

## Executive Summary

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In July 2018, governments will convene for the Sixth Meeting of the United Nations High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development to examine their progress on implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Forum is mandated to carry out regular, inclusive, State-led and thematic reviews of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, with inputs from other intergovernmental bodies, regional processes, major groups and other stakeholders. Countries present these voluntary national reviews (VNRs) on an annual basis at the HLPF. As outlined in the 2030 Agenda, this follow-up and review process is meant to promote accountability to citizens, support effective international cooperation and foster exchange of best practice and mutual learning.<sup>1</sup>

This review documents and analyses the 42 English, French and Spanish VNR reports submitted in 2017 to the HLPF, as well as a sample of civil society reports also produced in 2017 for the HLPF.<sup>2</sup> The VNR report for the Netherlands provided information on all countries in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, including Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten. As such, the analysis is based on data for 45 countries. The review of VNR reports includes recommendations for improving the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the VNR process and reports, and strengthening the accountability mechanisms around the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The review identifies best practices in implementation of the 2030 Agenda with a view to providing recommendations on how governments, civil society organisations (CSOs) and other stakeholders can improve their efforts. It also provides recommendations on how countries can improve their VNR reporting to the HLPF by meeting and building on the Secretary General's common reporting guidelines for VNRs at the HLPF.

It should be noted that the analysis in the review is based largely on the VNR reports, and where available, civil society reports. No additional research was conducted to verify the accuracy and confirm the validity of the information governments included in reports. Where relevant, findings from other assessments of the VNR reports for 2017 have been noted. Nevertheless, this is a clear limitation of the findings.

### COUNTRIES REPORTING TO THE HLPF IN 2017

Afghanistan, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Botswana, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Maldives, Monaco, Nepal, Netherlands (including Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten), Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Portugal, Qatar, Slovenia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Thailand, Togo, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe.

The review reveals that the majority of countries reporting in 2017 appear to have established foundational elements for implementation. The review sets out what governments reported in terms of awareness raising, incorporation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national policies and plans, development of institutional mechanisms for implementation, national plans, consultation with local stakeholders, partnership development, and monitoring and evaluation of progress. However, the VNR reports remain patchy. Furthermore, the level of engagement by governments on these different pillars of 2030 Agenda implementation is not uniform either within or across countries. Much can be learnt and applied from emerging standard practice and best practice to date by different countries. Best practices identified from the VNR reports are highlighted throughout this review. The VNR reports show that greater efforts are needed to ensure a high-level of

<sup>1</sup> 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: United Nations. Available at [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/684&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/684&Lang=E).

<sup>2</sup> Details on the methodology, including the analytical framework, used for the assessment of all the VNRs can be found in Annex 2.

implementation across all pillars of implementation within countries and by all countries to meet the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda, and realise the SDGs.

## Findings, best practice and recommendations



### INCORPORATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA INTO NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND POLICIES

The majority of countries (40) reporting in 2017 have in some way incorporated the SDGs into national development plans and related policies and frameworks and are able to demonstrate concrete actions in their move towards implementing the 2030 Agenda. A limited number of countries (2) state that their national policies and frameworks already align to the SDGs. However, with the exception of 'leaving no one behind', important principles in the 2030 Agenda – namely universality and the human rights based approach – are not mentioned in most VNR reports. Countries tend to focus on the SDGs rather than the transformational principles of the 2030 Agenda.

#### BEST PRACTICE

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

**Explicitly link the implementation of each SDG to relevant national and international human rights frameworks.**



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Fully integrate the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national 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. The fact that existing policies already align to the SDGs is not sufficient.
- Operationalise the principles of the 2030 Agenda in approaches to implementation – recognising the universal, rights based and interlinked nature of the agenda that seeks to leave no one behind and ensure sustainable development within planetary boundaries. This must include grounding plans and strategies in human rights, purposefully working to put the last first and consistently reach marginalised communities, and supporting the universality of the agenda - more specifically, addressing domestic and global dimensions of sustainable development. VNR reports should demonstrate how approaches to sustainable development are meaningfully changing based on the principles of the 2030 Agenda and not just the SDGs.



### LEADERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

Most countries (36) appear to be making use of councils or committees to govern 2030 Agenda implementation, with leadership residing with cabinet ministers (14) or an implementation council or committee outside parliament (11). A minority of countries (18) have formally included non-state actors in governance arrangements; whereas, most countries simply note their commitment to engage non-state actors. While the commitment by countries to engage non-state actors through governance and institutional mechanisms is welcome, this serves as standard rather than best practice. For countries that have formally included non-state actors, representation is more prominent in technical working groups rather than on councils or committees. In terms of who governments engage, civil society and the private sector are most commonly cited, followed by academia, development partners, parliament and government institutions. Formal inclusion of representatives from major stakeholder groups is essential, and is something civil society will be monitoring actively to ensure practice changes and improves.

#### BEST PRACTICE

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



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Clearly establish leadership and governance structures to support 2030 Agenda implementation and lay out lines of accountability between various national stakeholders.
- Formalise non-state actor engagement in governance structures to realise the 2030 Agenda.



### BASELINE OR GAP ANALYSIS

Most countries (38) state that they are making use of policy and/or data assessments to inform their policies and approaches to SDG implementation, though information on the results of such assessments is not readily available in the VNR reports. The most commonly cited gaps – identified by these assessments - include lack of sufficient information on specific goals or targets, and overarching data limitations. There is a clear need to understand the status of official data and research related to 2030 Agenda implementation to facilitate scrutiny of government policies and identify where data gaps can be filled by supplementary data from citizens or research bodies.

## BEST PRACTICE

**Assess policies, data availability and baselines to inform prioritisation and nationalisation of the 2030 Agenda.**

**Ensure an evidence-based approach to implementation.**



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Conduct an assessment that identifies gaps in existing policies and programmes, and set out baselines from which to measure progress and assess where additional efforts are needed.
- Clearly articulate how the assessment was conducted and provide a summary of the gaps identified for each goal.



## INTEGRATION AND POLICY COHERENCE

While countries tended to cover all dimensions of sustainable development in their VNR reports, including through detailed analysis, the majority of countries (34) did not report on the full set of SDGs in 2017. Limited references to linkages between goals by 19 countries in the goal-by-goal analysis may also indicate that countries are not sufficiently ensuring integration in their approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation. Policy coherence for sustainable development does not feature strongly in VNR reports, with only a limited number of countries (11) providing an assessment of the impact of their domestic and foreign policies on sustainable development outcomes globally. Twenty-two countries link climate change and the [Paris Agreement](#) to the 2030 Agenda. Fifteen (15) link to the [Addis Ababa Action Agenda](#). Fifteen (15) also referred to policy coherence for sustainable development.

## BEST PRACTICE

**Detailed assessment of all 17 SDGs with appropriate linkages to all dimensions of sustainable development and reference to domestic and global efforts to realise the 2030 Agenda.**

**Summarise best practice, lessons learned, gaps and priorities, and areas where support is needed in the goal-by -goal analysis to facilitate learning and global partnership.**



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Assess all 17 goals in their 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.
- Include a summary of best practice, lessons learned, gaps and priorities, and areas where support is needed in the goal by goal analysis to facilitate learning and global partnership.
- Link implementation of the 2030 Agenda to both the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, including in VNR reporting.
- Provide an assessment of domestic and global dimensions of sustainable development in the goal-by-goal analysis, demonstrating contributions to realising the SDGs at home and abroad, and supporting policy coherence for sustainable development.



## LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

Reports that included a dedicated chapter on leaving no one behind tended to do a better job at describing who is being left behind and what efforts are being made to reach the furthest behind people. Only 14 countries provided an indication of the availability of data to leave no one behind (LNOB), the bulk of which (11) noted that additional disaggregated data by sex, region, ability, age, social status, and/or particular groups are needed. Nevertheless, the bulk of countries (33) identified those at greatest risk of being left behind, often pointing to women, children and youth, persons with disabilities and elderly people. To LNOB, countries highlighted the use of broad social policies that set minimum standards as well as policies and initiatives that target specific groups and/or reduce domestic inequality. As reports do not provide information on data to LNOB or evaluate the impact of their policies on vulnerable groups, it is not possible to assess which policies and programmes are successfully reaching the people who are furthest behind first.

