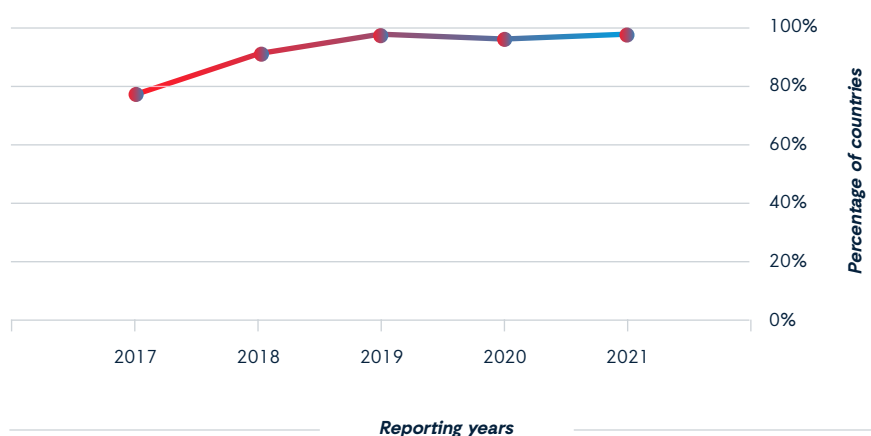
64. Compared to 40% of countries in 2020 (19 out of 47 countries), 19% in 2019 (9 out of 47 countries), and 28% in 2018 (13 out of 46 countries).

65. Versus 13 out of 47 countries (28%) reporting in 2020.

66. This percentage compares to 57% in both 2020 and 2019 VNR reports. 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 leaving no one behind.

67. This excludes Bahamas.

Figure 13. Identification of vulnerable groups



A case study in good practice: Cyprus' actions to leave no women and children behind during the pandemic

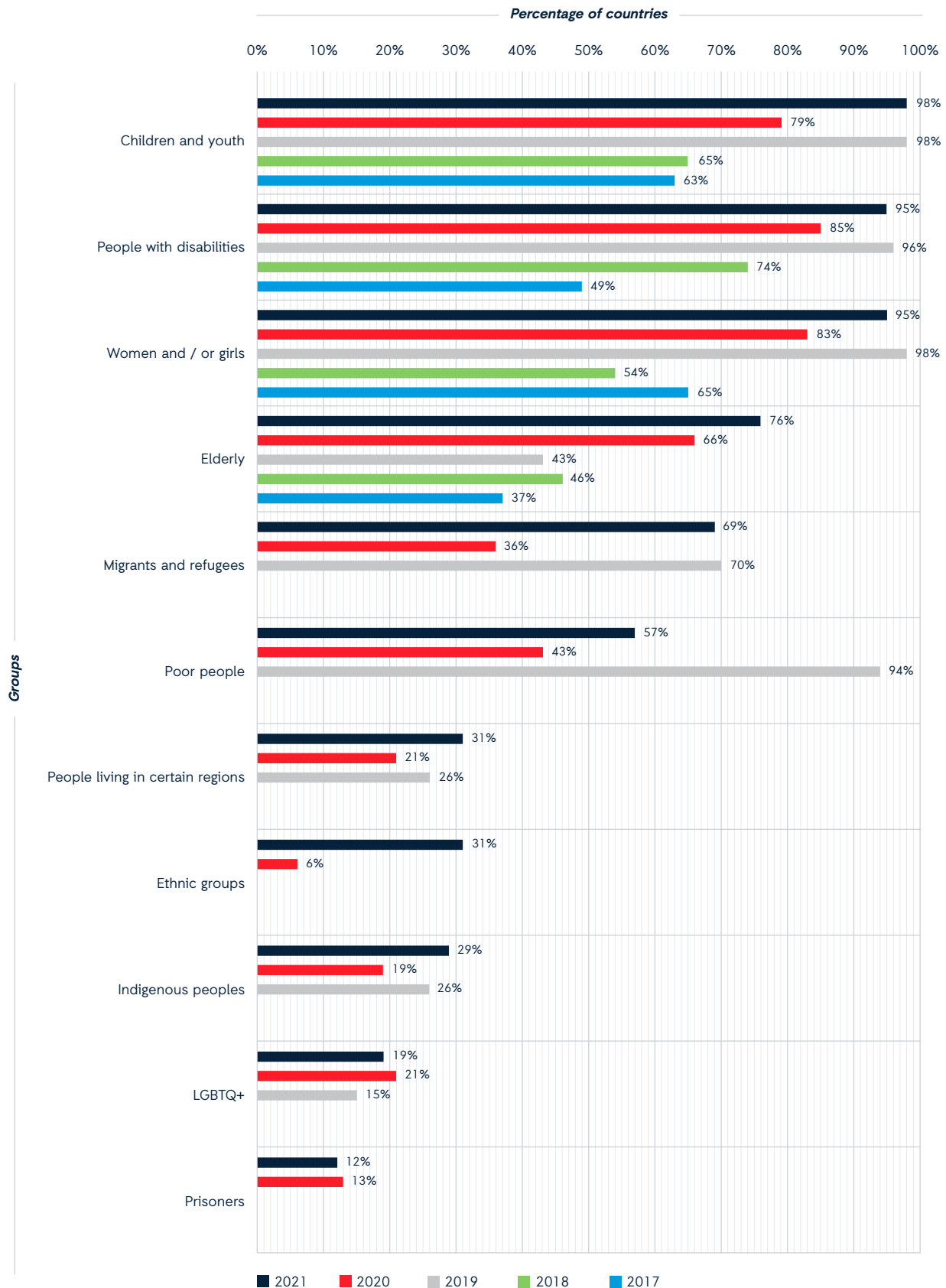
From the realization that the COVID-19 pandemic affected women and children in a disproportioned way, Cyprus adopted actions with the police bodies to both safeguard equal opportunities for all and bridge the gender equality gap. For example, first line police members have been alerted to issues of domestic violence and abuse, new technologies have been adopted for the benefit of survivors of violence (e.g. a web application is currently under development), and special arrangements have been made to video-record statements of children-victims of domestic violence to ensure safe distancing.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Cyprus's VNR report.

Figure 14 provides an overview of the main groups identified as vulnerable or being left behind in the 2021 VNR reports, with a comparison with data from previous years, when available. It shows that the groups identified as the most at risk of being left behind were children and youth⁶⁸ (98% of the countries), persons with disabilities⁶⁹ (95%), women and/or girls⁷⁰ (95%), the elderly (76%), migrants and refugees⁷¹ (69%), people living in poverty⁷² (57%), people living in certain regions (31%), ethnic groups (31%), Indigenous peoples (29%), LGBTQ+ community (19%), and prisoners⁷³ (12%). In comparison with previous years, 2021 VNR reports are consistent in identifying children/youth, persons with disabilities, women/girls and the elderly as the 4 major groups at risk of being left behind, this having been the case since the analysis of 2017 VNR reports.

68. Countries sometimes disaggregate children and youth as separate groups. However, results are shown in aggregate here to account for the VNR reports that considered children and youth as one same group, and for ease of comparison with data from previous years. In spite of this, there are certainly advantages in disaggregating such data and treating children and youth as distinct categories.
69. Persons living with both physical and mental disabilities (e.g. mental illnesses, dementia, behavioural and developmental disorders) have been included in this category.
70. Some countries further specified this category by specifically mentioning pregnant women, divorced women, widows, and women with three or more children, for example.
71. This category also includes references to internally displaced persons (IDPs), stateless persons, and returnees (mentioned in Afghanistan's VNR report).
72. This category appears in many different ways in the VNR reports, such as the poor, poor people, the socio-economically disadvantaged, people living in extreme poverty, people with scarce resources, and the multi-dimensionally poor. Some VNR reports specified homeless people, who have also been included in the category of people living in poverty for the purposes of this analysis.
73. VNR reports refer to people included in this category in different ways, such as persons in prisons, young males and females who are institutionalized, prisoners and other individuals deprived of their liberty, and prison inmates. Zimbabwe's VNR report also recognizes ex-convicts as one of the groups at risk of being left behind.

Figure 14. Groups most commonly identified as vulnerable in VNR reports



In comparison with 2020, the 2021 VNR reports saw an overall increase in the number of countries identifying most groups as being left behind or at risk of being left behind. Apart from the abovementioned 4 major groups, increases in identification were also observed for the case of migrants/refugees, poor people, people living in certain regions,⁷⁴ ethnic groups, and Indigenous peoples. Declines in identification happened with the LGBTQ+ community, with 19% of the 2021 reporting countries mentioning this group (versus 21% in 2020), and prisoners, with 12% in 2021 (down from 13% in 2020).

A case study in good practice: Recognition of disproportionate effects of the pandemic in Malaysia

Malaysia highlighted the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on sectors of the population considered more vulnerable. According to the VNR report, challenges are more pronounced for low-income households, women, children, elderly, persons with disabilities (PWDs), Indigenous people (Orang Asli), homeless, migrants, stateless persons, and refugees. Recognizing the specific issues surrounding each one of these groups helps in the development of specific solutions to leave no one behind during the COVID-19 crisis.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Malaysia's VNR report.

As some country-specific examples, when it comes to Indigenous peoples, **Malaysia** identified the Orang Asli, and **Paraguay** identified the Guaraní population, particularly those who are monolingual, as being or at the risk of being left behind. In terms of ethnic groups, those identified were afro-descendants (from

Colombia's VNR report), the Kuchis (from **Afghanistan's** VNR report), Roma populations (mentioned in **Colombia, Czech Republic, and Spain's** VNR reports), and the San, Tonga and Doma people (from **Zimbabwe's** VNR report).

A category that seems to arise from the analysis of 2020-2021 VNR reports are people characterized by their labour or employment situation. While 7 countries had already referred to unemployed people in 2020, examples arising in 2021 VNR reports include the following: **Bhutan** referred to those working in the informal economy and unemployed persons, **Indonesia** mentioned labourers (without further details), **Laos** mentioned farmers with limited access to land, unskilled and unemployed workers, and unpaid workers, **San Marino** referred to the unemployed, irregular or precarious workers, young people out of training and employment, and workers close to retirement who are made redundant, and **Zimbabwe** included people working in informal sectors.

Moreover, in addition to the groups identified in Figure 14, some countries presented more granular information about people at risk of being left behind, as shown in Box 5 below.

The specific case of **North Korea** contains some contradictions. Among the groups at risk of being left behind that can be inferred from the VNR report's goal-by-goal analysis (as actions are not framed under the objective of LNOB), there are two that stand out due to contradictory information presented in other parts of the VNR report. One of them is poor people; even if the VNR report states that the government fulfills everyone's material needs, it specifically mentions how SDG 1 (No poverty) has been localized in the country for continuous improvement of people's lives. The other group is women; even if the VNR report argues that the country has fully achieved gender equality, actions related to women are still mentioned. Although the goal-by-goal analysis allows for some inference on leaving no one behind, the fact that the VNR report does not recognize the principle as a steppingstone for action, and states that the government has fully achieved some SDGs is worrisome.

74. E.g. rural regions, mountainous areas, areas of difficult access (both from Cuba's VNR report), island and coastal communities (from Sierra Leone's VNR report), and outer island inhabitants (from Marshall Islands' VNR report).

BOX 5. OTHER GROUPS IDENTIFIED AS BEING / AT RISK OF BEING LEFT BEHIND

- **Azerbaijan** mentioned vulnerable and isolated groups of women and men, young families, and martyrs' families.
- **Bhutan** mentioned single parents. Four (4) countries had also identified single-parent households in 2020 VNR reports.
- **Colombia** specified the victims of the Colombian conflict.
- **Cuba** referred to the chronically ill, single-parent families (headed by women in particular) and families affected by extreme meteorological events.
- **Czech Republic** mentioned distressed persons, recognizing distress as a structural issue in regard to indebtedness and debt literacy.
- **Denmark** referred to people facing or at risk of facing social problems such as substance abuse, prostitution or violence in intimate relationships.
- **Laos** referred to people living with HIV. In 2020, 7 countries had referred to this group.
- **North Korea, Qatar, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe** mentioned orphans.
- **Norway** divided groups into the domestic and international spheres, including national ethnic minorities (without specifying which) in the former, and religious minorities in the latter.
- **Sierra Leone** noted persistent discrimination against the following groups: street beggars, orphans, homeless people, widowed individuals, and those struggling to make ends meet.
- **Zimbabwe** noted people suffering from the impacts of natural disasters (i.e. Cyclone Idai) and health emergencies.

Civil society validity check: Discrimination against persons with disabilities in North Korea

The mismatch between policies and implementation caused by systemic practices is further shown by public policies developed in order to protect PWD rights. According to a civil society report, *discriminatory practices persist against persons with disabilities in forms including but not limited to quarantine, forcible sterilization, and forcible separation due to the broad interpretation of Article 4 [of the DPRK's Persons with Disabilities Protection Act, 2003], which states that North Korea shall "promptly detect, treat, and prevent the disease-causing disability." Recent survey results imply that the prevalence of forced sterilization and quarantine has lessened and that persons with disabilities are increasingly seen living together with the rest of the general population.*

Source: Civil society report from North Korea.

4.2.2. Efforts to leave no one behind

Although not all countries included a dedicated section on leaving no one behind in their VNR reports, all the 41 countries presenting full VNR reports in 2021⁷⁵ provided information on efforts related to at least one vulnerable group. This represents an increase in relation to previous years.⁷⁶ The same situation refers to countries that provided information on efforts to realize gender equality.⁷⁷ Different from previous years, though, the review of 2021 VNR reports found a predominance of countries pointing to universal programs such as social assistance, and new specialized

75. This excludes Bahamas.

76. For comparison purposes, the number of countries referring to efforts related to at least one LNOB group was: 44 out of 47 countries in 2020, 46 out of 47 countries in 2019, 41 out of 46 countries in 2018, and 33 out of 43 countries in 2017.

77. In terms of realizing gender equality, numbers from previous years were: 44 out of 47 countries in 2020, 46 out of 47 countries in 2019, and 40 out of 46 countries in 2018.

programs to LNOB.⁷⁸ In 2021, 37 countries pointed to universal programs, 36 referred to new specialized programs to specific groups, and 26 countries mentioned existing 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.⁷⁹

It is also worth noting that 34 countries (or 81%) highlighted embedding leaving no one behind or efforts to address inequality and social exclusion as part of overarching development plans.⁸⁰ This positive increase suggests more incorporation of 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 groups.

A case study in good practice: Cuba's "Yo sí puedo" program

Cuba's international cooperation efforts and quality are recognized worldwide. The "Yo sí puedo" (Yes, I can) program for literacy promotion stands out among its actions. The program has provided education to people of all ages through a learning process based on students' social reality and daily activities. By the end of 2019, more than 10 million people in 30 Latin American and African countries have received literacy training under the "Yo sí puedo" activities, enabling 1.5 million of its participants to reach the sixth grade of basic education.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Cuba's VNR report.

In terms of efforts not to leave specific groups behind, most countries reporting in 2021 provided information on actions being carried out. The group mostly covered by actions described in the 2021 VNR reports was children, with 41 countries (98%) describing approaches to avoid them from being left behind. People living in poverty is the next most mentioned group, covered by actions and programs from 39 countries (93%). Thirty-seven (37) countries (or 88%) referred to efforts to leave no persons with disabilities behind. Although **Afghanistan's** VNR report recognizes the low percentage of persons with disabilities' participation in schools and their high level of unemployment, no specific programs are mentioned to address these issues. The next group is migrants and refugees, with 30 countries (71%) noting specific programs or actions not to leave those people behind. Conversely, although **Afghanistan's** VNR report mentions refugees and returnees, specially from Iran and Pakistan, it does not mention specific programs to address these issues. In the case of **Japan**, although there is not an overarching solution or specific programs aiming at migrants, the VNR report brings the recognition of immigration-related problems and specifies the need for policy re-examination and reform.

In terms of ethnic groups, 12 countries (29%) provided information on efforts towards not leaving them behind. Although the VNR reports from **Afghanistan** and **Czech Republic** recognize ethnic groups (the Kuchis and the Roma, respectively) as more at risk of social exclusion, there is no information on how to tackle the identified issues. Eleven (11) countries (or 26%) mentioned actions not to leave Indigenous Peoples behind. Apart from these, 33 countries (or 79%) also referred to other groups as being at risk of being left behind and particular efforts to address them. These groups include the elderly, people living in rural/remote areas, homeless people, youth, and the LGBTQ+ community.

The 2021 data show a continued emphasis on similar approaches compared to 2018-2020, although higher

78. Between 2018-2020, universal programs such as social assistance, and existing specialized programs had predominated.

79. Samman, Emma. (2016). 10 Things to Know about 'Leave no one Behind.' London: ODI.

80. This compares to 28 out of 47 countries (60%) in 2020, 17 out of 47 countries (36%) in 2019, and 10 out of 46 countries (22%) in 2018.

percentages of countries have referred to specific programs or actions targeting particular groups.⁸¹ As shown above, more limited references were found across 2021 VNR reports to efforts related to supporting Indigenous Peoples and ethnic groups. In terms of strategies and approaches, these are rather similar to the ones mentioned in VNR reports from previous years and 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 or education.

A case study in good practice: The “Dominican Republic Includes” seal

Population with disabilities’ support to reach the SDGs has been strengthened by promoting their development and participation under equal conditions in Dominican Republic. Among the initiatives to promote the appropriation of policies in favor of the population with disabilities, the National Disability Council created, in 2017, the “Dominican Republic Includes” Seal of good inclusive practices for persons with disabilities. The Seal recognizes public and private institutions’ good practices to promote full inclusion and improve persons with disabilities and their families’ life quality in one of the following areas: Universal Accessibility, Education, Work, Health, Participation, Justice, Awareness raising, or production of Knowledge. Up to 2021, the government recognized 190 entities and 390 good practices with the Seal.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Dominican Republic’s VNR report.

In 2021, 30 countries (71%) presented some information on progress and results of efforts to leaving no one behind.⁸² Such progress has been sometimes backed up with data, with countries presenting evolution of percentages regarding, for example, levels of poverty (including the Gini coefficient), the wage gap between men and women, and youth’s participation in education. Countries that have presented comparative data to refer to results of LNOB efforts include **Afghanistan, Cabo Verde, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, Madagascar, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Niger, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Spain, and Sweden.** Conversely, in the case of **Uruguay**, even if this is the country’s third VNR report, there is no treatment of the issue of the results achieved following the efforts made to leave no one behind. The VNR report does not refer to changes in the situation of the most vulnerable groups, despite its tables presenting data for different indicators’ evolution over time. Moreover, as in previous years, results and progress presented by countries in 2021 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 (Reduced inequalities). In 2021, 34 out of the 42 reporting countries (or 81%) provided some information on their efforts to reduce domestic inequalities, which is tied to leaving no one behind. This shows an increase in relation to the previous year, when 29 out of 47 countries (or 62%) reporting in 2020 had presented such information. Once again, countries point to national policies and guarantees to non-discrimination, including through legal instruments

81. For comparison purposes, percentages for 2020 where the following. The data analysis considers the amount of countries (from a total of 47 countries presenting VNR reports in 2020) referring to specific programs targeting specific groups, as follows: people living in poverty (92% of reporting countries), children (85% of countries), persons with disabilities (85% of countries), migrants and refugees (53% of countries), ethnic groups (32% of countries), Indigenous Peoples (19% of countries), and other groups (53% of countries).

82. This compares to 35 countries (or 75%) reporting in 2020. In 2019 and 2018, VNR reports did not provide enough information on leaving no one behind data to evaluate the outcomes of activities.

and universal and specialized programs. Some countries, including **Afghanistan, Chad, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, and Sierra Leone** highlighted efforts related to social protection to address domestic inequalities.

A case study in good practice: Efforts to reduce inequality

In **China**, counties provide rural populations with minimum living allowances that are either at or above the national allowances' standard.

The government of **Denmark** has been monitoring inequality-related outcomes through an annual inequality report. The current assessment is that more can be done to tackle inequality.

Namibia has been deploying volunteers to support SDG implementation, including SDG 10, and including at the community level. The work of volunteers and volunteer groups at different levels has contributed to generate solutions and accelerate action to address systemic gaps in SDG implementation.

Qatar highlighted the role of civil society organizations among successful practices to promote and ensure equal opportunities and reducing inequalities, particularly mentioning the Qatar Foundation for Social Work, which is a non-profit development organization contributing to human and social development through specialized centres focusing on family stability, orphan care, child and woman protection, youth empowerment, care and rehabilitation for persons with disabilities, and elderly care.

Thailand has worked to reduce inequalities between and among countries by increasing the number of products with zero-tariff barriers in all categories, and by consistently providing assistance for other countries, such as Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam.

Source: Excerpt adapted from the VNR reports for China, Denmark, Namibia, Qatar, and Thailand.

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

In 2021, 26 out of the 42 reporting countries (or 86%) provided information on the specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from an LNOB perspective. This shows an increase in relation to 2020, when 32 out of 47 countries (or 68%) had provided such information. This increase in reporting positively points to countries' acknowledgment that the most vulnerable are most affected by crises. In 2021, supports focused equally on strategies to tackle health-related impacts (including in terms of mental health), and socio-economic ones.

Targeted groups mentioned in 2021 include children, people living in poverty, those with lower levels of education, the elderly, persons with disabilities, migrants, and homeless people. Some countries have further specified people most at risk of being left behind in the specific context of COVID-19. As some examples, **Azerbaijan's** government covered for tuition of students from socially vulnerable groups. **Bhutan's** assistance programs for essentials' distribution included people undergoing retreat (as a spiritual practice) in secluded places, and stray canines living on the streets have also been fed. **Guatemala** published a document with recommendations to protect the rights of Garífuna, Xinka and mestizo women within the framework of the country's COVID-19 response.

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 26 VNR reports referring to COVID-19 and LNOB in 2021, countries focused on vaccination and spread prevention actions, extended social protection and safety net programs, reviewed policies, created special funds to address the pandemic, and provided financial aid to the general population and to specific groups. As some examples, **Denmark** and **Japan** highlighted the need of universal health coverage, and **Indonesia** highlighted the importance of disaggregated data so that efforts for sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is targeted for those most in need. Overall, reporting countries were able to show clear adjustments being made in their current approaches to LNOB.

A case study in good practice: A measure to protect children during COVID-19 in Angola

In June 2020, in the context of COVID-19, the SOS Criança [SOS Child] 15015 hotline was activated in partnership with the National Children's Institute (INAC), as an accessible mechanism for reporting cases of violence against children, also in response to recommendations related to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) addressed to the Government of Angola. There was an immediate acceptance of this new hotline service. On the other hand, Standard Operational Child Protection Procedures were developed to highlight the roles and responsibilities of each of the sectors that intervene in the response to Child Protection. These were approved in the first half of 2020 by the Joint Executive Decree signed by five Ministries – Justice, Interior, Social Affairs, Health, and Education. This is a milestone in the government's efforts and commitment to promote the provision of child-friendly services and break the cycle of violence against children in Angolan society.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Angola's VNR report.

knowing who is being left behind, by how much, and in what areas. The Inclusive Data Charter (IDC) is a useful tool to this end, as it advances the availability and encourages the use of inclusive and disaggregated data while fostering transparency, accountability, and knowledge sharing to ensure no one is left behind.

- 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.

4.2.5. 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

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 2021, information on awareness-raising activities was available for 79% of the countries, down from all previous years covered by this analysis.⁸³

83. Mentions of awareness-raising activities compare to 98% in 2020, 87% in 2019, 83% in 2018, and over 90% in 2017.

A case study in good practice: Laos' concrete effort to raise SDG awareness

In Laos, an SDG Advocacy and Communication Work Plan has been created to integrate the SDGs into the national education curriculum, raise public awareness, create platforms for public participation, and monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the communication strategies.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Laos' VNR report.

While a range of methods to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda (Figure 15) continues to appear in 2021 VNR reports, two forms of awareness-raising strategies

were most commonly cited. Technical workshops and programs with and for stakeholders in government and beyond on 2030 Agenda implementation were mentioned by 11 countries in 2021,⁸⁴ and events were highlighted by 9 countries.⁸⁵ While there has been a decrease in those numbers in relation to previous years, a higher number of countries (6 countries, namely **Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Colombia, Cuba, Iraq, and Laos**) prepared or plan to prepare a communications strategy in 2021 than in previous years.⁸⁶ Five (5) countries referred to the VNR process as part of awareness-raising efforts,⁸⁷ countries pointed to websites,⁸⁸ and 4 others mentioned forums and/or platforms for sustainable development, versus only 1 country in 2020. Only 3 countries referred to the use of media and social media,⁸⁹ and only 1 country (**Norway**), reporting in 2021 noted translation efforts, including the three official Norwegian languages (Bokmål, Nynorsk and Sami).⁹⁰

Figure 15. Common methods of raising awareness of 2030 Agenda



84. Workshops and programs were mentioned by 16 countries in 2020, 12 countries in 2019, and 10 countries in 2018.

85. Eleven (11) countries noted events in 2020, 9 did so in 2019, and 8 did so in 2018.

86. The mention of communications strategies compares with 3 countries in 2020, 4 countries in 2019, and 6 countries in 2018.

87. The VNR process was mentioned by 5 countries in 2020, 7 countries in 2019, and 9 in 2018.

88. Websites were mentioned by 3 countries in 2020, and 5 countries in 2019.

89. Media and social media were mentioned by 16 countries in 2020, and 8 countries in 2019.

90. Translation was mentioned by 4 countries in both 2020 and 2019.

A case study in good practice: Increasing the general public's awareness of the SDGs in Indonesia

Indonesia has worked towards ensuring the spread of a general awareness towards the SDGs, since the SDGs have been disseminated to a large group of stakeholders within the realm of academics, businesses, civil society organizations, sub-national governments, youth/children, etc. Indonesia ensures that training is conducted with all stakeholders in order to best equip them with the necessary tools to successfully plan and budget for SDGs implementation. An example of such efforts can be seen through the establishment of “SDG Academy Indonesia”, which functions as a key learning institution related to the SDGs. The three programs of the Academy (mobile learning, leadership based, and study abroad) are all open to the public.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Indonesia's VNR report.

Civil society validity check:

On Indonesia's good practice
described above

SDGs Academy Indonesia is a collaborative idea between the government and the private sector. The aim is to increase public capacity and knowledge, but it is not enough to raise public awareness. There are limitations on the scope and reach of the beneficiaries/ participants. It was launched in 2019 by UNDP, the Government of Indonesia through the Ministry of Development Planning (Bappenas), with the support of the Tanoto Foundation (a philanthropic organization founded by Sukanto Tanoto, a businessman in the timber, palm oil, and pulp and paper sectors).

There are three programs: 1) SDGs Leadership Certification, 2) Study Abroad, and 3) Mobile learning. As we see, it is a great program but not massively well known. This innovation is not a subject of discussion among civil society. In our opinion, this is due to the inclusiveness factor. The number of program recipients is still limited, despite the high-level involvement of UN agencies, philanthropy organizations, and the government. For SDGs Leadership Certification, 33 students were included for the first batch, 35 for the second, and applications are currently open for a third one. The study abroad program is not yet running due to COVID-19, and mobile learning is still developing (3.6 stars in the app store, with the majority giving one rate).

In the context of outreach and increased public awareness, we think the Indonesian government and other stakeholders could do more by paying attention to the local context. According to our research with 457 respondents (online survey, in-depth interview, and FGD) and 40 online and local media (September 2015-January 2021), public knowledge about the SDGs exists but is still minimal, especially around how the public can support SDGs implementation. In addition, there are gaps, and different degrees of SDG understanding, such as the SDGs being seen as a sectoral issue, and multiple interpretations of reference data.

Furthermore, the Tanoto Foundation has a relatively negative reputation, especially among environmental civil society organizations. Its founder, Sukanto, has a poor environmental record and social conflicts (Indigenous peoples and economic crimes).

However, we think that the SDGs Academy Indonesia is a good initiative but needs to be optimized/scaling up through 1) increasing the number of beneficiaries, especially from vulnerable and left behind groups; 2) more meaningful engagement with local CSOs and community leaders; 3) as well as more significant outcomes/impacts from activities (not only formalities and business as usual).

Source: Views from INFID, after consultation for the present report.

In 2021, other awareness-raising methods referred to the allocation of funds for pilot projects on awareness-raising efforts around the SDGs (**Marshall Islands**), the production of guidelines for schools (Marshall Islands), the conduction of information and training sessions with Parliament, members of government and public administration and institutions (**Bhutan, Chad, and Niger**), and consultations (**Tunisia**). Conversely, some countries referred to awareness-raising activities without specifying them or providing further details, as it was the case of **Mexico, North Korea, Spain, and Sweden**. Although data suggest that most countries are continuously focusing on carrying out and improving work to disseminate knowledge around the 2030 Agenda, the VNR reports presented in 2021 contain less information around this topic than previous years.



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.

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. Efforts at the local level / Localization

Regional and local governments are critical players in delivering locally tailored sustainable development solutions. For 2030 Agenda implementation, efforts at the local level (or localization) require 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.⁹¹ 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.

A case study in good practice: Localized efforts towards the SDGs in Japan

Japan has been encouraging SDGs localization. Municipalities that propose outstanding initiatives to achieve the SDGs are selected by the government as “SDGs Future Cities.” After being appointed, these cities formulate action plans with key performance indicators (KPIs) based on a “List of SDGs Local Indicators for Local Development.” Mechanisms for monitoring the initiatives’ progress are also in place, and model cases are promoted to further encourage local governments into SDGs implementation. Moreover, the government of Japan encourages active engagement in the Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). To date, four (4) Japanese cities have presented VLRs, and further similar reports conducted by local governments are expected.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Japan’s VNR report.

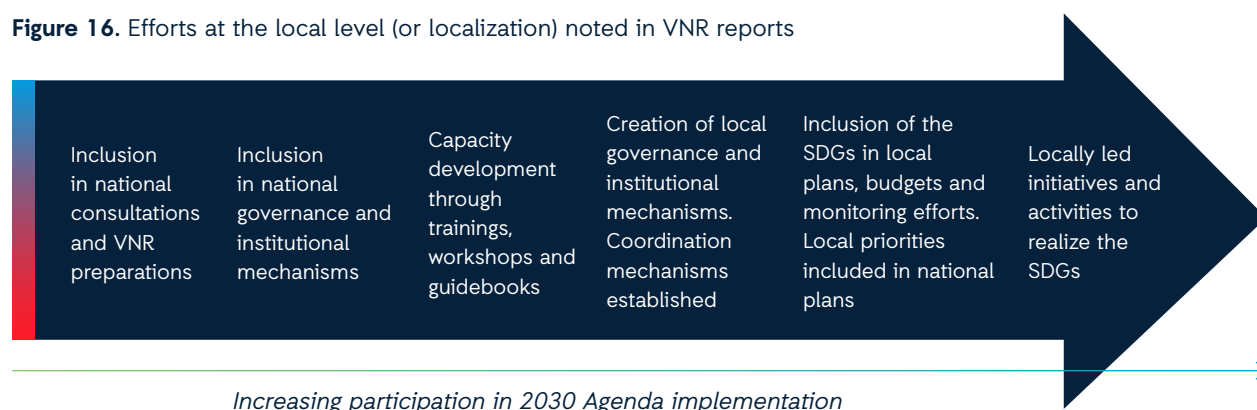
91. For a report relating localization, the SDGs and the COVID-19 pandemic, Cf. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG); Global taskforce of local and regional governments. (2021). [Towards the localization of the SDGs: sustainable and resilient recovery driven by cities and territories](#). Local and regional governments’ report to the 2021 HLPF. 5th report. Cf. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG); Global taskforce of local and regional governments. (2020). [Towards the localization of the SDGs: how to accelerate transformative actions in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak](#). Local and regional governments’ report to the 2020 HLPF. 4th report. For results of a project on SDGs and local governments, Cf. 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, Cf. Wayne-Nixon, Laurel; Wragg-Morris, Tanya; Mishra, Anjali; Markle, Dawson. (2019). [Localizing the 2030 Agenda](#). In: [Good Practice in 2030 Agenda Implementation Series](#). Vancouver and Ottawa: BCCIC and CCIC.

In 2021, 83% of countries provided information on their efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda, a steady result in comparison to 2020.⁹² As it had been the case in previous years, the VNR reports continue to show wide variance in terms of where countries and their local governments are with regards to efforts at the local level (or localization). Consistent reporting helps to assess the status of such efforts overall. In 2021, some countries presented dedicated sections on localization or showcased initiatives by local governments throughout their reports. Conversely,

other countries provided more limited space in their VNR reports to the local efforts/localization topic, or information was unclear, or efforts were not sufficiently detailed, such as in the cases of **Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Dominican Republic, North Korea, San Marino, and Qatar.**

Figure 16 provides an overview of the main elements of efforts at the local level (or localization) reported in VNR reports.

Figure 16. Efforts at the local level (or localization) 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 efforts at the local level (or localization). In 2021,

13 countries (31%) referred to integrating the 2030 Agenda into local plans and policies, a decrease in relation to all previous years covered by this analysis.⁹³

A case study in good practice: Participatory conservation at the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve in Mexico

The Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve has been a protected area in the state of Querétaro since 1997. The Sierra Gorda Ecological Group is a participatory conservation system working to reconcile economic development and biodiversity conservation in the region. The Group is a multistakeholder and interdisciplinary forum highlighting cultural practices in favor

of a safe environment, advocating regional sustainable public policies. The innovative, low-cost, efficient and participatory management model of the Group has led it to obtain the One World Award 2021, as a recognition of its role in promoting a sustainable culture through educational and waste management programs, wildlife protection, the establishment of fire and illegal logging prevention brigades, and for building a regenerative economy throughout sustainable tourism services delivery.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Mexico's VNR report.

92. Information on efforts at the local level (or localization) was mentioned by the same 83% of countries in 2020, versus 75% of the countries reporting in 2019, 65% of countries in 2018, and 73% of countries in 2017.

93. On the integration of the 2030 Agenda into local plans and policies, percentages were 43% of countries reporting in 2020, 38% of countries reporting in 2019, and 35% of countries reporting in 2018.

Coordination between national government institutions and local governments was noted by 16 countries (or 38%) reporting in 2021, down from 22 countries (or 47%) reporting in 2020.⁹⁴ Conversely, reference to local initiatives was presented by 23 countries (or 55%), an impressive increase in relation to previous years.⁹⁵ Eight (8) countries (or 19%) referred to local institutional mechanisms (e.g. local councils or bodies supporting 2030 Agenda implementation), versus only 1 country (or 2%) in 2020. Seven (7) countries (or 17%) noted having integrated local governments into monitoring and evaluation systems,⁹⁶ and 4 countries (or 10%) referred to capacity development efforts for local governments.⁹⁷ Only 2 countries (**Germany** and **Uruguay**) mentioned engaging associations of local municipalities as part of local/localization efforts, which translated into 5% of 2021 reporting countries.⁹⁸ Finally, only 1 country (**Laos**) referred to localization as part of an SDG roadmap.⁹⁹

A case study in good practice: A platform to connect stakeholders in Japan

Back in August of 2018, the Japanese Cabinet Office established the “SDGs for Regional Revitalization Public-Private Partnerships Platform” as a method of sharing information with both the public and the private sector in order to strengthen stakeholder relations. The stakeholders involved range from businesses, NGOs, NPOs, universities and research institutions that collectively aim towards solving local issues and revamping local economies while cooperating with local governments. By the end of May 2021, the

platform had 5,432 members, which included a total of 907 local governments that were also contributing their efforts. The platform supports the matching of members focused on finding solutions to regional issues as well as reaching the SDGs. In the 2020 fiscal year, the most prominent good practices of such public-private partnerships received official recognition.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Japan's VNR report.

As it had been the case in 2020, almost no country reported on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to efforts at the local level (or localization). One exception refers to the case of **Spain**, whose VNR report mentions local actions (both from the autonomous communities and local governments) aimed at facing the pandemic and its effects. While the Spanish VNR report shows complementarity between the actions carried out by the central government and local governments to respond to the pandemic-imposed challenges, the lack of similar information in the VNR reports of other countries is worrisome, as outbreaks require a localized response.

4.4.1. Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have increasingly gained more space, including during the 2021 HLPF, when the second volume of the [Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews](#) was launched. While directly relating to SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), [human settlements](#) at all levels cross-cuttingly relate to other SDGs. Moreover, as an instrument of efforts at the local level (or localization), VLRs pave the way for subnational accountability

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94. In 2019, the number of countries mentioning coordination between national government institutions and local governments was 7 (or 15%).
95. Information on local initiatives was presented by 10 countries in 2020 (or 21%), 13 countries in 2019 (or 28%), and 10 countries in 2018 (or 22%).
96. Monitoring and evaluation regarding efforts at the local level (or localization) was referred to by 3 countries in 2020 (or 6%), and 5 countries in 2019 (11%).
97. Capacity development related to efforts at the local level (or localization) was referred to by 4 countries in 2020 (or 9%), and 12 countries in 2019 (or 26%).
98. On associations of local municipalities, figures from previous years were: 6 countries in 2020 (13%), 3 countries in 2019 (6%), and 3 countries in 2018 (7%).
99. An SDG roadmap was referred to in the context of efforts at the local level (or localization) by zero countries in 2020, and 2 countries in 2019 (or 4%).

structures. In 2021, 15 out of the 42 reporting countries (or 36%) mentioned VLRs, which compares to only 2 countries reporting in 2020 (or 4%), and no countries in 2019.

As some examples, **Colombia** published a “Guide to Voluntary Local Reports for the cities and municipalities of Colombia”, and **Japan** established the “VLR Lab”, a platform which collects worldwide information on VLRs. Under the next steps section, **Sierra Leone’s** VNR report mentions the need to discuss the institution of VLRs in the country. In turn, **Thailand’s** VNR report recognizes that VLRs can link SDGs implementation between national and local levels. In **Zimbabwe**, the Ministry responsible for local governments is working towards mainstreaming VLRs across all 92 local authorities.

As mentioned in a report from United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG),¹⁰⁰ by going beyond monitoring and reporting, both Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) are drivers of local action to achieve the SDGs. By including VLRs and VSRs into reporting processes, countries have the opportunity to consolidate national collective efforts. However, despite being powerful tools towards implementation, those instruments are still not officially present in the HLPF. Such official acknowledgment would lever change towards SDGs implementation, monitoring and reporting.

4.4.2. Recommendations

- **Include efforts at the local level (or 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.**
- **Advocate for the inclusion and acknowledgement of local and regional reporting tools (e.g. Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary Subnational Reviews) at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).**

4.5. Partnerships to realize the SDGs

Most countries agree that all stakeholders in society contribute to sustainable development. In order to realize the SDGs by 2030, accelerated actions are needed from all stakeholders, 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.

A case study in good practice: Czech Republic’s Association of Social Responsibility

In the Czech Republic, the Association of Social Responsibility brings together companies, public institutions, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions towards social responsibility and the achievement of the SDGs. To date, the Association comprises 412 members and is open for other actors to join (as long as they are registered as legal entities). The platform aims to foster public discussion and experience sharing, as well as to enable the creation of new partnerships across different sectors. Since 2017, the Association has been organizing the “SDGs Awards”, an event specifically focused on recognizing efforts towards fulfilling the SDGs. Website: www.spolecenskaodpovednost.cz/en

Source: Excerpt adapted from Czech Republic VNR report.

Among the 2021 reporting countries, 39 out of 42 countries (93%) provided examples of contributions by non-state actors to 2030 Agenda implementation beyond consultation on priorities and participation in governance arrangements.¹⁰¹ This represents an

100. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). (2021) [Towards the localization of the SDGs: Sustainable and resilient recovery driven by cities and territories. Local and regional governments’ report to the 2021 HLPF.](#)

101. This section deals with the forms of engagement and participation that have not yet been addressed in the earlier sections of this report, looking beyond engagement through consultation and governance arrangements.

increase over 2020, where 89% of the countries had provided that information.¹⁰² In 2021, **Afghanistan, Angola, and North Korea** 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 **Egypt**, included a section dedicated to partnerships with information on initiatives from non-state actors in the goal-by-goal analysis. In the case of **Guatemala**, local actors' engagement is referred to as a cross-cutting issue, and the VNR report shows that local actors are considered both as objectives of policies oriented towards the achievement of development, and as actors in its achievement. **Indonesia** included a full annex section with initiatives carried out by non-state actors, highlighting them as good practices for each one of the SDGs covered in the VNR report. Conversely, **Bolivia** and **Paraguay** mentioned non-state actors' participation, but their VNR reports are unclear with regards to the extent of engagement.

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.

A case study in good practice: Highlighting the importance of partnerships for achieving the 2030 Agenda in Egypt

In its reporting methodology, under each SDG covered, the VNR report of Egypt dedicates a section on partnerships. This section acknowledges the importance of all development actors for achieving the 2030 Agenda and exemplifies some of the projects. For instance, for both health and hunger, the report acknowledges the key role played by civil society. For health, the initiatives of NGOs are recognized by having even better access to the populations most in need.