## BEST PRACTICE

**Dedicate a chapter in the VNR report to leaving no one behind that details who is being left behind, the available data, and efforts to leave no one behind and reduce domestic inequalities.**



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Include a specific chapter on LNOB in VNR reporting.
- Provide information on the status of data collection or plans to improve data availability to inform efforts to LNOB. Ensuring no one is left behind means knowing who is being left behind, by how much, and in what areas.
- Highlight existing and planned efforts to LNOB, including how policies and programmes are being adapted to reach the people who are furthest behind first.
- Target domestic inequality in 2030 Agenda implementation, including in support of SDG 10 on reducing inequality, and outline the current status of domestic inequality and how it is being addressed in VNR reports.



## RAISING AWARENESS AND CREATING OWNERSHIP

Most governments (41) state that they have carried out initiatives to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda and selected national priorities, in consultation with national stakeholders, and that this is an area for ongoing effort. National priorities tend to reflect all dimensions of sustainable development, and to a lesser extent, governance issues. National priorities are yet to be matched with national targets and indicators for SDG implementation for most countries however. For those that have selected targets and indicators, there tend to be two main approaches. Some countries have made their selections based on a mapping of existing available data and priorities through a government-led process. Others have taken a more inclusive approach that includes consultation with non-state actors on targets and indicators as part of the nationalisation process.

In terms of localisation, reports reveal wide variance in terms of the extent to which local governments have been engaged in SDG implementation so far. Reports indicate that further efforts to localise the SDGs at country level are needed.



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Adopt innovative ways to raise awareness of the SDGs among the general public, with a view to long term engagement, including in partnership with civil society and other non-state actors.
- Identify national sustainable development priorities and develop associated national targets through an inclusive and participatory process to complement global targets and indicators.

- Provide support to sub-national levels of government to raise awareness of the SDGs and develop capacities for local level implementation, including translation of the SDGs into local plans, programmes, and monitoring efforts.



## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW PROCESSES

In their VNR reports, countries state that they are consulting with stakeholders in the selection of national priorities and preparation of VNRs for the most part. However, VNR reports provided varying degrees of details in terms of the actual consultation processes. Civil society reports are available for 18 of the countries reviewed in 2017 at the HLPF. A number of civil society reports note that there is still a need to translate the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into local languages.

### BEST PRACTICE

**Select national targets and indicators through inclusive consultation with local stakeholders.**

**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.**



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Ensure stakeholder engagement on the 2030 Agenda is accessible, transparent, timely and inclusive. This means making use of varied and inclusive approaches to consultation such as online and offline methods, publicising consultation opportunities widely and with appropriate lead time, including at sub-national events in different parts of the country, and ensuring that information is available in local languages.
- 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.
- Include and support non-state actors and parliamentarians to participate in the HLPF in line with the principles of inclusivity and partnership in the 2030 Agenda.
- Support multi-stakeholder platforms that promote dialogue across the SDGs and with different sectors with a wide range of stakeholders. This will help to promote greater understanding of shared goals and objectives and potential synergies, build momentum and strengthen partnerships in implementation.



## IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA

The Secretary General's common reporting guidelines ask member states to outline their best practices, lessons learned in accelerating implementation, challenges to implementation and where they would like to learn from peers. In 2017, countries reported on their challenges and to a lesser degree, lessons learned. However, few countries explicitly noted their best practices or areas in which they would like to learn from others. Data availability and monitoring progress are the most commonly cited challenges in implementation across VNR reports with developing countries often highlighting the need for support from development partners. In many cases, the information provided is general in nature, and not specific enough to be actionable. Reporting on these elements is critical to peer learning as well as the development of partnerships to address country-level challenges. These findings suggest that there may be a need for the United Nations to explore with member states why there is underreporting on these dimensions particularly given the focus of the HLPF follow-up and review process on knowledge and lesson sharing.