Source: Egypt's VNR report.

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, promoting accountability through independent analysis and reporting, among other roles. Reporting on civil society contributions to the 2030 Agenda as increased over 2017-2021, suggesting a positive trend in terms of countries recognizing the contributions by civil society organizations in their VNR reports. In 2021, 36 out of 42 countries (or 86%) provided such information, versus 79% of countries reporting in 2020, 68% of countries reporting in 2019, 65% of countries in 2018, and 56% of countries in 2017.

102. Percentages on contributions by non-state actors towards 2030 Agenda implementation compare to 98% of countries reporting in 2019, and 85% of countries reporting in 2018.

A case study in good practice: Norway's presentation of progress for every goal and systematic inclusion of civil society's input

The government's assessment of every SDG is presented side-by-side with that carried out by civil society in a concise manner. The government's assessment is comprehensive (includes brief sections outlining the general status of progress, main achievements, main challenges, and Norway's global responsibility) and clear (use of smiley faces and arrows to indicate progress or a lack thereof). For each SDG, the VNR report lists main policy initiatives from the 2016-2021 period, which makes it easy to see what the government has done. Civil society's assessment is structured similarly, highlighting: the general trends by the use of arrows, where Norway has succeeded, challenges, and what Norway must do. For every SDG, civil society's assessment clearly indicates which organizations contributed to the analysis.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Norway's VNR report.

approach to implementing the SDGs. We were able to read a draft and give input, but at a later stage in the process and, due to lack of human resources in the ministry, I believe that these inputs were not followed-up in a satisfactory manner. A longer timeframe and a better process with more feedback loops would have been made the process more fruitful regarding strengthening policy engagement and follow-up.

Regarding the follow-up, the weaknesses in Norway's implementation of the SDGs are evident. We lack a holistic approach and an institutional architecture for the implementation, which makes each initiative, such as the VNR, the national action plan for the SDGs and other networks of academics, local government and unions, separate processes and institutions. We hope that this will improve with the new National Forum for Agenda 2030, but we still need to see further commitments from the government's side for strengthening multi-stakeholder engagement in the implementation.

Source: Views from the Norwegian Forum, after consultation for the present report.

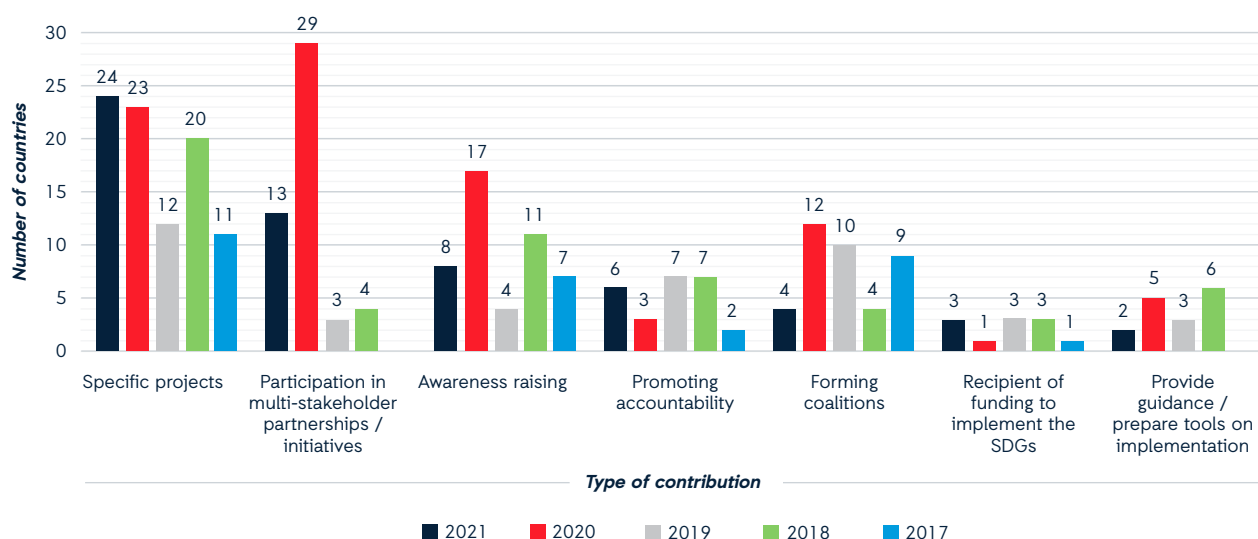
Civil society validity check:

On Norway's good practice described above

We are happy with the government following the Finnish model for the VNR report, by including civil society assessments unedited in the official report. In this regard we are very happy since our assessments are included without any censorship or editing. However, the VNR process had a short timeframe and there were no feedback loops between the stakeholders and the government during the review, which made it difficult for us to further strengthen cooperation and policy engagement within the review. There were clear benefits, and we achieved a stronger relationship with the bureaucrats in the ministry and we learned more about the government's

Figure 17 provides information around the most common activities emerging with respect to reporting on civil society contributions over 2017-2021. Information for 2021 shows a continued emphasis on the role of civil society in implementing specific projects (24 countries) and participating in multi-stakeholder partnerships and/or initiatives to support 2030 Agenda implementation (13 countries). The number of countries highlighting CSOs' actions towards awareness raising decreased substantially, with 8 countries noting this element in 2021. Conversely, the role of civil society in promoting accountability for 2030 Agenda implementation has increased, with 6 countries mentioning this aspect. Mentions to civil society organizations' actions towards forming coalitions, and towards providing guidance and/or preparing tools on 2030 Agenda implementation have both declined, with 4 countries mentioning the first aspect and 2 countries referring to the second. A higher number of countries (3) referred to CSOs as recipients of funding to implement the SDGs, although numbers relating to this aspect have been the lowest in the whole 2017-2021 series.

Figure 17. Main civil society contributions highlighted in VNR reports, 2017-2021



Other aspects appearing in the analysis of both 2020 and 2021 VNR reports were references to civil society conducting research, promoting structured dialogue, and incorporating the SDGs into institutional operations. In 2021, 3 countries (**Bahamas, Malaysia, and Spain**) mentioned civil society's engagement in producing research, versus 4 countries in 2020. Actions carried out by civil society from 4 countries (**Denmark, Spain, Sweden, and Zimbabwe**) pointed to the promotion of a structured dialogue, reflection and debate around the SDGs, versus 2 countries in 2020. There was mention of SDGs having been included in institutional operations of civil society organizations from 3 countries (**Japan, Norway, and Sweden**), versus 1 country in 2020. Overall, VNR reports continue to recognize a wide range of roles played by civil society, although there has been a decrease in reporting on some of the types of contributions. Countries should showcase activities carried out by CSOs in order to more fully acknowledge their role in 2030 Agenda implementation.

A case study in good practice: Initiatives from Cabo Verde's civil society

The report produced by Cabo Verdean civil society organizations mentions specific projects on fostering microfinance and youth empowerment, as well as environmental conservation – both in-land and of marine life. More specific to the SDG process, the NGO platform PLATONG has developed some autonomous monitoring processes – in partnership with the UN country system – through workshops in different islands of Cabo Verde in which selected SDGs have been reviewed and policy recommendations have been issued.

Source: Cabo Verde's CSO report, prepared by the Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda

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 2020, civil society reports noted a range of challenges that prevent civil society's 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, issues related to data

availability and monitoring capacities, and structural factors such as deeply rooted behaviours and changes in government. Figure 18 provides an overview of the challenges noted in civil society reports for 2021, 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, as well as 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 18. Challenges identified by civil society organizations to 2030 Agenda implementation



- **Egypt:** Methodology and process adopted for the formulation of the VNR report were less than ideal regarding participation and inclusion of a diversity of views from different stakeholders. This lack of participation contributed to an analysis for monitoring achievements very much sequential and not based on interlinkages.
- **Indonesia:** The level of inclusiveness seems to have diminished after the launch of the implementation process in 2016-2017. Even though the institutional framework put together for SDG implementation includes the participation of civil society in its structures, the quality of engagement in decision-making and monitoring processes, such as the VNR preparation and the process of adopting CSO data by the government, declined in 2020-2021.
- **Malaysia:** Participation is specific to the progress assessment process, namely the VNR. Also, civil society reports selectiveness and shrinking civic space, which points to a process that is inclusive in terms of its internal modalities (draft VNR report being shared by the government for CSO inputs and said inputs were mostly included), but not as inclusive in terms of access.
- **North Korea:** The country being a single-party totalitarian system, there is not an independent civil society to speak of and participation processes are non-existent.
- **Norway:** Norway has an inclusive implementation process and, more broadly, an open political system, which offers regular and stable channels for meaningful policy dialogue. CSOs were invited to assess SDG implementation within the VNR process, although short deadlines made it difficult to reach civil society on a local level, as well as marginalized groups.
- **Paraguay:** Some interesting initiatives in order to spur policy dialogue with civil society have been carried out by the Parliament in the context of the SDG Commission – such as the review of the current national budget under the light of the SDGs –, or specific workshops organized in the context of the different VNR processes. That said, these have been very limited and isolated initiatives.
- **Spain:** The report notes that the participation process for the formulation of the National Sustainable Development Strategy was not as comprehensive and responsive as it should have been in terms of methodology, responsiveness from the government and timeframe.
- **Zimbabwe:** Citizen participation and civil society engagement is available but not widely established and also not disability-friendly, as there are gaps in ensuring that consultations are held in accessible forums particularly for persons with disabilities (PWDs). There are information gaps, which implies lower quality of citizen participation, while coverage for consultations remains low and centralized in provincial centres. Further devolution of civil participation frameworks must be considered to ensure there is no one and no place being left behind.

Coordination

- **Bhutan:** Lack of participation mechanisms, lack of internal coordination mechanisms.
- **Cabo Verde:** Lack of participation in policy-making and monitoring at the different levels of government.
- **Chad:** Lack of coordination among ministries, which calls for greater integration in the implementation process, as well as establishment of clear funding facilities, with greater mechanisms in place to foster policy dialogue between CSOs, government, private sector and development partners and put together concerted strategic policy solutions. Regarding civil society internal processes, given that there is not any overarching CSO coordination structure, one is currently being built.
- **Colombia:** Lack of participation in policy-making and monitoring at the different levels.
- **Denmark:** Lack of structures for multi-stakeholder-based monitoring and evaluation; need for an established annual monitoring and evaluation cycle.
- **Egypt:** There is a need for increased decentralization in the context of the implementation of sustainable development plans and policies in order to allow enough policy and fiscal space for these plans to be localized and respond to each governorate and marginal areas' needs. Civil society also calls for more spaces and mechanisms for community participation in the policy formulation, implementation, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluation processes, with a special focus on marginalized sectors of society.

- **Indonesia:** A clear majority of grassroots CSOs claim that they have never been involved either in policy dialogue or in the VNR process, with challenges of access regarding participation at SDG forums at both national and global levels. Likewise, CSOs at the provincial level suggested that they are rarely involved in the different spaces of the SDG implementation process.
- **Laos:** Lack of political participation, centralization, selectivity and authoritarianism.
- **Malaysia:** Lack of established channels for participation, specially at the subnational and local levels.
- **Mexico:** Although specific institutional arrangements have been put in place (i.e. National Commission for SDG implementation; 32 subnational bodies for SDG implementation), these have not been conceived in an inclusive manner. CSOs have demanded being included, along with other actors, and some working groups were created, but with no clear mandate or working methodology, and have been seldomly gathered since their creation. At the subnational level, only a handful of established bodies (23%) include civil society as a fully integrated stakeholder. Furthermore, many spaces for policy dialogue are being discontinued.
- **North Korea:** There is not any independent organized civil society to speak of. There are some party-affiliated organizations – notably women-led –, but they serve as vessels to further exert social control over the citizenry.
- **Norway:** New spaces for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue are being open, given that a National Forum for Agenda 2030 will be launched soon, and stakeholders are currently invited to provide input on its mandate, form and structure.
- **Paraguay:** Process-wise, the Paraguayan implementation system is not well-known by civil society, given that it is very much government-led, and its main purpose is to provide coordination between the executive, legislative and judiciary powers (Comisión ODS Paraguay).
- **Spain:** The Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 is not currently occupying one of the current vice-presidencies, which has eroded the centrality of the SDGs and the new National Sustainable Development Strategy within prospective documents, as well as its potential in order to articulate disjointed efforts aimed at bringing about broad transformations from a policy formulation, budgetary alignment and monitoring standpoints. This calls for a supra-ministerial mechanism to be established, in order to foster the multi-stakeholder governance system, instead of the current Agenda 2030 secretariat. It also calls for enhanced resources and clearer mandates for the main multi-stakeholder body for policy dialogue, the Sustainable Development Council.
- **Zimbabwe:** Proposed amendments within the Constitution of Zimbabwe (Amendment No.2 Bill) narrows the space for citizen consultation, inclusive decision-making and participation going forward.

Data availability and monitoring capacities

- **Bhutan:** Develop a mechanism to retrieve and update data for better impact assessment. While there is a good monitoring protocol in place, some of the data for different goals is still not available.
- **Colombia:** There has been moderate progress on defining national and subnational indicators, as well as on the production of quality data.
- **Denmark:** Need to establish data-collection processes based on disaggregated data on marginalized groups in order to enable an analysis and evidence-based approach towards local marginalization dynamics, so that implementation of Danish efforts on the principle of LNOB can be monitored.
- **Indonesia:** Regarding the availability of data, most of the respondents stated that the data was available but inaccurate, unintegrated, and underutilized in policy planning and making. CSOs also collected numerous data on marginalized groups. However, CSOs data were difficult to identify and integrate to enrich the government data due to differences in data collection methods between CSOs and the government.
- **Laos:** Official socio-economic statistics are unreliable.
- **Madagascar:** Since April 2021, the United Nations system, through the UNDP and the government, has started a process to collect as much data as possible and information on the implementation of the SDGs from all stakeholders, in order to establish the voluntary national report of Madagascar.

- **Malaysia:** Transparency and accountability, including access to data and information, are most critical regarding the allocation of public funds, contracts and project, which are major concerns. Here too, social and economic data are essential regarding poverty, gender, ethnicity, PWDs and Indigenous peoples.
- **Mexico:** There is a website for SDG-monitoring and some indicators that the National Statistical Office provides with information. However, in the last review, data was only shown until 2017.
- **North Korea:** The lack of civil space for independent monitoring and accountability within the country calls into question the veracity of the data that the State presents in a variety of areas.
- **Norway:** Share and communicate public data relevant to work on the SDGs more efficiently with organizations and citizens.
- **Paraguay:** There is the creation of the new National Institute of Statistics (INE), with the objective of modernizing the National Statistical System (SISEN), which includes the adoption of new instruments such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). It has been observed that these efforts should include, in their periodic production of information, populations such as those in the Departments of Boquerón and Alto Paraguay, Chaco region, ordinarily not contemplated in continuous statistical reports, like the Permanent Household Survey (EPHC).
- **Spain:** When identifying data gaps, the Sustainable Development Council could analyze alternative data sources that could be provided by the research community and civil society and propose them for inclusion in the set of indicators included in the Sustainable Development Strategy. The Sustainable Development Council should also intervene in the continuous updating of the indicators and in the improvement of the evaluation methodology.
- **Zimbabwe:** Update national data sets through audits and needs assessments and develop one monitoring framework and a process of annual joint sector reviews. There is also a need for adequate resources to the Zimbabwe National Statistical Agency (ZIMSTAT) to plug the SDGs indicators data gap, as well as ensure timely production of data.

Internal and external factors hindering 2030 Agenda implementation

- **Bhutan:** Effects of the pandemic and of climate change.
- **Cabo Verde:** Effects of climate change.
- **Chad:** Political instability and political violence, limited official resources for monitoring, effects of climate change.
- **Colombia:** Political violence, limited fiscal space.
- **Egypt:** Lack of political participation, centralization and authoritarianism, lack of inclusive partnerships for implementation, socio-economic effects of the pandemic.
- **Guatemala:** Specific policy challenges are exacerbated by underlying systemic factors, such as chronic corruption, low levels of fiscal income (12% of GDP in 2020), regressive tax system, as well as low quality and level of public spending, and general political instability.
- **Laos:** Rampant corruption further threatens the few improvements that the country claims to have achieved regarding poverty-alleviation. The report also mentions that the political control exerted by Viet Nam (enshrined in the Friendship Treaty of 1977) and the economic control exerted by China (through the establishment of special economic zones and extensive transfer of land rights) are also a major hindrance for sustainable development in Laos, given that these maintain Laotian institutions in a state of subordination and facilitate systemic corruption.
- **Madagascar:** With a 73% poverty rate – from which 53% are in urban areas and 79% in rural areas –, the main challenge is SDG 1, which has been exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic. Having mainly an agrarian-based economy, Madagascar is very vulnerable to climate change-related fluctuating weather patterns. SDG 2, SDG 6, SDG 13 and SDG 17 are key in order to bolster and strengthen agricultural productivity in a sustainable way and foster adaptive practices. An estimated 75% of the entire population depends on agriculture-related activities for their livelihoods.

- **Malaysia:** CSOs call for a stronger commitment on human rights protection, as opposed to only promotion. Civil society also mentions corruption and lack of political will to effectively tackle it as a challenge. The report also notes fragmentation and a siloed approach to policy-making and implementation.
- **Mexico:** Shrinking civic space (legal framework, funding, violence), corruption and efficiency in spending amidst limited resources, socio-economics effects of the pandemic, effects of climate change, unsustainability of the development model, siloed policy-making.
- **North Korea:** From a conjunctural standpoint, the COVID-19 pandemic has implied closing of borders and the exit of all international organizations operating in the country, which has further isolated the nation. On a systemic level, the over-centralized production and distribution system still bears the sequels of the 1990's economic crisis and famine, whose main driving factor was the erosion of natural resources brought by over-exploitation, mismanagement and widespread deforestation. This ultimately meant that the public supply and distribution system was effectively dismantled and has not been reorganized since, which has threatened food security as well as deepened corruption (in the education and health systems, as well as in the labour market, bribery and forced monetary contributions are established as broad practices, are systematic and act as unofficial taxes).
- **Paraguay:** Efficiency in public spending amidst limited resources, socio-economic effects of the pandemic, effects of climate change, the nature of the overarching development model.
- **Zimbabwe:** The main structural challenge – one that cuts across the agenda as whole – is the inadequacy of resources, which is exacerbated by macroeconomic instability and widespread corruption. Apart from these main underlying factors, challenges exist in terms of budget allocation (social protection and education sectors are specially underfunded, with the report mentioning that 90% of public revenue is devoted to recurring expenditures) and efficiency in public spending (which is compounded by widespread corruption and lack of transparency in the selection of beneficiaries).

Lagging areas of progress

- **Cabo Verde:** Civil society asserts that the four main challenges are: tackling poverty through effective policies fostering inclusive development; related to the first point, the government should specifically address integration of the youth into the labour market through more focused policies aiming at enhancing technical education; tackling territorial inequalities and inequities in access to healthcare; addressing climate change adaptation and environmental conservation; gender equality.
- **Chad:** Existence of many challenges for Chad to realize the SDGs. On SDG 2: 1 million people are in a situation of food insecurity and upwards of 35% of Chadians are undernourished. Climate change and market inefficiencies (lack of diversification, of investment and speculation) keep prices on an upward trajectory. On SDG 3: especially maternal and infant health, with key improvements needed in the healthcare sector governance, infrastructure and funding. On SDG 4: even though enrollment has improved, quality is still lacking; illiteracy rate is still high. On SDG 5: even though gender equality and women and girls' autonomy and empowerment have constitutional status and broad national policies have been put in place, the prevalence of under-aged girls being married is still high (65%), and gender-based violence (GBV) and female genital mutilation are still very much an issue. Moreover, scholarization rates for girls are still low. On SDG 13: climate change is one of the biggest issues for sustainable development in Chad, with land and biodiversity degradation, as well as widespread desertification at the foreground. The report notes that there is a legal and policy framework in place, with a national policy and strategy, but no overarching institutional agency in charge of coordinating implementation and monitoring impact. Also, more international support is needed for adaptation. On SDG 16: Chad is ranked 160 in 180 countries on the corruption-perception ranking. On SDG 17: even though the country benefits from significant ODA flows, corruption and inefficiencies in public spending prevent these from fully contributing to sustainable development. That said, there are many oversight processes and budget-programming tools underway in order to improve this.