Most countries have not costed implementation but have identified public and private, domestic and international sources of finance to support implementation. Reporting was most prominent for international public finance in discussions on the means of implementation followed by capacity development and technology. The development of strategic partnerships, particularly in terms of South-South and triangular cooperation is seen as an important way to support the means of implementation going forward. A limited number of countries (5) called on traditional development partners to meet the official development assistance commitments. The same number of countries referred to the need to finalise trade packages for developing countries. Countries most commonly noted the general need for capacity development to realise the 2030 Agenda. In terms of next steps in implementation, a number of reports note the need for further localisation of the 2030 Agenda through engagement with local governments and for improving capacity to monitor progress.



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Clearly report in their VNR reports on best practices, lessons learned in accelerating implementation, challenges going forward and where opportunities exist to learn from peers.
- As an essential part of the process, start integrating the SDGs into national and local budgets to ensure that resources are allocated

for implementation, building on the good practice of identifying sources of finance to implement the 2030 Agenda at country level.

- Report on all means of implementation. Such information is critical for assessing gaps, including in terms of identifying where greater domestic and international efforts are needed. Member states failed to meaningfully operationalise Goal 8 of the Millennium Development Goals on Global Partnership. Member states should ensure that Goal 17 of the SDGs is fully implemented.
- Bolster donor country efforts to support development partners' capacity development priorities, including strengthening statistical systems and the capacities of local stakeholders to implement the 2030 Agenda.
- Increase official development assistance to support 2030 Agenda implementation. Aid providers should ensure they meet their commitment of providing at least 0.7% official development assistance as a percentage of gross national income, and 0.15 % to least developed countries.
- Align South-South cooperation to the national priorities defined by recipient partners in a data-driven and accountable way.
- Implement trade agreements and agendas that benefit developing and developed countries, including the Doha Development Agenda, and the Nairobi (2015) and Bali (2013) Packages.
- Scale up efforts to address systemic issues that impact SDG implementation, in particular international peace and security, illicit capital flight, tax avoidance and tax evasion, among other things.



## PARTNERSHIP TO REALISE THE SDGS

For the most part, the VNR reports stress the important contributions of non-state actors and others, and the critical importance of multi-stakeholder partnership for 2030 Agenda implementation. Yet, VNR reports do not consistently provide real examples of specific stakeholder contributions beyond consultation processes and participation in implementation structures.

Reports also do not address the enabling environment for civil society (and the increasingly shrinking space that is available to civil society organisations around the world), nor other challenges that civil society organisations face in contributing to the 2030 Agenda; rather they highlight specific initiatives from civil society. Civil society reports indicate that lack of awareness on the 2030 Agenda by the general public and other development stakeholders. Limited finance for CSO activities are the most prominent barriers to effective civil society participation in 2030 Agenda implementation.

It seems that parliamentarians are primarily contributing to the 2030 Agenda through committee work, though reporting on the role of parliamentarians is limited. Similarly, VNR reports as a whole provide limited examples of the specific roles and initiatives supported by the private sector and academia, suggesting that more work is needed to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda and promote partnership with these stakeholders. Finally, VNR reports for developing countries revealed that most do not identify priorities for development partner support for delivery of the 2030 Agenda, though the roles development partners can play in supporting implementation are more commonly featured.

## BEST PRACTICE

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



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Support civil society to engage in 2030 Agenda implementation by creating a more enabling environment, and through institutionalised dialogue and consultation, inclusion in formal governance arrangements, finance, and where needed, capacity development.
- Integrate the 2030 Agenda into parliamentary committee work, recognising 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 and the private sector.
- Where relevant, clearly stipulate and provide details in their VNR reports on priority areas for support from the international community, laying out the roles development partners can best play to support the acceleration of 2030 Agenda implementation.



## MEASUREMENT AND REPORTING

The majority of countries provided information on monitoring and evaluation at the national level. There is some limited information on data availability for overall SDG monitoring. However, information on data availability, including disaggregated data is often unclear or not articulated. The review shows a need for countries – regardless of their income level – to strengthen data availability for SDG monitoring. Regular reporting, for the most part annual, is promised by 15

countries in descriptions of national reporting. A minority of countries plan to report to parliament. In the 31 reports that articulate national reporting provisions, only one country, Japan, notes when it will submit a follow-up report to the HLPF (2019).