- **Colombia:** Regarding policy aspects, the report notes that with its 0.51 GINI coefficient, Colombia is one of the most unequal countries in the LAC region, with increasing numbers regarding poverty (42%) and extreme poverty (17%). Access to the labour market for youth and women is increasingly limited. Progress regarding SDG 2 has been non-existent, whereas for SDG 3 it has been very limited given the high levels of underinvestment in a mostly privatized healthcare system.
- **Denmark:** The principle of leaving no one behind is not applied in policy-making processes at the national level, and seldomly – and in a more implicit manner – in Danish humanitarian and international development policies. Regarding SDG 6, although access to drinking water is ensured, the prevalence of pesticides in drink-water sources is still high (45%). Regarding SDG 8, access to the labour market for young people without qualifications remains a challenge, whilst employers continue to discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, age, disabilities and other protected characteristics mentioned in the Danish Anti-Discrimination Act. Regarding SDG 10, wealth concentration is still high, with 10% of the population possessing 43% of total net wealth and the lower 40% owning just 5%. The gender pay gap is still at almost 15%. On climate change, the 70% target in emissions reductions is still largely dependent on technological breakthroughs, whilst on SDG 14, sustainable management of waters is still far from being an established policy, although several new policy frameworks specific to different kinds of bodies of water are starting to be implemented. Regarding biodiversity, the report asserts that only 5% of habitat types in Denmark have a favourable conservation status.
- **Guatemala:** From a policy standpoint, the report notes that a major challenge is the very low level of spending on social policies, which reached only 6.8% of GDP in 2018. The practical effects of this trend are particularly visible in Indigenous communities. The report notes that 90% of the two main Indigenous populations and 70% of the rural population live in poverty. The structural causes of poverty also stem from a very unequal and asymmetric development model, based on the concentration of land ownership that seeks to foster agro-industrial monocultures geared towards foreign markets: 92% of farmers occupy only 22% of total land surface, whilst 2% of land-owners possess 57% of agricultural lands. On access to health, 73% of the population does not have health insurance. Gender equality, access to education, and income inequality are also among the various challenges in the country. Moreover, with a GINI of 0.63, the richest decile of the population possesses 42% of national income.
- **Indonesia:** From a policy standpoint, issues that must be prioritized include poverty, poverty due to COVID-19, health, inequality, the impact of the pandemic on women and children, quality of education, equality for minority groups, climate change and disasters, gender equality, and the narrowing space for civil liberties.
- **Laos:** Regarding SDG 2, the report asserts that there has been an escalation in monocultures driven by a massive influx of Chinese investment flows in agro-business – especially banana plantations –, which has translated into increased threats to biodiversity, soil-degradation, deforestation, and groundwater pollution. Small-scale farmers and organic agriculture have been held captive by these trends, which have been exacerbated by the development of massive dams for energy production, decreasing the availability of fertile land even further. Inequities in access to healthcare are also highlighted – and those are tied to financial capacity or political ties to the Communist party –, as well as challenges in gender equality, water and sanitation, energy access, promotion of SMEs and small-scale farming instead of large corporations.
- **Madagascar:** The report mentions that there is a clear urban-rural divide and broad geographical inequalities, with some regions being wealthier and having better access to natural resources. The effects of climate change are also different between regions, with the southernmost regions experiencing extended droughts and northern regions benefitting from more stable and normal weather patterns. Access to health, sanitation, energy and, to a slightly lesser extent, education, is a challenge, although the intensity differs between regions. Furthermore, the 80% prevalence of the informal sector in the composition of the economy, as well as the complex access to title rights (especially for women) are also a major driver of low productivity and inequality, whereas the pressures on natural resources brought by widespread heating methods (e.g. charcoal stoves and cooking appliances), as well as agricultural and livestock-raising practices exacerbate the effects of climate change. Although the rate of re- and afforestation has increased, the rate of deforestation is still high.

- **Malaysia:** Some aspects of inclusive development need improvement, especially regarding the formulation of a comprehensive social protection scheme, including the informal sector, as well as other areas like food security in rural regions, women empowerment, quality education and addressing access to digital technologies. On climate change, the country still has not formulated and adopted a long-term decarbonization roadmap and strategy, which makes for a fragmented landscape when it comes to the institutional framework for medium to long-term planning to address climate change. In this sense, the report notes that all directly environment-related goals remain a challenge for the country (SDGs 13, 14, 15). The report also points out lack of implementation of specific policy frameworks aimed at persons with disabilities, as well as on gender equality. Furthermore, land ownership and land use are cited as crucial issues concerning Indigenous peoples, given extensive reports of land-grabbing processes in many regions. This is compounded by the lack of representation of ethnic groups and Indigenous peoples in national and subnational government positions and in the Parliament.
- **Mexico:** Policies addressing poverty are still formulated as assistentialism, gender-based approaches have not been mainstreamed and GBV violence has increased, water and sanitation policies have not been aligned with the SDGs.
- **Norway:** Clear challenges exist regarding the country's development model as a whole, and particularly regarding its impact on biodiversity, both at home and abroad. In this regard, both policy coherence, management of natural resources, and within this category, the realization of more responsible production (dependence on extractive industries, i.e. fossil fuels, aquaculture) and consumption patterns, as well as more sustainable food systems (including by supporting small-scale producers) are all still lagging. Therefore, the directly environment-related SDGs remain as specific challenges (SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15).
- **Paraguay:** The nature of the development model is based on the agro-export sector, which concentrates wealth and land, does not create jobs in quantity and quality, and leaves a trail of soil degradation and pollution. The composition of the labour market is dominated by the informal economy sector, which amounts to 70% of the workforce. Given the composition of the labour market, contributive social programs and pensions are only available to a minority of the population. Regarding capacity of the public sector, there is low fiscal revenue-collection, which is driven by a low and regressive tax-base, filled with exemptions for the wealthy, hidden subsidies and tax evasion. This is compounded by inefficiencies in public spending patterns and unsustainable public debt. SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 15 are clear challenges given this general context.
- **Spain:** Among others, challenges exist regarding migrant rights, gender equality (women's participation in the workforce and equal pay), conceiving and measuring development beyond economic growth, and threats to civic space.
- **Zimbabwe:** In the case of SDG 1, the report mentions that the low budgetary allocations to poverty alleviation programmes with no minimum set standards, underbudgeting, and irregular financing is the biggest challenge. Implementation remains a key challenge for the government. For instance, the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy-1 had good goals and targets and even included budget allocations to support the identified strategies. However, due to poor financing and resource management, most of the strategies were not implemented fully.

4.5.2. Parliamentarians

Parliamentarians advocate for the priorities and concerns of the citizens they represent and hold governments to account for progress. Fewer countries provided information on the role of parliaments in

2021 than in 2020, although the percentage in 2021 is still higher than the ones for the period between 2017-2019. Twenty (20) out of 42 countries (48%) reported on efforts by parliamentarians to support SDG implementation, beyond consultations and engagement in governance arrangements in 2021.¹⁰³

103. This compares to 53% of countries reporting in 2020, 23% of countries in 2019, 39% of countries in 2018, and 35% in 2017.

The majority of countries noting parliamentarians' actions (18 out of 20 countries) mentioned the folding of SDG-related activities into regular parliamentary work, which includes committees and budgeting, for example. Among these, parliaments in **Namibia, Paraguay, and Sweden** developed legislation aligned with the SDGs. Parliamentarians in **Azerbaijan** and **San Marino** engaged in awareness-raising efforts related to the SDGs. In **Indonesia** and **Japan**, parliaments organized events and forums, and in the case of **Denmark** and **Mexico**, working groups were formed. **Mexico** also referred to trainings, and **Norway's** parliament acted around accountability by formally requesting the government to present a progress report and an action plan on the SDGs. In the case of Spain, a mixed commission of parliamentarians is involved in preparing an opinion piece intended to inform and guide the executive in drafting the Sustainable Development Strategy 2030. In terms of efforts at the local level (or localization), members of parliament in **Malaysia** were involved in localizing the SDGs in their constituencies, and 34 solution projects impacting the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development have been implemented at the grassroots level.

The activities showcased by parliaments in the 2021 VNR reports are similar to what had been reported in previous years, and there was a variety of efforts being highlighted. However, reporting on parliamentarians was more limited in the 2021 VNR reports, and fewer countries detailed their efforts. Overall, this backslide is negative, given the role of parliamentarians in ensuring accountability for 2030 Agenda implementation, identifying priorities and approving national budgets.

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 2021, 86% of reporting countries (36 out of 42) highlighted private sector contributions beyond consultations and engagement in governance arrangements, an improvement in relation to previous years.¹⁰⁴

A case study in good practice: Malaysia's new initiative to accelerate SDGs impacts

To translate the ambition in a variety of ways that carry meaning within a local context, the UN Global Compact Network Malaysia and Brunei (UNGCMYB) initiated the #mySDGAmbition program. The initiative seeks to support Malaysian businesses through mobilization-based programs that will target accelerating key SDGs impacts. The UNGCMYB launched a free-to-use "MSME SDG digital toolkit" in order to assist Micro, Small and Medium sized enterprises in incorporating sustainable practices into their operations. This digital resource will provide a range of tools, guides and other resources that target MSMEs' participation in the SDGs.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Malaysia's VNR report.

Table 3 outlines the main activities noted in 2021 with regards to private sector contributions and includes a comparison with the period between 2017-2020. Similar to previous years, two of the most prominent activities relate to involvement in specific projects (which experienced an increase), and alignment by the private sector with the 2030 Agenda. However, in 2021, the creation or use of forums to raise awareness and coordinate around the 2030 Agenda, private sector's involvement in multi-stakeholder partnerships, and the creation or prizes or competitions related to the SDGs decreased in relation to previous years.

104. Percentages had been 75% of countries reporting in 2020, versus 53% of countries in 2019, 61% of countries in 2018, and 53% of countries in 2017.

Table 3. Main private sector contributions highlighted in VNR reports, 2017-2021

Activity	Year				
	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017
Specific projects	20	13	12	12	7
Alignment through corporate social responsibility and/or business practices	14	14	9	14 ¹⁰⁵	5 ¹⁰⁶
Creation or use of forums to raise awareness and coordinate	-	4	6	6	8
Events	2	2	5	-	6
Research	1	1	4	4	5
Provision of finance for SDG related activities	7	7	3	-	-
Multi-stakeholder partnerships	14	17	2	10	-
Creation of prizes or competitions	2	3	2	4	-

In 2021, **Mexico** was the only country to highlight the private sector's contribution to research; more than 700 companies contributed to a study on the status of the SDGs in their business practices and supply chains. In turn, **Chad's** Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Agriculture, Mines and Artisans expressed a pressing need for awareness-raising activities on the role of the private sector in the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. Some countries specified the involvement

of the private sector in the context of COVID19-. For example, **Bahamas** partnered with a hotel to provide additional medical accommodations for low-risk citizens in need of medical attention and quarantine facilities. In the case of **Egypt**, a cement company developed an engineered disinfection solution that caters for widespread areas, and disinfected roads and alleys while in coordination with the governorate.



105. Ten (10) of which were in the form of company-specific commitments.

106. Company specific commitments.

A case study in good practice: Multi-channel strategy for information, tracking, and monitoring of COVID-19 cases in Uruguay

Uruguay implemented a comprehensive and multi-channel digital strategy to reach different population segments with patients' care and COVID-19 monitoring information. In addition to setting up a hotline, communication channels through the Internet, and mobile phone messaging services, the government joined private sector companies in the Uruguayan Chamber of Information Technologies to create a specific application named "Coronavirus UY," downloaded more than a million times. "Coronavirus UY" provided information of interest while allowing users to upload their symptoms and, if necessary, communicate directly with their healthcare provider through telemedicine channels. A software that manages beds, ventilators, and personnel available in health centers was also developed. Daily updated public dashboards were created to show the evolution of the pandemic in Uruguay in real-time, and to visualize the beds' occupancy situation in the country.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Uruguay's VNR report.

SDGs implementation increased in 2021 in relation to previous years, with 28 out of 42 countries (or 67%) providing information on the role of academics.¹⁰⁷ This suggests a greater involvement by academic and expert communities in 2030 Agenda implementation.

In 2021, countries most commonly referred to the creation of courses or incorporating the 2030 Agenda into curricula, as it was the case of 9 countries (**Antigua and Barbuda, Chad, Czech Republic, Denmark, Indonesia, Madagascar, Norway, Paraguay, and Qatar**).¹⁰⁸ Engagement of academia/experts in multi-stakeholder initiatives was mentioned by 8 countries (**Bahamas, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Germany, Guatemala, Thailand, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe**),¹⁰⁹ and research contributions were also mentioned by 8 countries (**Bhutan, Denmark, Japan, Qatar, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe**).¹¹⁰ Five (5) countries mentioned academic networks (**Cuba, Japan, Nicaragua, Spain, and Sweden**),¹¹¹ and 5 other countries referred to capacity development efforts (**Antigua and Barbuda, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, and Nicaragua**).¹¹² Three (3) countries referred to specific expert contributions (**Azerbaijan, Cabo Verde, and Colombia**),¹¹³ and only 1 country (**Guatemala**) mentioned academia contributing to monitoring and evaluation.¹¹⁴

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 challenges and going forward initiatives was noted by **Bhutan**, whose VNR report mentions that better coordination is required between government and academia, and between academic institutions themselves, and that more remains to be done regarding the creation, sustainability and governance modalities around a research endowment fund.

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

107. This compares to 55% of countries reporting in 2020, 28% of countries in 2019, 50% of countries in 2018, and 33% in 2017.

108. Courses and incorporation into curricula: numbers compare to 3 countries in 2020, versus also 3 countries in 2019, and 4 countries in 2018.

109. Multi-stakeholder initiatives: numbers compare to 11 countries in 2020, and 2 countries in 2019.

110. Research: versus 6 countries in 2020, and 7 countries in 2019.

111. Academic networks: versus 11 countries in 2020, and 3 countries in 2019.

112. Capacity development: versus 5 countries in 2020, and 2 countries in 2019.

113. Expert contributions: versus 13 countries in 2020.

114. Monitoring and evaluation: versus 3 countries in 2020, and 2 countries in 2019.

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 17 out of 42 VNR reports (40%) in 2021. Conversely, this had been noted by 21 countries (or 45%) in 2020, 9 countries (or 19%) in 2019, and 10 countries (or 22%) in 2018.

A case study in good practice: Youth engagement in Madagascar

In Madagascar, the population is predominantly young (64% are under 25 years old). The effort of the government has been focused on making the youth a “force for development” to achieve the SDGs, by involving young people in the fight against poverty, and more particularly in the definition and implementation of public policies, and in developing the strategy named “youth engagement for emergency” [engagement des jeunes pour l’émergence]. This is a great example of including stakeholders’ views – and in particular youth – in the elaboration of policies that directly impact them to effectively ensure that no one is left behind.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Madagascar’s VNR report.

The VNR reports in 2021 mostly 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, promotion of competitions, inclusion in forums and committees, volunteerism, and integration of children and youth’s perspectives in policy documents and the VNR report. The second most mentioned type of engagement was through specific projects and/or initiatives designed and carried out by children and youth, which was mentioned by 11 countries (**Bhutan, Czech Republic,**

Denmark, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Mexico, Paraguay, Thailand, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe). The third form of engagement was through the means of youth organizations, councils, or networks. Countries that referred to the existence of such groupings were **Azerbaijan, Denmark, Indonesia, Norway, Paraguay, Sweden, and Tunisia**. Finally, in the case of **Laos**, the involvement of youth and volunteers in a systematic way to implement and monitor SDGs progress is planned as a next step.

Civil society validity check:

On Madagascar’s good practice described above

Indeed, initiatives on the part of the government are on the right track, such as the establishment of the youth parliament, the validation of the national youth policy, and the promotion of initiatives for the involvement of young people in public and democratic life (such as elections). Young students and academics, young politicians, rural youth, young entrepreneurs and other youth groups are encouraged to consult through spaces created for dialogue, such as the CCJ (Communal Youth Council) at the municipalities level. Apart from that, the effective existence of the Youth Observatory should also be highlighted.

Source: Views from the youth organization JAI, reached out by the national platform PFNOSCM, after consultation for the present report.

Comparing with data from 2020, more countries referred to initiatives being developed by children and youth in the 2021 VNR reports, which is a positive recognition of such efforts and specific projects.

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 2021, 23 out of 42 VNR reports (or 55%) referred to stakeholders not previously mentioned in this report, up from 2020.¹¹⁵ While volunteers

115. This had been mentioned by 17 out of 47 countries (or 36%).

were mentioned by 8 countries in 2019 and by 5 countries in 2020, 8 countries did so in 2021 (**Bhutan, Colombia, Cyprus, Laos, Madagascar, Mexico, Namibia, and Thailand**). Other stakeholders referred to in 2021 were United Nations agencies (6 countries, versus 4 countries in 2020), “citizenship” (4 countries, versus also 4 in 2020), and trade unions (3 countries, versus 2 countries in 2020). In addition, **Spain** referred to (non-trade) unions’ role in strengthening the welfare state to guarantee rights and social protection. National institutions such as the judiciary and the chamber of labor were only mentioned by **Madagascar** (versus 3 countries in 2020), and auditor institutions were only mentioned by **Cabo Verde** (versus 4 countries in 2020).

Moreover, **Bahamas** referred to public-private social care initiatives, **Guatemala** and **Paraguay** mentioned international cooperation partners, and **Malaysia** referred to government-linked companies, such as the national oil company. No countries in 2021 noted initiatives carried out by the media or the marketing industry, or by village communities.

A case study in good practice: Stakeholder inputs included in a transparent manner in Laos’ VNR report

The VNR report contains a section which includes key messages from various stakeholders, including the COVID-19 Multi-Stakeholder Taskforce, UN agencies and development partners, the private sector, provincial authorities and local communities, as well as youth, volunteer groups and Lao civil society.

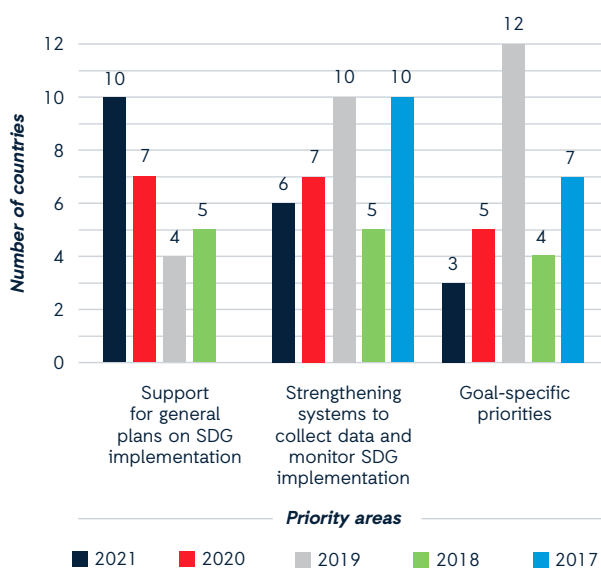
Source: Excerpt adapted from Laos’ VNR report.

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 2021, key areas in which the government requires additional support to realize the SDGs were noted by 15 out of 42 reporting countries (or 36%), down from previous years.¹¹⁶ Conversely, 19 out of 42 countries (or 45%) mentioned types of support required from development partners or, in other words, how support should be provided.¹¹⁷ As with previous years, countries tended to provide general information on the support they require.

Figure 19 shows the number of countries referring to 3 priority areas for development partners support in the 2017-2021 period. Most countries reporting in 2021 referred to the need of support to carry out general plans on SDGs implementation, up from all previous years. Secondly, 2021 VNR reports noted the need to strengthen systems of data collection and monitoring of implementation, down from previous years. Finally, support for goal-specific priorities was noted by the least amount of 2021 reporting countries, also down from previous years.

Figure 19. Priority areas for development partners’ support



116. This information had been included in VNR reports from 27 out of the 47 reporting countries (58%) in 2020, against 38 out of 47 countries (81%) in 2019.

117. Information on the role of development partners, or how they should provide support, was included by 26 out of 47 countries (55%) reporting in 2020.

In supporting country priorities, the provision of finance (official development assistance (ODA), finance from international financial institutions, and South-South cooperation) continued to be the most common role identified by countries (16), up from previous years.¹¹⁸ Technical assistance, including technology transfer, knowledge sharing, and capacity building were noted by 15 countries (versus 9 in 2020), while general coordination and partnerships were mentioned by 10 countries (versus 7 in 2020). 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 in some cases. Countries such as **Cabo Verde** and **Niger** specifically referred to the need of development partners' support for the COVID-19 response and recovery.

Finally, the number of countries noting support to carry out their VNR dropped slightly in 2021 over the previous year. In 2021, 22 out of 42 countries (or 52%) noted such support from the United Nations, whereas in 2020 there were 25 out of 47 countries (53%) mentioning such support, versus 22 out of 47 countries (47%) in 2019, 14 out of 46 countries (30%) in 2018, and 7 out of 43 countries (16%) 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 2021, the global COVID-19 pandemic continued to have 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 ongoing 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 assist countries in preparing realistic implementation strategies, identifying financing shortfalls and setting clear expectations regarding needs when working with development partners. Figure 20 provides an overview of whether VNR reports refer to costing for domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda and identified sources of finance

118. In 2020 this number had been 13 countries, versus also 13 countries in 2019, and 12 countries in 2018.

for 2017-2021. In line with the previous year, most countries reporting in 2021 (15 out of 42, or 36%, the exact same percentage as 2020) did not mention costing 2030 Agenda implementation, although they have identified sources of finance. Secondly, 13 out of 42 (31%, versus 30% in 2020) did not indicate that they have or plan to cost out implementation. Countries reporting in 2021 reversed the so far positive trend with respect to countries that both costed and identified sources of finance. While 26% of the countries provided this information in 2020, only 7 out of 42 countries (17%) did so in 2021. Among these countries, 3 are located in Europe (**Denmark, Cyprus, and Czech Republic**), followed by 2 in Africa (**Chad and Niger**), and 2 in Asia (**Indonesia and Japan**). No country did so in Latin America and the Caribbean, as it had also been the case in 2020.

Considering all the countries that have identified sources of finance (regardless as if they have costed implementation or not), the figures for 2021 are 29 countries (or 69%) which is in line with previous years.¹¹⁹ 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 (ODA) and South-South cooperation. Overall, the trend

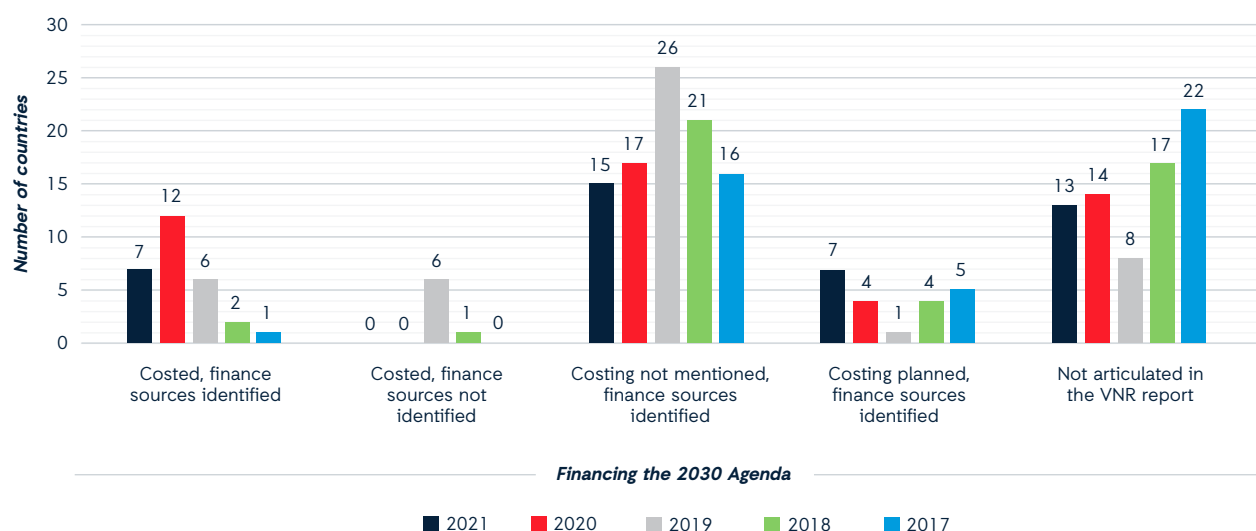
between 2017-2021 shows that countries tend not to cost out 2030 Agenda implementation but do identify sources of finance.

A case study in good practice: Cyprus' approach to budgeting and financing for the 2030 Agenda

On budgeting and financing for the 2030 Agenda at the country level, Cyprus both costed country level implementation and identified sources of finance. From its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Cyprus' approach aimed to support sustainable development in all three dimensions (social, economical, environmental) while budgeting to promote investments and reforms in all sectors of the economy to advance the SDGs. Cyprus' VNR report included tables that comprehensively included the cost of implementation for each one of the SDGs, as well as how the national plan showed policy cohesion while contributing to SDGs achievement.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Cyprus' VNR report.

Figure 20. Resourcing the 2030 Agenda



¹¹⁹ Figures had been 70% of countries in 2020, the same 70% of countries in 2019, versus 57% in 2018, and 49% in 2017.



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, clarifying the actions that are being undertaken to realize the SDGs. In 2021, 26 out of 42 countries (62%) provided information on inclusion of the SDGs into national budgets or budgeting processes, up from the previous year.¹²⁰ Of those 26 countries, 4 (**Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Laos, and Madagascar**) indicated plans to incorporate the SDGs into budgeting processes.¹²¹ This continues to be a positive sign in the sense that more countries are actually doing such incorporation, instead of mentioning it as a future plan.

In 2021, 10 countries referred to previous plans of SDG incorporation into national budgets, which suggests that countries have been making progress in achieving previously planned objectives to link national budgets to the 2030 Agenda. This was the case of **Chad, Colombia, Cuba, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Spain, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe**. According to the **Czech Republic's** VNR report, government expenses are mostly in line with SDG priorities, but creating an SDG-based budget would require substantial modifications in the budgetary structure and preparation process, which is the reason why the country welcomes learning from the experiences of other states that have applied SDG budgeting. Moreover, more countries made reference to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to budgeting

for the 2030 Agenda. In 2021, 5 countries (**Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Paraguay, and Spain**) did so, versus only 2 countries in 2020.

A case study in good practice: Citizen engagement in SDG budgeting in Angola

The government launched, in March 2021, the Participatory Budget, a mechanism that aims to allow citizens to become directly involved in the management of public finances at the local level through the Municipal Budget. This is an important advance in the sense that it will allow citizens to freely define their local priorities and projects and to participate in the definition of priorities of local governments or administrations. On the other hand, the National Assembly of Angola took the initiative to host, in February 2021, the Seminar on Gender Budget Analysis and Monitoring, which aimed to promote the continuous process of information production, knowledge building and implementation of methodological practices for the promotion of gender equality – through governance and democratic consolidation mechanisms –, using Gender Budgeting as a vehicle.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Angola's VNR report.

4.6.2. International finance

International public finance, including official development assistance (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

120. Figures were 51% of countries in 2020, 64% of countries in 2019, and 46% in 2018.

121. This compares to 2 countries in 2020, 14 countries in 2019, and 10 countries in 2018.

globally and in developing countries. Reporting on international public finance continued to improve in 2021, with 40 out of 42 countries (95%) – exceptions were **Afghanistan** and **Iraq** – reporting on international public finance.¹²²

All the 13 high-income countries that reported in 2021 provided some information on international public finance. Of these, most countries referred to their role as providers, including specific mentions to ODA, South-South and triangular cooperation, and 1 country (**Bahamas**) commented of its receipt of funds and resources, particular regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. More specific information is listed below.

- **Antigua and Barbuda** emphasized collaboration with other countries and international development partners to facilitate both South-South and North-South collaboration to access financial support.
- **Bahamas'** government secured a \$20 million dollar loan from the International Development Bank to assist with procurement and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, and received doses from COVAX, India, and Antigua and Barbuda.
- **Cyprus** listed 5 government initiatives related to ODA and mentioned having allocated 0.21% of its Gross National Income to ODA in 2019, as opposed to 0.12% in 2018.
- The **Czech Republic** noted the need to continue increasing ODA, which is still just 0.13% of Gross National Income, despite recent increases.
- **Denmark** mentioned having met the United Nations' goal of allocating 0.7% of GNI to development assistance every year since 1978, while noting it is not just a matter of giving a lot, but also giving effectively and with quality in mind.
- **Germany's** VNR report refers to the country as being the world's second-largest bilateral donor and it expects to reach the 0.7% of GNI target for the second time in 2020. Germany also refers to North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation, and the support to both technological cooperation and the development of capacities and expertise in countries of the Global South.
- **Japan** highlighted the need to effectively use and mobilize both public funding and private funding (investment and lending) while expanding the amount and enhancing the quality of funds.
- **Norway** mentioned it has for several years been allocating around 1% of GNI to ODA, being one of the six countries members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) that met or exceeded the United Nations' target of 0.7% of GNI going into ODA in 2020.
- **San Marino** has identified two main sources of public allocations in favour of international solidarity and cooperation, but also noted that the budget chapter availability fell significantly in 2019.
- **Spain's** VNR report brings activities being carried out based on a series of instruments and the country's effort to slightly increase ODA provision.
- **Sweden** has identified 7 priority areas regarding the implementation of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development.
- **Qatar** mentioned a \$100 million-dollar contribution for the support of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and the Least Developed States (LDS) to deal with the climate change and environmental challenges. Qatar has also engaged in partnerships that will commit up to \$250 million in funding to enrol 2 million out-of-school children in quality education in 40 countries.
- **Uruguay** referred to South-South and triangular cooperation, through which the Latin American region was able to advance the implementation of SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), and SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities).

122. This compares to 39 out of 47 countries (83%) in 2020, 36 out of 47 countries (77%) in 2019, 44 out of 46 countries (96%) in 2018, and 38 out of 43 countries (84%) in 2017.

A case study in good practice: China's promotion of the Green Silk Road

Through a presidential announcement in 2021, China committed to building stronger ties towards green development by strengthening efforts regarding green infrastructure, energy, and finance. Such efforts will be carried out through improving the BRI International Green Development Coalition, Green Investment Principles for the Belt and Road Development, and other multi-lateral cooperation platforms. China has also implemented green bonds under the BRI regular inter-bank cooperation mechanism and the Green Investment Fund, and has provided a collective of technical support, capacity building and advisory services. In more recent times, China has committed to investing an average estimate of \$2 billion USD each year towards renewable energy initiatives in various countries that have also joined the BRI collective. For example, Dubai's Concentrated Solar Power Plant is being manufactured and built by a Chinese company

and meets the global standard for the use of solar power. The Plant is anticipated to reduce carbon emissions by 1.6 million tons per year upon completion.

Source: Excerpt adapted from China's VNR report.

Among low- and middle-income (both lower-middle and upper-middle) countries, **Afghanistan** and **Iraq** did not report on international public finance. **Mexico's** VNR report contains only minimal reference to external financing sources other than international cooperation, with no references to financing by regional banks or international financial institutions. Conversely, 27 low- and middle-income countries (64%) provided information on international public finance – versus 68% of countries in 2020 – and covered a wide range of issues related to international public finance and their ongoing needs for such support (Figure 21). The figure below does not show references to ensuring donors meet their ODA commitments, as no country in 2021 noted this.¹²³ Conversely, 5 countries (**Bhutan, Laos, Mexico, Namibia, and Paraguay**) referred to climate finance.¹²⁴ None of the 2021 reporting countries mentioned dual roles (donor and recipient of funding and technical assistance) played in international cooperation.



123. This compared to 1 country in 2020, 1 country in 2019, 2 countries in 2018, and 7 countries in 2017.

124. Up from 1 country in 2020, 2 countries in 2019, and 3 countries in 2018.

Figure 21. Issues related to international public finance highlighted by low and middle-income countries in 2021 VNR reports



Declining aid flows

- **Angola, Laos, and Sierra Leone** noted decline in donor flows.
- **Bhutan** referred to the loss of development assistance due to income graduation.
- **Dominican Republic** mentions limitations to ODA access and the need to make efforts to mobilize internal resources and external financing.
- **Namibia** pointed to a downward trajectory in ODA, consistent with countries' experience when attaining upper-middle-income status.



Increasing international public finance received

- ODA to **Egypt** has increased, and the country launched an interactive map showing the distribution of ODA per SDG with specific project details.
- **Guatemala** referred to 355 projects signed with bilateral and multilateral cooperation sources.
- **Mexico** mentioned that international cooperation partners supported the generation of tools to promote 2030 Agenda implementation progress.



Improving aid effectiveness

- **Nicaragua** mentioned finding and promoting new forms of cooperation to ensure access to health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **North Korea** plans to develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs even in the context of sanctions and blockades.
- **Paraguay** highlighted the importance of cooperation to mobilize and exchange resources.



South-South cooperation

- **Bolivia** mentioned SSC programs signed with Latin American and Middle Eastern countries.
- **Chad, Madagascar, and Niger** refer to SSC as a source of financing
- **China** pointed to deepening SSC and financial assistance through the China-UN Peace and Development Fund and the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund.
- **Dominican Republic** mentioned SSC, North- South, and Triangular Cooperation.
- **Indonesia** mentioned strengthening international cooperation, including through SSC, and the provision of ODA to Fiji, Timor Leste, and Solomon Islands.
- **Marshall Islands** noted SSC, including among Pacific Small Islands Developing States, and that it will assist with strengthening capacities and knowledge transfer.
- **Namibia** continues to strengthen cooperation through SSC.
- **Thailand** transitioned from a recipient country to a development donor and has provided assistance to 26 countries through SSC and Triangular Cooperation.
- **Tunisia** provides technical assistance and experience sharing with African countries through SSC.



Leveraging public finance

- **Azerbaijan** plans to receive support through direct financing.
- **Cabo Verde** mentioned the government's role in promoting conditions for ODA receipt and exploring other public flows.
- **Colombia** mentioned seven alliances, which have been mobilized to finance high-impact initiatives.
- **Cuba** intends to boost exports, increase attracting Foreign Direct Investment, develop the financial system, and explore other sources of external financing.
- No longer a receiver of ODA, **Malaysia** will continue to support activities with partner countries.
- **Zimbabwe** prioritized global re-engagement, including by re-establishing relations with the international financial community.

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. In 2021, 31 out of 42 countries (74%) reported on trade. Different from international public finance, the percentage on trade represented an increase, after a series of declines between 2018 and 2020.¹²⁵ Countries tend to note the importance of trade in general terms with a focus on specific initiatives to strengthen trade, such as creating trade strategies and focusing policy (15 countries),¹²⁶ increasing trade overall through integration into regional and global trading systems (12 countries),¹²⁷ and finalizing specific trade deals (5 countries).¹²⁸

As some more specific examples, **Egypt's** VNR report presented data on the stagnation of global trade and the decrease in the value of exports. **Germany, Norway, and Sweden** referred to their participation in funding for bilateral Aid for Trade (AfT). **Malaysia** mentioned being a strong proponent of free trade and having reduced its worldwide weighted tariff average. **San Marino** noted that, in order to adhere to the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries under the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements, the country does not apply different tariffs according to the country of origin. With regards to COVID-19, **Bhutan** highlighted the negative impacts of the pandemic on SDGs implementation due to trade disruptions. Conversely, **China** carried on with sharing development opportunities with other countries in the China International Fair for Trade in Services, and the China International Import Expo, despite the impact of COVID-19.

4.6.4. Capacities for 2030 Agenda implementation

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

A case study in good practice: Civil society coordination for capacity and awareness in Paraguay

According to a CSO report, Paraguayan civil society has not been as actively involved in coordinating specific and collective SDG-related advocacy, capacity-building and public awareness activities up to this year (2021). Through the process of producing a joint spotlight report for the first time, a civil society-led monitoring platform is starting to be built. As a complement to the spotlight report, a capacity-building and awareness-raising handbook was also developed in order to make the SDGs more well-known amongst CSOs and the wider public.

Source: CSO report prepared by Paraguay's Association of NGOs (POJOAJU)

4.6.4.1. Capacity development

In 2021, 36 out of 42 countries (86%) referred to capacity development in some way in their VNR reports, an increase from previous years.¹²⁹ 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 2021, the majority of countries reporting on capacity development (25 out of 36 countries) referred to actions being either carried out or planned towards capacity building.

Secondly, 12 countries provided analyses of capacity challenges within the goal-by-goal analysis (versus 5 countries in 2020). Capacities related to monitoring and data collection were noted – both in terms of challenges but also efforts to improve capacities – by 10 countries (versus 5 in 2020). High-income countries such as **Germany, Japan, Norway, Qatar, and Sweden**,

125. In 2020, 27 out of 47 countries (58%) reported on trade, versus 28 out of 47 countries (60%) in 2019, 35 out of 46 countries (76%) in 2018, and 22 out of 43 countries (49%) in 2017.

126. Versus 10 countries in 2020, and 9 countries in 2019.

127. Versus also 12 countries in 2020, and 9 countries in 2019.

128. Versus 2 countries in both 2020 and 2019.

129. In 2020, 39 countries (83%) referred to capacity development, versus 32 countries in 2019 (68%), 2018 (70%) and 2017 (74%).

as well as **China**, tended to showcase their efforts to support capacity development in other countries. No countries in 2021 noted support received, but **Antigua and Barbuda**, **Chad**, and **Madagascar** highlighted the importance of capacity development towards implementation. Overall, the issues related to capacity development as reported in VNR reports in 2021 continue to be consistent with reporting in the period between 2017-2020.



4.6.4.2. Technology

With respect to technology, SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) includes 3 targets on technology transfer to developing countries. More countries reported on technology in 2021 in comparison to previous years, reversing the backslide observed in 2020. In 2021, information was available for 90% of countries (38 out of 42),¹³⁰ and the majority among those (33 countries) made some reference to leveraging technology to implement or advance the SDGs domestically. Moreover, 10 countries discussed technology in terms of environmental management or improving the quality of their environments. Six (6) countries – **Bolivia**, **Colombia**, **Germany**, **Guatemala**, **Sierra Leone**, and **Zimbabwe** – discussed ways of improving the education system with technology or enhancing learning through the mobilization of technology. In 2021, six (6) countries¹³¹ referred to technology transfers, including **Angola**, that highlighted the need for such transfers, and **Norway**, whose civil society assessment mentions that the country does not support certain regulations that facilitate

technology transfer, and asserts that depriving Global South countries of the opportunity of knowledge and technology transfer from multi-national technology companies operating in such countries impedes the development of countries' own digital industry.

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 2021, 37 out of 42 countries (88%) referred to systemic issues, up from previous years.¹³² More countries referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as a systemic issue hindering countries' capacity to realize the 2030 Agenda in 2021 (24 out of 42 countries, or 57%) than in 2020 (21 out of 47 countries, or 45%). Apart from this challenge that continues to hinder implementation at a global scale, some of the other systemic issues identified in 2021 are consistent with the ones mentioned in previous years' VNR reports. Seventeen (17) countries referred to climate change or environmental degradation,¹³³ and 16 countries mentioned macroeconomic instability as systemic issues. Eight (8) countries (versus 11 countries in 2020, and 5 in 2019) referred to peace and conflict, regional instability, terrorist organizations' actions, and 4 countries specifically related to illegal activities on their territories, such as illicit flows and corruption, as systemic issues.

As some specific examples, **Bolivia** noted the capitalist world order as a systemic issue, **Chad** and **Madagascar** mentioned diseases (including tropical ones), **Cuba** and **North Korea** referred to sanctions and blockages imposed to their countries, **Cyprus** referred to the occupation of its territory by Turkish military, **Japan** noted the continuous decline in birth rates, **Mexico** mentioned the colonial process and the consequences of European domination over Native American peoples, **Namibia** referred to droughts, and **Tunisia** noted the refugee and asylum seekers crises. In comparison with previous years, the global COVID-19 pandemic was the most commonly cited issue, followed by climate change and environmental issues.

130. Versus 79% of countries reporting in 2020, 87% of countries in 2019, 80% in 2018, and roughly 75% in 2017.

131. Compared to 3 countries mentioning technology transfers in 2020, 6 countries in 2019, 3 in 2018, and 8 countries in 2017.

132. In 2020, 33 out of 47 countries (70%) referred to systemic issues, versus 22 out of 47 countries (47%) in 2019, and 32 out of 46 countries (70%) in 2018.

133. Versus 15 countries in 2020 and 6 countries in 2019.

Civil society validity check:

Systemic issues identified in CSO reports

Guatemala referred to the lack of spaces for policy dialogue and participation, underfunded public policies, lack of substantial overarching planning, systemic corruption, and collusion between the public and private sectors.

North Korea noted that citizens are categorized into a three-tier hierarchy scale, based on their perceived loyalty to the national party.

Zimbabwe highlighted the inadequacy of resources as the main structural challenge cutting across the 2030 Agenda as a whole. Such issue is exacerbated by macroeconomic instability and widespread corruption, which are the main underlying factors.

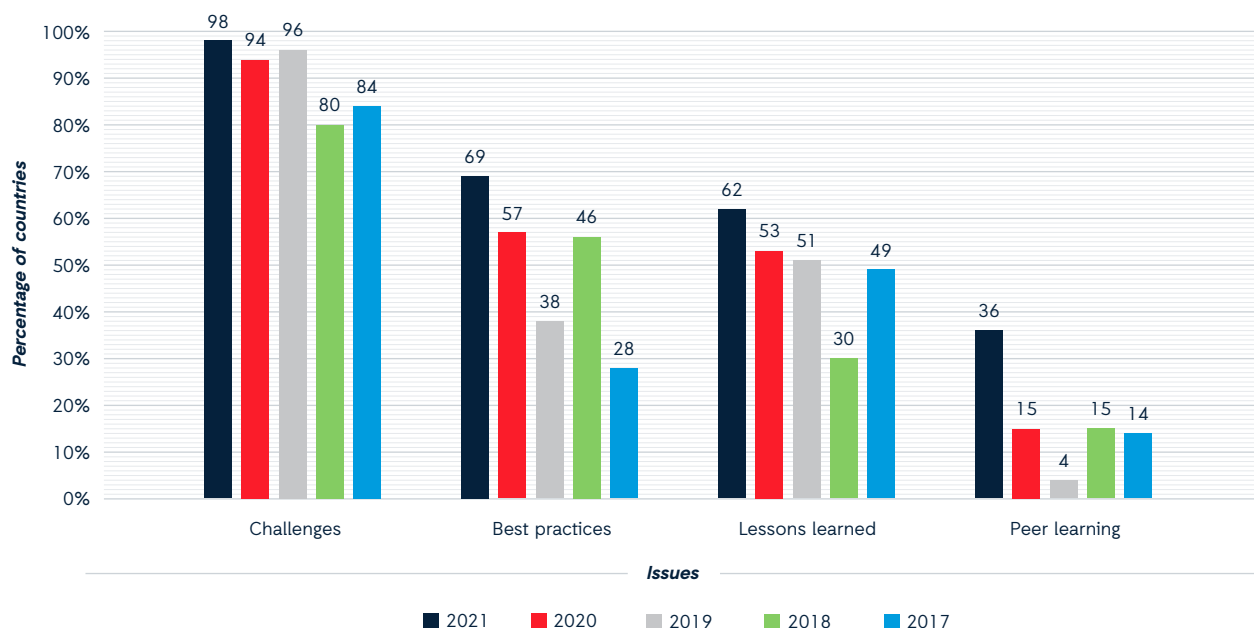
Source: Excerpts adapted from CSO reports prepared by CONGCOOP (Guatemala), Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (North Korea), and a coalition of CSOs (Zimbabwe).

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 22 shows that there has been improvement in reporting on challenges, best practices, lessons learned, and peer learning in 2021 over previous years. Almost all countries reported on challenges at 98% (41 out of 42 countries), with the sole exception of **Nicaragua**. More than two-thirds of countries reported on best practices (69%), and 62% reported on lessons learned. Thirty-six percent (36%) of countries reported on learning from peers, an increase of more than a double in relation to 2020. Despite such increase, there is still significant room for improvement in reporting on peer learning and, to a lesser extent, lessons learned. Reporting on these elements is critical to meeting the learning objectives of the HLPF. Despite the encouragement for member states 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 that dimension, particularly given the focus of the HLPF follow-up and review process on knowledge and lesson sharing.

Figure 22. Countries highlighting areas requested in the voluntary common reporting guidelines, 2017-2021





Best practice spotlight

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

4.6.5.1. Best practices

The information shared for best practices tends to be detailed across VNR reports, particularly through case studies and text boxes, which provides a good basis for understanding and learning. More countries presented information on best practices in 2021 compared to previous years, at 29 out of 42 countries (69%).¹³⁴ Like previous years, most countries reporting in 2021 highlighted specific programs or practices related to the realization of specific SDGs. Countries that inserted examples of good practices related to their goal-by-goal analysis include **Antigua and Barbuda, China, Czech Republic, Malaysia, Mexico, and San Marino**. Some countries referred to national policies or national plans in relation to the SDGs, such as **Angola, Azerbaijan, Cabo Verde, Denmark, Niger, Qatar, and Sierra Leone**. In turn, **Germany and Laos** mentioned good practices in SDG-related indices and targets, and on data collection to report on implementation.

A case study in good practice: Marshall Islands' good practices boxes

Marshall Islands' VNR report consistently presents examples of good practices in text boxes. These are present throughout the report and are a good way to clearly illustrate action.

Source: Marshall Islands' VNR report.

A few countries (11) highlighted good practices being carried out by different stakeholders other than the national government, including civil society, local governments, academia, youth, and volunteers.

Malaysia reported best practices in relation to SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), and **Bhutan** and **Indonesia** included good practices specifically related to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. With regards to SDG 13 (Climate action), countries such as **Antigua and Barbuda, China, and Czech Republic** highlighted good practices related to environmental and ecosystems protection. Some countries focused on localization efforts and good practices being carried out at the local level, such as in the cases of **Cabo Verde, Cuba, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sweden, and Uruguay**. Countries such as **Cyprus, Sweden, and Tunisia** highlighted good practices related to youth, including on youth participation in parliament. Other good practices were highlighted on topics such as social protection (**Angola**), refugee migration (**Azerbaijan**), poverty reduction (**Paraguay and Tunisia**), agriculture (**Antigua and Barbuda, China, and Uruguay**), research and education (**Norway**), and housing (**Mexico and Uruguay**).

A case study in good practice: Preventing diseases in Guatemala's archaeological sites and parks

Even when the VNR report does not highlight good practices, the National Council of Protected Areas and the Guatemalan Tourism Institute developed a Guide of good practices for preventing COVID-19 and other infections aimed at archaeological sites and parks. Its application was followed by the publication of good practice guides for COVID-19 and other infection preventions backed by the Ministry

¹³⁴. Versus 27 out of 47 countries (57%) in 2020, 18 out of 47 countries (38%) in 2019, 21 out of 46 countries (46%) in 2018, and 28% of countries in 2017.

of Public Health and Social Assistance. As a result, strict hygiene and sanitation protocols were applied, leading to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) including Guatemala on the list of countries that have obtained the Safe Travel Stamp, which is expected to accelerate the increase in the number of tourists visiting the country.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Guatemala's VNR report.



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.

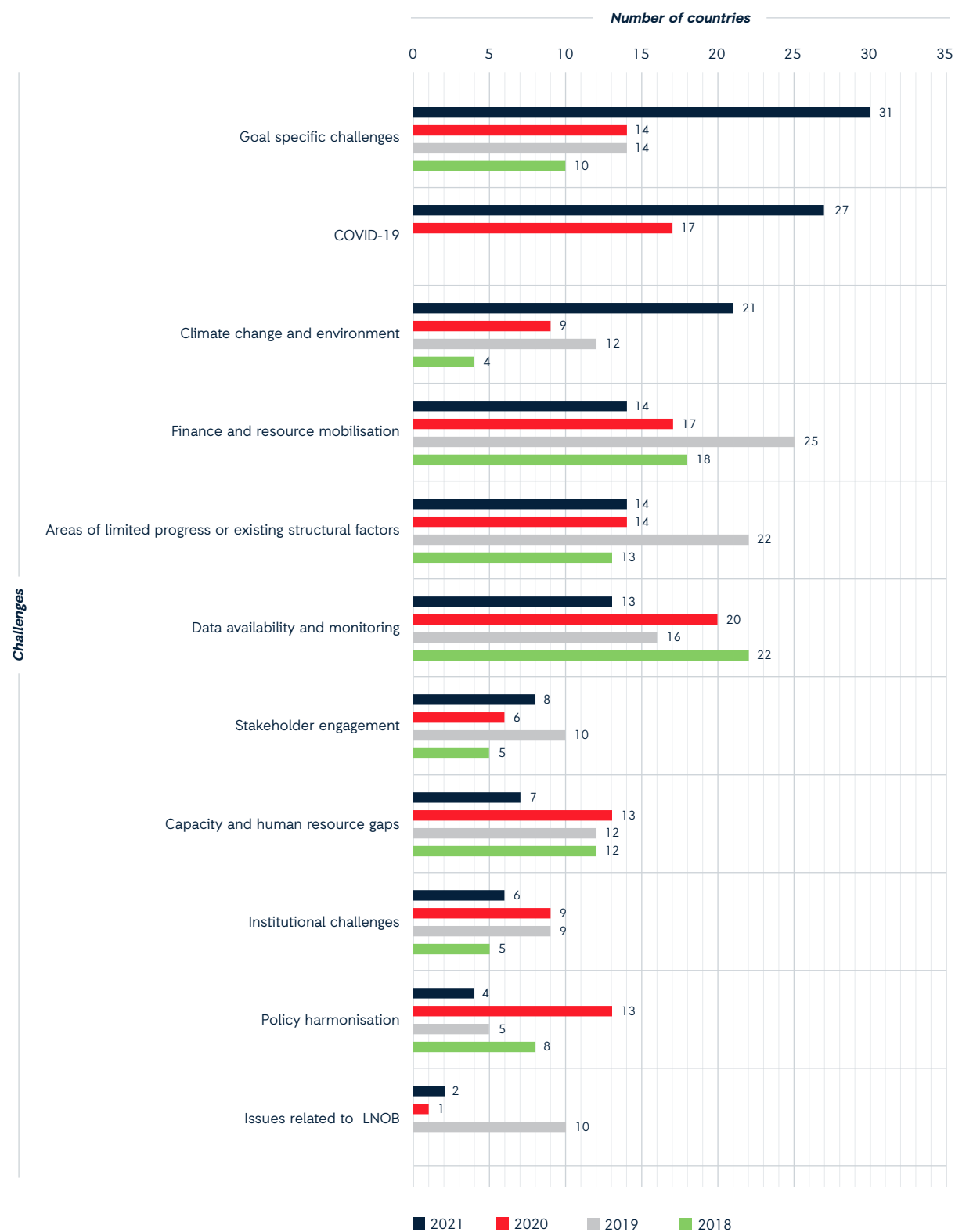
4.6.5.2. Challenges

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.

In 2021, 41 out of 42 countries (98%) – the sole exception being **Nicaragua** – identified and reported on challenges to 2030 Agenda implementation, up from the previous year (44 out of 47 countries, or 94%, in 2020). Countries reporting in 2021 presented implementation challenges in different ways, such as lists of key issues integrated in the VNR reports, with varied levels of detail. Figure 23 shows the main challenges emerging in 2030 Agenda implementation over 2018-2021.



Figure 23. Most common challenges in 2030 Agenda implementation, 2018-2021



Goal-specific challenges emerged as the top challenge in 2021, being mentioned by 31 countries, up from previous years. Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned as a challenge by 27 countries, versus 17 countries reporting in 2020. Thirdly, 21 countries referred to climate change and environmental issues, up from previous years. In fourth place came finance and resource mobilization, referred to as challenges by 14 countries in 2021, down from previous years. In fifth place, 14 countries mentioned areas of limited progress, such as poverty and malnutrition, or structural factors, such as war, occupation, corruption, and geographical realities. Next, data constraints and monitoring progress was referred to by 13 countries, down from previous years. Countries continue to face challenges related to broader 2030 Agenda implementation, including stakeholder engagement (referred to by 8 countries in 2021), capacity and human resource gaps (mentioned by 7 countries), and ensuring institutions are fit for purpose (mentioned by 6 countries). Only 4 countries referred to challenges in terms of policy harmonization, and the issue of ensuring inclusivity and meeting the promise to leave no one behind was mentioned by only 2 countries in 2021.

A case study in good practice: Consistent incorporation of intergenerational impacts and goals' progress in Sweden's VNR report

In its goal-by-goal analysis, in addition to sections on Sweden's fulfilment of the goals, its challenges, its successes, and its responsibilities and contributions in a global perspective, Sweden's VNR report includes sections on the impact on children and young people related to

each SDG. It also includes key national policy initiatives in 2017-2020 (since the last reporting period), and outlines future measures, which shows a comprehensive presentation of progress on every goal.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Sweden's VNR report.

4.6.5.3. Lessons learned

Pointing to lessons learned in VNR reports is another aspect of reporting that supports peer learning. In 2021, 26 out of 42 countries (62%) highlighted lessons learned, up from previous years.¹³⁵ Among the countries that provided such information in 2021, most reported lessons learned related to integrating the 2030 Agenda into government systems, including policies, budgets and monitoring and evaluation – 7 countries, versus 14 countries in 2020, and 4 countries in 2019. Six (6) countries emphasized stakeholder engagement for successful 2030 Agenda implementation in 2021,¹³⁶ and 4 countries pointed to lessons learned related to developing appropriate systems for follow-up and review.¹³⁷ Four (4) countries emphasized country ownership as being critical to success,¹³⁸ another 4 countries highlighted issues related to addressing the needs of vulnerable populations in the context of leaving no one behind,¹³⁹ only 1 country highlighted the roles of local governments,¹⁴⁰ and no 2021 reporting countries pointed to the importance of prioritization under the 2030 Agenda.¹⁴¹

In addition to the issues noted above, countries such as **Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Spain** referred to accelerators (i.e. “accelerating themes”, “accelerating policies”) for 2030 Agenda implementation. **Paraguay** mentioned the preparation of an impact assessment to report lessons learned. **Cuba** noted joint work with the United Nations system, and **Colombia**

135. Figures had been 25 out of 47 countries (53%) in 2020, and 24 out of 47 countries (51%) in 2019.

136. Compared to 10 countries in 2020, also 10 countries in 2019, and 5 in 2018.

137. Compared to also 4 countries in 2020, and 8 countries in 2019.

138. Versus 8 countries in 2020, and 4 countries in 2019.

139. Versus 2 countries in 2020, and 4 countries in 2019.

140. Versus 3 countries in 2020, and 4 countries in 2019.

141. Versus 1 country in 2020, and 4 countries in 2019.

mentioned a joint program roadmap and the importance of alliances in implementation. Along similar lines, **Germany, Niger, and Sierra Leone** highlighted partnerships, cross-sectoral collaboration, and cooperation. **Japan** and **San Marino** highlighted specific lessons learned related to disaster prevention and supporting the tourism sector, respectively. **Thailand** did not highlight specific lessons learned to accelerate implementation but mentioned the exchange of knowledge and experiences with other countries.

The lessons learned presented in the 2021 VNR reports are largely aligned with what had been reported in the VNR reports examined in the period from 2017-2020. However, there seems to be a trend arising in the sense of acknowledging the importance of joint work, partnerships, and collaboration (including at the international level) to advance 2030 Agenda implementation.

4.6.5.4. Learning from others

Reporting on what countries are keen to learn from others saw an increase in 2021, with 15 out of 42 countries (38%) providing this information.¹⁴² As some examples, **Czech Republic** welcomes the sharing of experience with other states that have decided to apply SDG budgeting, as well as inspiration from other VNR processes on how to use them as an opportunity to increase inclusivity and government transparency. **Laos** mentioned exploring lessons learned from other countries, such as setting up an innovation and knowledge hub to foster IT and non-IT innovative thinking. **Madagascar** referred to the will to learn from others in the fight against food insecurity and the operationalization of the triple nexus (humanitarian-development-peace). **Malaysia** referred to Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) as experience sharing and learning opportunities for cities, as well as the connection of Malaysian cities with global peers undertaking VLRs. **Tunisia** would like to develop capacity in relation to economy and management of public funds, as well as effective management of water and resources.

A case study in good practice: Sweden's government's openness to independent as well as internal review in the interests of policy improvement

Sweden's VNR report includes multiple references to reports by commissions appointed by the government or produced by the United Nations, other international organizations, the European Union, or NGOs that highlight gaps in Sweden's implementation of the various elements of the 2030 Agenda and provide recommendations on how to improve performance. The VNR report references such reports widely, indicating the government's interest in taking such feedback onboard. Examples include the civil society review of SDGs implementation and policy coherence for sustainable development, Barometer 2020, the UN's latest review of Sweden's performance on human rights, and the "Young Agenda – An examination of young people's inclusion in work on the 2030 Agenda" report published by the National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations (LSU) in 2020.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Sweden's VNR report.

A case study in good practice: Peer learning exercise between VNR reporters

The governments of **Colombia, Spain, and Sweden** engaged in a peer learning exercise regarding VNR reporting, and counted with the participation of Finland, which had reported in

142. Up from 7 out of 47 countries (15%) in 2020, 3 out of 47 countries (6%) in 2019, and 7 out of 46 countries (15%) in 2018.

2020. Key messages from such peer-learning dialogues and sharing of lessons learned have been included in VNR reports.

In the case of **Denmark**, the country contacted the government of Kenya (a 2020 VNR reporter), who read and commented on the Danish 2021 VNR report. This shows good practice in peer feedback and learning opportunities.

For the preparation of **Norway's** VNR report, the government gathered inputs from Denmark and Indonesia through a peer dialogue.

Source: VNR reports from Colombia, Denmark, Norway, Spain, and Sweden.

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

Among the 42 countries presenting VNR reports in 2021, 38 reported on the dimension of the impacts of COVID-19 on the means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which represents almost 91% of countries (versus almost 75% of countries reporting in 2020). The majority (29 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 19 countries, was another category highlighted in the 2021 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 –, which was reported by 7 countries. Fourteen (14) countries referred to external collaboration, both in the sense of providing and receiving support, and mentioned cooperation with the United Nations system and partner countries. The closure of borders or the suspension of air traffic and limitation of travel was not specifically mentioned by any country in 2021 (versus 3 countries in 2020). Conversely, 7 countries referred to improving infrastructure (versus also 3 countries

in 2020), for example regarding health facilities and communications.

Still other actions were highlighted by some countries. For example, **Cyprus** pioneered the mobilization of the country's volunteer network and received EU-wide recognition for its prompt and effective support of vulnerable groups. **Guatemala** and **Mexico** highlighted the multi-stakeholder character of the COVID-19 response, and included actions carried out by civil society, the private sector and academia to tackle the effects of the pandemic. The VNR report from **Indonesia** included a list of 230 policies and regulations put in place towards the COVID-19 response. **Spain** and **Uruguay** mentioned the establishment of a dedicated fund to provide subsidies related to overcoming the pandemic and its effects. With regards to vaccination rollouts, some countries have included information in their VNR reports, including **Norway, Qatar, San Marino, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe**.

Finally, in terms of the effects of COVID-19 on 2030 Agenda implementation, **Colombia's** VNR report repeatedly presented the pandemic as “a challenge and an opportunity” and stated that its response cannot be dissociated from the 2030 Agenda. Along the same lines, **Mexico** carried out a preliminary analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the SDGs, including a traffic-light system of possible impacts on progress with four categories: negative effect, positive impact, mixed impact, and unknown impact.

A case study in good practice: Niger's COVID-19 Comprehensive Response Plan

To deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Niger, with the support of its technical and financial partners, developed and implemented a “COVID-19 Comprehensive Response Plan.” This plan includes health measures and provisions to mitigate the social and economic effects of the crisis, with funding amounting to CFAF 1,439.5 billion, or 17.8%

of GDP. Ensuring an integrated response for post-COVID recovery, while addressing multiple strategic areas, including health management, resilience of the education system, support for vulnerable people, and mitigation of economic and financial impacts is key for a successful recovery that leaves no one behind. Indeed, the implementation of this plan has enabled Niger to be effective in managing COVID-19, ranking Niger among the top four countries with the highest cure rate in Africa, a substantial reduction in the number of cases, and a relatively low fatality rate.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Niger'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 2021, 26 out of 42 countries (62%) provided information on follow-up and review processes at the national level. This shows still another backslide in terms of reporting on this dimension of 2030 Agenda implementation, a negative trend continuing from 2020.¹⁴³



Best practice spotlight

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

Furthermore, the Secretary-General's voluntary common report guidelines strongly encourage repeat reporters to present progress made since their last VNR report. In 2021, 24 out of the 42 reporting countries presented a VNR report for the second time, and 10 countries presented for the third time. Most repeat reporters (32 countries) provided information on their progress since their last VNR report, except for **Bahamas**, that did not present a full VNR report in 2021, and **Qatar**. As some examples, **Bhutan's** VNR report consistently references progress since the last review in 2018, citing improved data availability and, in the goal-by-goal analysis, a number of new policies and measures adopted/under implementation since the last reporting period. In the case of **Madagascar**, progresses are highlighted in the environmental

¹⁴³. In 2020, 64% of countries discussed measures to report on the national level, versus 85% of countries in 2019, 67% of countries in 2018, and 72% of countries in 2017.

domain (e.g. reforestation and protected areas increase), at the social level, and on the economic front. Conversely, in the case of **Uruguay**, the continuity between the 2021 and the prior VNR reports is weak, as challenges presented in previous years are not considered, nor there are references to what had then been indicated as future steps.

A case study in good practice: Reporting process since previous VNR report in the cases of Cyprus, Czech Republic, and Egypt

Cyprus' VNR report shows SDG-related progress through a traffic light system. Under each one of the SDGs, the overall implementation level (%) is compared between the country's first and second VNR reports, with green indicating improvement on the indicators, red showing decline in progress, and white showing a stable performance. Moreover, other tables compare Cyprus' trend in achieving specific indicators in a ten-year period (2010-2019). In such tables, green arrows indicate an improvement in performance, red arrows indicate a decline, black arrows show a constant trend, and whenever less than 8 years of data are available, blue dots indicate that a trend has not been calculated.

In the case of **Czech Republic**, progress is shown in the VNR report by symbols and colours: a green check mark means positive progress, a yellow dash means limited or erratic progress, and a red cross means there are obstacles to progress.

In the VNR report of **Egypt**, each SDG is presented with a table of key indicators showing the latest available data point in comparison with a previous one, usually 2018, to showcase the progress since the country's last VNR report. Following the table of key indicators, the progress towards the goal is laid out, which contextualizes and elaborates on the change in the different indicators while incorporating relevant recent developments, frameworks, and agendas in relation to the goal.

Source: Excerpts adapted from the VNR reports from Cyprus, Czech Republic, and Egypt.



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, 39 out of 42 countries (93%) referred to the pandemic somehow in their VNR reports, a percentage that compares with 25 out of 47 countries (53%) reporting in 2020. Among the 2021 reporters, most have mentioned COVID-19 throughout their VNR reports, and many countries also produced a stand-alone chapter, sub-chapter or annex dedicated to the pandemic and its effects on the country's progress on 2030 Agenda implementation. Three (3) countries – **Bolivia, Nicaragua, and North Korea** – did not make significant reference to COVID-19 impacts.

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.

A case study in good practice: The Colombian Confederation of ONGs (CCONG)'s 'Social monitoring reports'

The Colombian Confederation of ONGs (CCONG) has been developing "Social monitoring reports" since 2015. In these, the coalition monitor the scope and quality of the SDG implementation process through a set of 6 specifically formulated indicators. The report also seeks to measure

the level of civil society contributions to the implementation process by gauging the scope and type of CSO-driven projects within each SDG. This year (2021), CCONG also developed a joint report with the official statistical office DANE, which builds upon the “Social monitoring report” and provides further quantifiable evidence on CSOs contribution to each one of the selected SDGs for this year’s HLPF.

Source: Civil society report prepared by CCONG.

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 2021, only 15 out of 42 countries (36%) provided information on data availability, which shows still another backslide from previous years.¹⁴⁴ 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. Conversely, some countries provide an overall percentage of 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 do 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 2021, 7 out of 42

countries (17%) reported that data was available for less than 50% of SDG indicators, which represents an improvement in relation to both 2020 (with 11 out of 47 countries, or 23%) and 2019 (over half of the reporting countries, or 25 out of 47 countries, had less than 50% of data available).

A case study in good practice: Fighting illegal deforestation in Bolivia

One of the leading causes of forest area reduction in Bolivia is illegal deforestation, which in 2012 represented 92% of total deforestation. The government strengthened the forests’ integral management normative and institutional framework to fight illegal deforestation to increase forest cover. It also consolidated the Monitoring and Control Program of Deforestation and Forest Degradation “Nuestros bosques” (Our forests) as an inter-institutional project.

In the same line, the country implemented a Forest Information and Monitoring System, providing updated and accurate information for deforestation control and degradation, heat sources monitoring, forest burn scars and fires, to propose data-based actions aimed at recovering wooded areas. As a result, illegal deforestation dropped to 53.9% in 2020. At the same time, Bolivia is expanding forest-covered areas through afforestation and reforestation programs linked to basins headwaters conservation and degraded lands restorations. Consequently, in recent years the forested and reforested area has substantially increased.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Bolivia’s VNR report.

In relation to second and third reporters in 2021, some countries experienced a decrease in data availability, shown as percentages of data available for targets and

144. In 2020, 21 out of 47 countries (45%) provided clear information on data availability for SDG monitoring, versus 36 out of 47 countries (76%) in 2019, 18 out of 46 countries (39%) in 2018, and 14 out of 43 countries (33%) in 2017.

indicators. That was the case of **Bhutan** (from 61-70% in 2018 to 31-40% in 2021), **Denmark** (from 51-60% in 2017 to 41-50% in 2021), **Guatemala** (from 71-80% in 2019 to 61-70% in 2021), and **Malaysia** (from 81-90%

in 2017 to 51-60% in 2021). Conversely, countries such as **Azerbaijan, Dominican Republic, Iraq, Niger, Paraguay, Spain, and Tunisia** saw gains in terms of data availability according to previous reporting versus 2021.

Table 4. Data availability for global SDG indicators

Percentage	Countries and Years				
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
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	Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Iraq, Paraguay
41–50%	Belgium, Italy, Nigeria, Peru	Benin, Egypt, State of Palestine	Côte d'Ivoire, Kuwait, Oman, Saint Lucia, Tunisia	Kyrgyz Republic, Morocco, Syria, Uzbekistan	Denmark, Dominican Republic, Zimbabwe
51–60%	Denmark	Ecuador, Niger, Spain, Uruguay, Viet Nam	Lesotho, Mongolia, Philippines, Tanzania, Timor-Leste	Costa Rica	Malaysia, Spain
61–70%	Indonesia	Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Lithuania, Senegal	Indonesia, Israel, Rwanda, South Africa	Finland	Guatemala, Niger
71–80%	Bangladesh	Hungary, Mexico	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Guatemala, United Kingdom	Benin, Ecuador, Libya, Malawi, Moldova	Angola, Madagascar, Sweden, Tunisia
81–90%	Malaysia	–	–	Austria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya	–

As noted in this review's section on leaving no one behind, information on disaggregated data is not necessarily 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 (26%) reporting in 2018 noted the need to improve disaggregated data, this figure jumped to 30 countries (64%) in 2019, then declined back to 13 countries (28%) in 2020. In 2021, 16 countries (38%) pointed to the need of additional data to leaving no one behind. Six years into reporting on the 2030 Agenda,

this suggests that although some countries recognize that efforts to LNOB will require improvements to the availability of disaggregated data, less than half of reporting countries mentioned this recognition (except for countries reporting in 2019). Countries not usually provide 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: Multiple levels of data disaggregation in Indonesia's VNR report

Indonesia's statistical annex provides an extensive array of data. Through more than 200 pages of the VNR report, data are divided by SDGs and their indicators, and are then disaggregated by many different components, which include year, province, sex, age group, area of residence, disability status, formal/informal work, expenditure quintile, head of household's sex, their education level, employment status, mother's education level, type of gender-based violence, marriage status, age of first marriage, type of environmentally-friendly products, number of displaced persons, number of complaints handling on human rights violations by ministry and commission, among many others.

Source: Indonesia's VNR report.

Civil society validity check:

On Indonesia's good practice described above

In regard to data, we think the Indonesian government has made significant improvement on data disaggregation. The Central Statistics Agency's (BPS) efforts to prepare objective-based indicator data for the SDGs demonstrate this endeavor (accessed through [this link](#)). Moreover, the Indonesian government also has a more interactive [SDGs Dashboard](#).

However, many SDGs data have not been updated and aggregated, particularly those that describe vulnerable groups' situations. The

commitment to integrate data from non-state actors and the government is also constrained in terms of methodology (for example, data must be continuous, and the coverage area is the same as data from the Central Statistics Agency).

Based on the workshop results conducted by INFID to strengthen data and budget allocation for the implementation of the SDGs (November 2019), Misiyah (KAPAL Perempuan) stated the importance of disaggregated data to patch up missing government data. For example, the lack of statistics on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) suggests FGM is not a priority issue for SDGs 3 and 5 (Health and Gender Equality). On the other hand, Gantjang Amanullah, as the Director of BPS People's Welfare Statistics, explained the limitations experienced by BPS in data collection in terms of: a) limited SDGs indicators available in the survey conducted by BPS; b) limited sample because not all data from all districts and cities are presented; c) most of the data are offered only at the national and provincial levels, and d) disaggregation according to specific characteristics cannot provide a complete picture of the actual condition.

Source: Views from INFID, after consultation for the present report.

4.7.2. Improving data availability

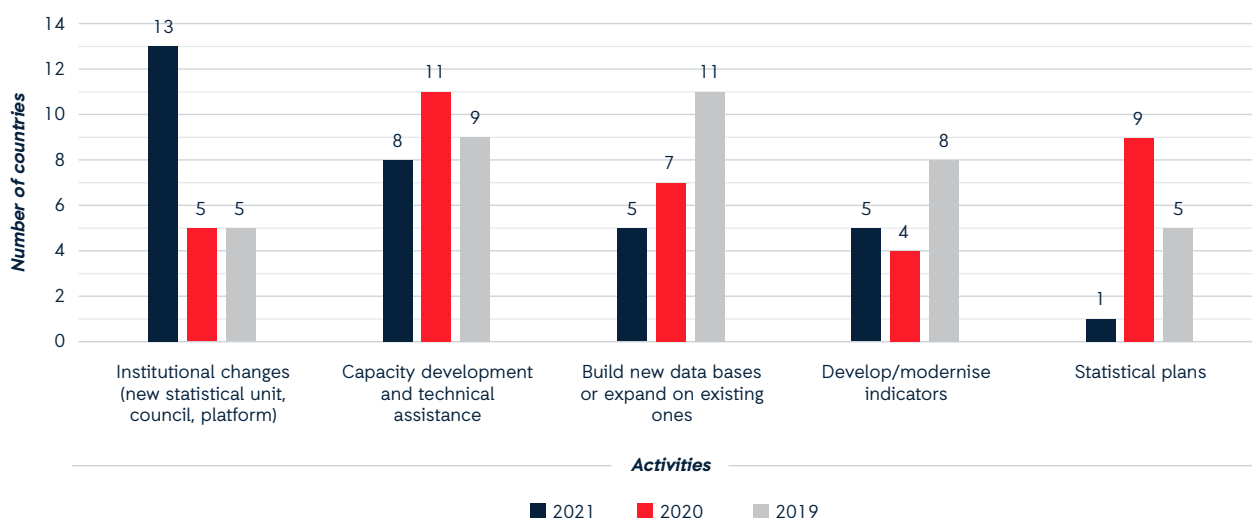
In 2021, 25 out of 42 countries (83%) indicated efforts to improve data availability, an improvement in relation to the previous year.¹⁴⁵ As shown in Figure 24, the three most cited ways to address data availability in 2021 VNR reports were conducting institutional changes to strengthen statistical systems (13 countries, versus 5 countries in both 2020 and 2019), improving capacity and having technical assistance in place (8 countries, versus 11 countries in 2020 and 9 countries in 2019), and building or expanding on data bases (5 countries, versus 7 countries in 2020 and 11 countries in 2019). Five (5) countries referred

145. This was noted by 30 out of 47 (64%) reporting countries in 2020, 100% of the 47 countries reporting in 2019, and 31 out of 46 countries (67%) in 2018.

to developing or modernizing indicators in 2021, and only 1 country – **Uruguay** – mentioned building a statistical plan (versus 9 countries in 2020 and 5 countries in 2019). Moreover, **Uruguay's** plan included

8 strategic objectives spanning different areas, which is a good practice in terms of improving data availability and national statistical systems.

Figure 24. Efforts to improve data availability



Other efforts mentioned in 2021 VNR reports include data dissemination, which was referred to by 6 countries (including as a recommendation in **Iraq's** VNR report), coordination (both at the national and international levels), which was mentioned by 5 countries, and resource mobilization, which was noted by 4 countries, all in Africa (**Chad, Madagascar, Niger, and Sierra Leone**). In addition, other countries specified still other efforts towards improving data availability. For example, **Colombia** noted the development of innovative management mechanisms to determine progress in the measurement of indicators, including a measurement barometer, and workplan implementation logs. According to **Marshall Islands'** VNR report, the process of data collection and analysis to populate a national annual report is under design, and the annual monitoring system has already been aligned to track progress on the SDGs. For **Tunisia**, a study on the analysis of lack of data was carried out and will support the country's efforts to strengthen its production system for disaggregated and periodic statistical data. In the case of **Laos**, a monitoring and evaluation framework is planned, and **Namibia** did not provide details on the efforts currently in place to address the challenge of data unavailability.

A case study in good practice: Thailand's efforts to evaluate and process information regarding the SDGs

In Thailand, the government established a central reporting database to monitor and evaluate progress on the SDGs. The Electronic Monitoring and Evaluation of National Strategy and Country Reform (eMENSCR) operates at all levels, and Thailand plans to use information collected through eMENSCR to evaluate progress on the SDGs. This should allow for a systematic analysis of implementation gaps so that the government can develop evidence-based policies, projects, and implementation going forward.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Thailand's VNR report.

The efforts noted in 2021 are somewhat consistent with those referred to in VNR reports from 2019 and 2020, though to a lesser extent in certain areas and a

greater focus on institutional changes. Moreover, reporting in 2021 provided attention to a broader array of areas, some of which had also been largely mentioned in 2017 and 2018 VNR reports, such as improving coordination, resource mobilization and data dissemination.

In addition to these findings, 17 out of 42 countries (40%) included unofficial data (from sources other than governments) in their VNR reports, versus 20 out of 47 countries (43%) in 2020. Different data sources (e.g. independent bodies, United Nations' agencies, World Bank, OECD, academic articles, civil society documents) contribute to maintaining a multi-stakeholder reporting process, provide balance to government-focused data bases, and serve as a means of reinforcing transparency and accountability.

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 2021, 26 out of 42 countries (62%) provided some information on national level reporting, a decline in relation to previous years.¹⁴⁶ However, more countries presented information on the mechanisms and processes of national reporting, including how countries report and to whom, which is positive in terms of transparency and accountability. Countries should 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).

In 2021, 5 out of 42 countries (12%) indicated that their national reporting process or mechanism is under development, which might suggest that more countries currently have reporting mechanisms in place.¹⁴⁷ Fewer countries pointed to regular national reporting in 2021 – 8 out of 42 countries (19%) – in comparison with previous years,¹⁴⁸ and 3 countries – **Afghanistan**,

Denmark, and Spain – referred to the intention of reporting annually, versus 7 countries in both 2020 and 2019. Different from previous years, VNR reports from 2021 were clearer on who would prepare reports, an information that was provided by 9 out of 42 countries (21%). Another aspect over which VNR reports are usually unclear is to whom reporting would occur, but 7 countries reporting in 2021 included information in this sense, which is a positive trend.¹⁴⁹

A case study in good practice: Status of data availability in Czech Republic's VNR report

The Annexes of the Czech Republic's VNR report link to a [website](#) containing all the SDGs and related indicators. Each indicator is colour-coded to include the status of data availability, as follows: available (green), unrated (orange), unavailable (red), and irrelevant (blue). Whenever the status is available, the data itself is included, comprising charts, national and international metadata, and data sources.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Czech Republic's VNR report.

Eleven (11) countries listed the presence of coordination bodies in reporting,¹⁵⁰ and 8 countries highlighted the use of a national statistics bureau or national evaluation council as either writers of or contributors to national reporting.¹⁵¹ In comparison with previous years, a higher number of countries (11 out of 42, or 26%) noted the involvement of parliamentarians in national reporting processes.¹⁵² Conversely, a dashboard, platform or dedicated website for online national reporting was noted by only 3 countries (7%) in 2021, down from previous years.¹⁵³

146. This compared to 29 out of 47 countries (63%) reporting in 2020, and 40 out of 47 countries (85%) in 2019.

147. This data compares to 2 out of 47 countries (4%) reporting in 2020, and 18 out of 47 countries (38%) reporting in 2019.

148. In 2020, 16 out of 47 countries (34%) pointed to regular national reporting, versus 19 out of 47 countries (40%) in 2019.

149. Information on who would prepare reports was included by only 1 country in 2020, and another 1 country mentioned to whom reports would be addressed.

150. Versus 12 countries in 2020, and 8 countries in 2019.

151. Versus 7 countries in 2020, and 2 countries in 2019.

152. Parliament's involvement was mentioned by 5 out of 47 countries (11%) in 2020, another 5 out of 47 countries (11%) in 2019, and 2 out of 46 countries (4%) in 2018.

153. Versus 13 out of 47 countries (28%) in 2020, 12 out of 47 countries (26%) in 2019, and 11 out of 46 countries (24%) in 2018.

A case study in good practice: Measuring the local situation with local indices in Iraq

Localizing the 2030 Agenda and understanding progress at the local level is utmost important. The Iraqi VNR report dedicates a full chapter around monitoring the progress of sustainable development in the country's provinces. For this, two indices based on data for 39 SDG indicators were developed. The first one is the Local Comparative Development Index (LCDI), which measures progress towards each SDG by using nationally available indicators, and in comparison with the global standard or national average if the global SDG has been achieved. The second one is the Local Comparative Developmental Perseverance Index, which considers progress compared to other provinces, rather than just the nature of achievement, and how close it is to the global standard.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Iraq's VNR report.

A case study in good practice: Adopting reporting cycle commitments in Spain

The government of Spain developed a "National Sustainable Development Strategy Monitoring and Evaluation" indicators framework to serve as a reference in elaborating annual government Progress Reports. Those yearly reporting exercises will be the basis of an accountability mechanism that will engage all stakeholders, including citizenship. Its results will be presented to and debated with parliament. Moreover, considering the 2030 Agenda's intergenerational nature, the annual progress reports will be presented to the national Child Participation Council. In addition, Spain assumed the commitment of carrying out an exhaustive mid-term evaluation in 2024, aimed at producing a detailed assessment of the country's progress towards the SDGs, its compliance to the promises made in the 2030 Agenda, and identifying adjustments required to make the 2030 Agenda a reality.

Source: Excerpt adapted from Spain's VNR report.



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Civil society validity check:

On Spain's good practice described above

In relation to the Sustainable Development Strategy presented by the Government of Spain in the 2021 Voluntary National Exam, we consider that it is very much aligned with the problems and challenges that the set of platforms and civil society organizations that we articulate under the umbrella of FeC have been working on.

Aspects such as the need for the 2030 Agenda to convey the long-term common political project – which is the roadmap for reconstruction after the multidimensional and global crisis aggravated by COVID-19 – in a way that is linked to the Recovery and Resilience Plan, the need to articulate the sustainable development agenda with that of human rights, or the centrality of putting into practice the Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development in order to aspire to a truly transformative 2030 Agenda, are some examples of the demands that we have identified and positioned in recent years and that we see reflected in the document.

However, we consider that there is a distance between the depth and scope of the great challenges identified and the proposals set forth to implement accelerating policies for each of them. And specifically, we see a need for greater coherence between diagnosis and accelerating policies with the goals and indicators of all challenges, to avoid losing transformative potential as progress is made in determining how to address the identified challenges and ensure a good measurement of progress. Specifically on the Progress Report that Spain has presented to the VNR of 2021, in our opinion, it is a good exercise for reviewing the Action Plan and compiling the different policy actions taken in relation to the lever measures that were identified in it.

However, we understand that a progress report should measure progress against a horizon of transformative change that has clearly defined

goals and a complete monitoring and review system, including a dashboard capable of capturing the most innovative elements of the 2030 Agenda. This transformation horizon should be the one established in the Sustainable Development Strategy and, since it has not been approved until the month of June 2021, it is understood that the Progress Report presented in 2021 cannot meet the criteria mentioned to make a true analysis of progress and pending challenges. But it is a task that cannot be postponed creating the conditions to carry out a true measurement of progress. In this sense, we understand that the Sustainable Development Strategy opens a new chapter and should constitute the programmatic reference against which to measure progress in future accountability exercises.

But for this accountability to be meaningful, going beyond a compendium of actions undertaken and going on to analyze to what extent the transformative policies contribute or not to advance in the achievement of the proposed strategic horizon, we understand that these actions must be undertaken urgently:

1. The revision of the proposed goals for each accelerating policy so they are made coherent with the identified challenges.
2. The definition of an appropriate indicator framework to measure progress towards these revised goals and to measure the most innovative aspects of the 2030 Agenda (the interactions between development dimensions and policies, or the multidimensional nature of most of the challenges that we face).
3. The development of a gap analysis (distance between the starting point and the arrival point for the different transformation goals proposed).
4. Establish a clear methodology for the preparation of progress reports, with sufficient time and adequate processes, with the necessary human and material resources, to guarantee the quality participation of all the actors involved in the different governance bodies, in each phase of elaboration of the report.

5. Specification of a suitable content index for the reports so that, from now on, significant annual progress reports are prepared, with an identification of the approval process and subsequent route.

To guide the new progress reporting scheme, we recommend following the United Nations Guidelines for Reporting in Voluntary National Reviews at the High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development.

Source: Views from Futuro en Común in relation to the reporting-progress measurement cycle, after consultation for the present report.

Two (2) countries (the same number as in 2020) noted regional-level follow-up and review processes – in 2021, monitoring and reporting actions at the local level were noted by **Indonesia** and **Sierra Leone**. No countries provided information on planned HLPF reporting for the future, down from 2020, when this intention was noted by 2 countries. In 2021, no reporting countries provided information on national auditing institutions, down from the previous year. Finally, VNR reports usually lack information about citizen engagement in follow-up and review processes. While 5 countries had made some reference to stakeholders such as civil society and general citizens being engaged in national reporting in 2020, this was noted by 7 countries in 2021, namely **Angola, Azerbaijan, Chad, Cyprus, Marshall Islands, Spain, and Zimbabwe**.



Best practice spotlight

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

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

This chapter has two sections. The first one focuses on the United Nations Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines, and the second one examines how the countries presenting VNR reports in 2021 have made use of and complied with the guidelines.

5.1. Key Findings

5.1.1. Use of the voluntary common reporting guidelines

- **Overall guidelines compliance:** The review of 2021 VNR reports shows decreased compliance with reporting against the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines. Despite improvements that had happened until 2019 and the steadier situation observed between 2019 and 2020, the analysis conducted in 2021 shows backslides.
- **Guidelines' components:** Although most countries presenting VNRs in 2021 fully meet the Secretary-General's reporting guidelines, there has been some backslides and negative trends. In more than one third of the cases (6 out of 15 guidelines' components) the proportions show that countries are farther from fully meeting the reporting guidelines.
- **Increases and declines in reporting:** Although reporting increased in 4 components listed in the guidelines in 2021 compared to 2020, with the most significant gains seen in reporting on leaving no one behind, declines were seen in the majority of comparable components. In such cases, 5 components experienced the lowest level of compliance in the whole 2018-2021 series.

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 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). The guidelines have evolved over time with an updated [handbook for reporting](#)

in 2021. VNR reports submitted for the following year also have a [new set of guidelines \(2022\)](#) that continues to include recommendations on how to prepare subsequent VNR reports after first HLPF reporting, and suggestions on how to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidelines are voluntary however and countries ultimately decide on how to present their findings.

BOX 6. WHAT IS IN THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S VOLUNTARY COMMON REPORTING GUIDELINES (2021)?

- **Opening statement** by the Head of State or Government, a Minister or other high-ranking Government official.
- **Highlights** presented in one to two pages highlighting the number of VNRs previously presented to the HLPF and the most significant changes, a synthesis overview of the review process, status of SDG progress, new and emerging challenges (including on COVID-19), 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**
 - **Ensuring ownership** of the SDGs with an outline of efforts towards all stakeholders to inform them on and involve them in the SDGs and the VNRs. This section can address how specific groups have been engaged.
 - **Incorporation of the SDGs in national frameworks** is understood in terms of the critical initiatives countries undertook to adapt the SDGs and targets to their national circumstances, and to advance their implementation. This section should include challenges in implementation, 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 yearly HLPF theme.
 - Assessment of how the principle of **leaving no one behind** is mainstreamed in implementation. Includes how vulnerable groups have been identified and efforts to address their needs, with 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 information on institutions and non-state actors, coordination, and review plans.
 - Relevant **systemic issues** or barriers that hinder progress, including potential external consequences of domestic policies. Transformative approaches to addressing these challenges can be highlighted.

- A brief analysis of progress on all **goals and targets**, as well as policies and measures taken so far, 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.
- Description of **new and emerging challenges**, including recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, plans and measures to build back better while advancing the SDGs and targeting those most at risk of marginalization. Description of other new and emerging challenges, further discussion on policies and measures to address structural frictions, and definition of future actions needed can also be included.
- Presentation of the **means of implementation**, including how means of implementation are mobilized, what difficulties this process faces, and what additional resources are needed based on review of challenges and trends. The section can include reference to financial systems and resource allocation to support implementation, 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, including efforts and any support needed for an inclusive and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Can also outline how implementation will be reviewed at national and subnational levels. Countries can also highlight lessons learned and how they will be applied for future VNR processes and reports. Next steps should be stated in a concrete way to allow for targeted follow-up.
- **Annexes** should include an annex with data, using the global SDG indicators as a starting point and adding priority national/regional indicators as well as identifying gaps. Additional annexes can also showcase best practices or comments from stakeholders.

5.3. Use of the guidelines

All the VNR reports presented in 2021 were reviewed against the guidelines to identify which of the suggested components have been addressed by reporting countries. Another assessment refers to the extent to which countries fully met the guidelines' requirements for each component.

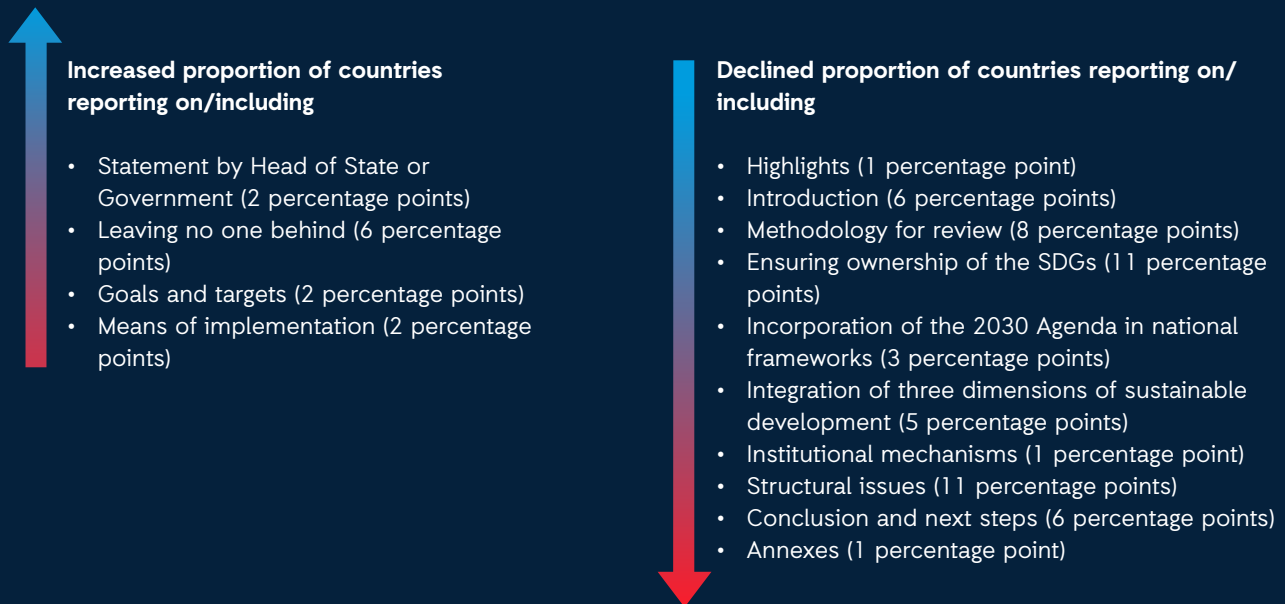
Figure 25 shows that, although reporting increased in 4 components listed in the guidelines in 2021

compared to 2020, with the most significant gains seen in reporting on leaving no one behind, declines were seen in the majority of comparable components (10 out of 14).¹⁵⁴ In such cases, 5 components experienced the lowest level of reporting/inclusion in the whole 2018-2021 series, namely introduction, ensuring ownership of the SDGs, incorporation of the 2030 Agenda in national frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and conclusion and next steps.¹⁵⁵

154. The "new and emerging challenges" component is not comparable, as it has only been included in the guidelines in 2021.

155. As a disclaimer, conclusion and next steps have been merged into a single component from the 2020 Secretary-General's guidelines. Therefore, the comparison for this component only relates to the 2020-2021 series.

Figure 25. Trends in reporting against the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines over 2020-2021



Apart from assessing the percentage of countries including the guidelines' components into their VNR reports, more information was drawn on in terms of countries' overall compliance with the guidelines. Figure 26 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.



Figure 26. The extent to which countries meet requirements of the Secretary General's voluntary common reporting guidelines, 2021

2021	Statement by HoSG	Highlights	Introduction	Methodology for review	Ensuring ownership	Incorporation in national frameworks	Integration of three dimensions	Leaving no one behind	Institutional mechanisms	Structural issues	Goals and targets	New and emerging challenges	Means of implementation	Conclusion and next steps	Annexes
Afghanistan															
Angola															
Antigua and Barbuda															
Azerbaijan															
Bahamas															
Bhutan															
Bolivia															
Cabo Verde															
Chad															
China															
Colombia															
Cuba															
Cyprus															
Czech Republic															
Denmark															
Dominican Republic															
Egypt															
Germany															
Guatemala															
Indonesia															
Iraq															
Japan															
Laos															
Madagascar															
Malaysia															
Marshall Islands															
Mexico															
Namibia															
Nicaragua															
Niger															
North Korea															
Norway															
Paraguay															
Qatar															
San Marino															
Sierra Leone															
Spain															
Sweden															
Thailand															
Tunisia															
Uruguay															
Zimbabwe															
Direction of change over previous year (2020 to 2021)	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑	-	↑	↓	↓
Percentage of countries including component in 2021	79%	86%	86%	88%	74%	93%	74%	93%	93%	76%	98%	88%(*)	98%	88%	71%
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%

(*) Component added in the VNR Handbook 2021 (**) Conclusion 77%, Next steps 79% (***) Conclusion 74%, Next steps 80%

Although most countries presenting VNR reports in 2021 have fully met the Secretary-General's reporting guidelines, there has been some backslides and negative trends. Figure 26 shows a majority of "fully met" assessment (green), as opposed to "partially met" (yellow) and "did not meet" (red) in most components. However, in more than one third of the cases (6 out of 15 components) the proportions show that countries are farther from fully meeting the reporting guidelines.

In the case of 4 components – integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, leaving no one behind, structural issues, and means of implementation – the number of countries fully meeting the guidelines and meeting them only partially was very balanced. Moreover, most countries only partially met 2 of those components: structural issues, and integration of the three dimensions.¹⁵⁶ This finding shows a backslide in relation to the previous year.¹⁵⁷ With regards to leaving no one behind and means of implementation,¹⁵⁸ there has also been a backslide vis-à-vis 2020 VNR reports,¹⁵⁹ and in the specific case of leaving no one behind, the majority of 2021 reporting countries did not meet the guidelines in full.¹⁶⁰

In the case of 2 other components – ensuring ownership of the SDGs, and annexes – the distribution between fully meeting, partially meeting and not meeting the guidelines was balanced, but the majority of countries did not comply with the guidelines in full. In the case of ensuring ownership, 19 countries fully met the guidelines, while 23 out of 42 countries (55%) either met the guidelines only partially or did not meet them at all. Moreover, for the case of including annexes in the VNR reports, 20 countries fully met the guidelines,

versus 22 out of 42 countries (52%) that complied with the guidelines either partially or not at all.

With regards specifically to "goals and targets", there has been a positive trend in terms of countries including this component in their VNR reports. Data show that 2021 reached the highest percentage of countries (98%) having dedicated a section to goals and targets in the entire 2018-2021 series. However, 12 out of 42 countries (29%) met the guidelines only partially, and 1 country (**Bahamas**) did not meet the guidelines at all as it did not present a full VNR report. These findings indicate that some countries are either reporting on a limited set of goals (instead of all the 17 SDGs) or are not providing sufficient information on goals and targets to fully meet the guidelines' requirements.

Overall, findings for 2021 show positive results regarding compliance to most components of the voluntary common reporting guidelines.¹⁶¹ However, negative trends were also observed, showing that VNR reporting countries did not sufficiently focus on, or did not present enough detailed information on several other guidelines' components.

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**

156. Structural issues: 21 out of 42 countries (50%) only partially met the guidelines, as opposed to 11 out of 42 countries (26%) fully meeting the guidelines. Integration of the three dimensions: 19 out of 42 countries (45%) only partially met the guidelines, versus 12 out of 42 countries (29%) fully meeting the guidelines.

157. Figures for those two components in VNR reports presented in 2020 here the following. Structural issues: 24 out of 47 countries (51%) fully met the guidelines, whereas 17 out of 47 countries (36%) met the guidelines only partially. Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development: 22 out of 47 countries (47%) fully met the guidelines, whereas 15 out of 47 countries (32%) met them only partially.

158. In 2021, the proportion of these components was the following. Leaving no one behind: 20 out of 42 countries (48%) fully met the guidelines, versus 19 out of 42 countries (45%) meeting only partially. Means of implementation: 22 out of 42 countries (52%) fully met the guidelines, versus 19 out of 42 countries (45%) meeting the guidelines only partially.

159. Figures for 2020 VNR reports: Leaving no one behind: 25 out of 47 countries (53%) fully met the guidelines, whereas 16 out of 47 countries (34%) met them only partially. Means of implementation: 26 out of 47 countries (55%) met the guidelines in full, whereas 19 out of 47 countries (40%) met them only partially.

160. For leaving no one behind, in 2021, 19 countries only partially met the guidelines, and 3 did not meet them at all, which shows that the majority of countries (22 out of 42, or 52%) did not fully meet the guidelines.

161. Positive results were seen regarding 9 out of 15 guidelines' components, namely: statement by the Head of State or government, highlights, introduction, methodology for review, incorporation to the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks, institutional mechanisms, goals and targets, new and emerging challenges, and conclusion and next steps.

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.





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6. CONCLUSION

In 2021, the fifteen-year agenda for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership entered its sixth year. While the world continues to grapple with the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is hoped that heads of state and government will meet the commitments to a Decade of Action and Delivery to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while ensuring that no one is left behind. Moreover, during the United Nations' 76th session of the General Assembly in September 2021, the Secretary General presented the Our Common Agenda report as a vision on the future of global cooperation and a call towards reinvigorating multilateralism in an inclusive, networked, and effective way. Furthermore, in the context of continuing to respond to the pandemic, there is an urgent need for governments to accelerate actions and promote transformative change to achieve a just recovery. To this end, the transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda, alongside the SDGs as a global roadmap, continue to be critical towards achieving equality and sustainability in the process of building forward better.

For the past six 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.

In the process of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, government and stakeholders from the global community should redouble their efforts to address gaps and work towards achieving the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. While an increasing number of countries return to the HLPF to present their second, third, and even fourth VNR reports in 2022, there is opportunity to further strengthen reporting – while making use of comparative analysis with data from previous VNR reports – so that SDGs implementation can continue to progress.

While the HLPF remains the crucial space for VNR presentations and an exchange of views, future HLPF meetings should provide additional opportunities for non-state actors' representation and the inclusion of analysis and reports produced by civil society organizations and experts. In doing so, there can be better linkages between processes of monitoring and accountability around the 2030 Agenda at the local, national, regional, and global levels.

This report, the sixth edition of *Progressing National SDGs Implementation*, aims to provide useful insights to inform these discussions and help guide improved implementation and reporting. By reviewing the 42 VNR reports submitted to the HLPF in 2021, as well as the analysis of 17 VNR-related civil society reports, this review has outlined lessons from the 2021 VNR process that add up to previous reports covering the period since 2016, in which 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 stakeholders' engagement mechanisms.

This review's examination of all aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation (governance arrangements, institutional mechanisms and stakeholder engagement, policies, means of implementation, and reporting) showed both positive and concerning trends. While moving into the Decade of Action and Delivery and on the path to ensure that the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is just, equitable and sustainable, the key findings, good practice case studies, emerging best practices and recommendations presented throughout this report are provided to inform governments and other stakeholders and shape their future SDG-implementation efforts at national, regional, and global levels.

It is our hope that the eight years left until 2030 can comprise more meaningful engagement between different stakeholders leading to greater achievement of our collective efforts towards a sustainable future for our communities and our planet. To feed into this process, this report, and its previous editions, provides in-depth data analysis and recommendations for each element of 2030 Agenda implementation.

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List of 2021 VNR reports (42 reporting countries)

Afghanistan

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Angola

First VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Antigua and Barbuda

First VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Azerbaijan

Third VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Bahamas

Second VNR report – only main messages

Language of analysis: English

Bhutan

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Bolivia

First VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Cabo Verde

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Chad

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: French

China

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Colombia

Third VNR report

Language of analysis: Spanish

Cuba

First VNR report

Language of analysis: Spanish

Cyprus

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Czech Republic

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Denmark

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Dominican Republic

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: Spanish

Egypt

Third VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Germany

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Guatemala

Third VNR report

Annexes

Contributions from cooperation actors towards the National Development Plan

Contributions from the private sector, academia, and research centres

Language of analysis: Spanish

Indonesia

Third VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Iraq

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: Arabic

Japan

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Laos (Lao People's Democratic Republic)

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: English

Madagascar

Second VNR report

Language of analysis: French

Malaysia

[Second VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

Marshall Islands

[First VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

Mexico

[Third VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: Spanish

Namibia

[Second VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

Nicaragua

[First VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: Spanish

Niger

[Third VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: French

North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK)

[First VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

Norway

[Second VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

Paraguay

[Second VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: Spanish

Qatar

[Third VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: Arabic

San Marino

[First VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

Sierra Leone

[Third VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

Spain

[Second VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: Spanish

Sweden

[Second VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

Thailand

[Second VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

Tunisia

[Second VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: French

Uruguay

[Third VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: Spanish

Language of analysis: Spanish

Zimbabwe

[Second VNR report](#)
Language of analysis: English

List of 2021 civil society reports (17 reports)

Bhutan

Report: [People's score card report, Bhutan](#)
Language of analysis: English

Cabo Verde

Report: [Relatório do grupo de trabalho da sociedade civil para a Agenda 2030](#)
Language of analysis: Portuguese

Chad

Report: [Rapport alternatif de la société civile sur les progrès de la mise en œuvre des ODD au Tchad](#)
Language of analysis: French

Colombia

Report: [Sexto monitoreo social a las recomendaciones presentadas al gobierno nacional para la implementación de los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible](#)
Language of analysis: Spanish

Denmark

Report: [Spotlight report: challenges for Denmark on the way to achieving the sustainable development goals – in the period 2017-2021](#)
Language of analysis: English

Egypt

Report: [A gender-based perspective on the third Voluntary National Review of Egypt](#)
Language of analysis: English

Guatemala

Report: [Informe social sobre los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible – ODS – 2021](#)
Language of analysis: Spanish

Indonesia

Report: [Independent civil society assessment of national delivery of the 2030 Agenda for SDGs](#)
Language of analysis: English

Laos (Lao People's Democratic Republic)

Report: [SDG Report for Laos by the Alliance for Democracy in Laos 2021](#)

Language of analysis: English

Madagascar

Report: [Rapport indépendant d'évaluation et d'analyse des progrès de mise en œuvre des Objectifs de Développement Durable avec les perspectives des OSC membres de la Plate-forme nationale des Organisations de la société civile de Madagascar \(PFNOSCM\)](#)

Language of analysis: French

Malaysia

Report: [Submission to people's scorecard process: assessing national delivery of the 2030 Agenda](#)

Language of analysis: English

Mexico

Report: [Progreso de la Agenda 2030 de Desarrollo Sostenible en México](#)

Language of analysis: Spanish

North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK)

Report: [Democratic People's Republic of Korea: 2021 Progress report in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

Language of analysis: English

Norway

Report: [Civil society's assessments of the sustainable development goals: to Norway's Voluntary National Review 2021](#)

Language of analysis: English

Paraguay

Report: [Miradas desde la Sociedad civil sobre el estado de los ODS](#)

Language of analysis: Spanish

Spain

Report: [Nos va el future en ello: un análisis desde la sociedad civil de la implementación española de la Agenda 2030 y recomendaciones a futuro](#)

Language of analysis: Spanish

Zimbabwe

Report: [Ensuring no one is left behind: CSO's voices on High Level Political Forum 2021: Zimbabwe CSO's SDGs Voluntary National Review Spotlight Report](#)

Language of analysis: English