Despite the emphasis on the importance of regional review as part of follow-up and review in the 2030 Agenda, of the 31 countries reporting in 2017, none referred to peer learning or review activities at the regional level in relation to 2030 Agenda implementation; that said, some countries referred to other SDG related activities at the regional level or in special country groupings.

## BEST PRACTICE

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

**Integrate the 2030 Agenda into parliamentary committee work, recognising the critical role parliamentarians play as citizens' representatives and in ensuring national level accountability for progress.**



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Report on data availability, including disaggregated data, and their 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.
- Spell out in their VNR reports how they plan to review progress at the national level and be accountable to their citizens for progress on the 2030 Agenda beyond reporting to the HLPF; and articulate 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.
- Identify opportunities to realise the 2030 Agenda domestically and globally through engagement more formally in regional level initiatives and with like-minded countries. Such engagement offers opportunities to share best practice with and learn lessons from peers.



## USE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL'S COMMON REPORTING GUIDELINES

Most countries include the majority of elements of the common reporting guidelines in their VNR reports, with notable exceptions being the thematic analysis and statistical annex. However, many of the VNR reports are not structured according to the outline in the guidelines. This can hinder comparison of shared challenges and good practices.

The absence of details in many VNR reports makes it difficult to understand country needs, hold stakeholders accountable and identify the best entry points for support. There are a number of specific recommendations for member states and the United Nations pertaining to VNR reporting emanating from the findings of this assessment of the 2017 VNRs against the common reporting guidelines.

Despite the missing elements noted above, VNR reports still tend to be very long, repetitive and unnecessarily detailed, with some sections of the guidelines asking for repetition of the same information. How member states are expected to differentiate from the goal-by-goal analysis and the analysis of the HLPF theme – particularly when it is linked to specific goals – is unclear. Similarly, there tends to be significant repetition between analysis of SDG 17 on partnership for the goals and the means of implementation. This suggests that the United Nations may need to explore the challenges faced by member States in reporting on these elements and provide further guidance to ensure that the reporting elements that can most contribute to learning and garnering support for implementation are present in VNR reports.

### Member states



Based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Follow, as much as possible, the guidelines as proposed by the Secretary General to ensure that all elements of 2030 Agenda implementation are captured and facilitate comparison of shared challenges, good practices and lessons learned.
- Include a statement from a head of state to demonstrate commitment and give profile to the agenda.
- Include an executive summary as a tool to provide a snapshot of context, best practice, challenges and lessons learned.
- Include an introduction which is useful for scene setting and setting out components of the report while avoiding repetition in the opening statement and executive summary.
- Include the methodology for the VNR, with sufficient details that clearly 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.
- Continue to provide information on efforts to raise awareness and foster ownership, in particular key initiatives and successes and lessons learned in this process.
- Report on all SDGs with specific attention to gap and baseline analyses that provide a clear articulation of where gaps exist.
- Continue to provide information on institutional mechanisms for 2030 Agenda implementation, including governance arrangements.
- Provide a detailed assessment of their forward-looking agenda, outlining where they need 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.
- Include a statistical annex in their VNR reports as suggested by the common reporting guidelines.

### United Nations



Based on the findings, the United Nations still needs to:

- Explore the challenges faced by states in adhering to the guidelines and provide further guidance where needed.
- Provide further guidance to member states on the following:
  - key elements required to help ensure integration of the three pillars of sustainable development (social, economic and environmental) into and across national frameworks.
  - the main elements to be reported in the thematic analysis, with reference to how this element should differ from the goal-by-goal analysis.
  - how to report on the means of implementation, recognising the differences between developing and developed countries, and those that are both recipients of official development assistance and providers of South-South cooperation.

- Within the United Nations common reporting guidelines:
  - streamline how SDG 17 is analysed, more specifically, by combining the analysis of partnerships for the goals with the means of implementation, considering the significant overlap between these issues.
  - revise the statistical annex provisions for reporting on data availability to include disaggregated data, with reference to global and national level indicators. This will provide a better picture of countries' overall capacity to monitor SDG implementation.
- mainstream the sections on next steps and conclusion. Rather than encouraging countries to provide a summary of the main report in the conclusion, the conclusion should focus on providing greater details on next steps.

