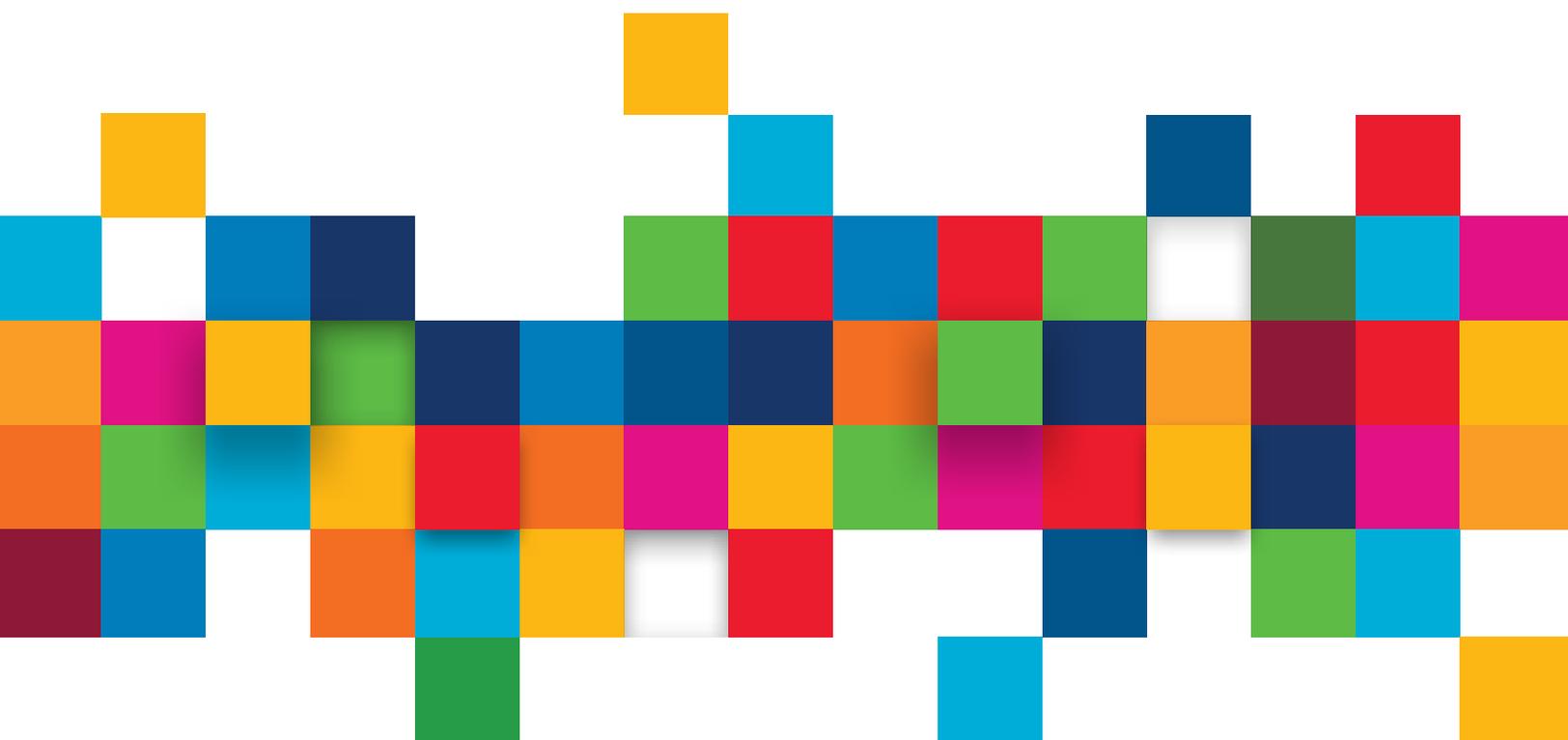


Progressing national SDGs implementation:



An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2018

The Third Edition in an annual series commissioned by civil society organisations



actionaid



CCIC CCCI



Acknowledgements

This report was written by Shannon Kindornay, Independent Consultant and Adjunct Research Professor at Carleton University, with inputs from Javier Surasky (Area Coordinator, Governance for Development Research, Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional, CEPEI), Nathalie Risse (Thematic Expert, 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, International Institute for Sustainable Development, IISD), and Anas El Hasnaoui (Associate Development Expert, Arab NGO Network for Development, ANND). Shannon Kindornay collected the data for all English voluntary national review (VNR) reports, Javier Surasky for all South American VNR reports, as well as for Mexico, Nathalie Risse for all French VNR reports and



Anas El Hasnaoui for the Bahrain VNR report. The report is the third of its kind, following on the 2017 report [Progressing National SDG Implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2017](#) and a 2016 report produced by Bond, entitled [Progressing national SDGs implementation: experiences and recommendations from 2016](#).

A Steering Committee guided preparations of this report. It was led by the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) and comprised of the following individuals and organisations: Sesheeni Joud Selvaratnam, ActionAid - Denmark; Oli Henman, Action for Sustainable Development (A4SD); Bihter Moschini, ANND; Claire Godfrey and Kit Dorey, Bond; Diego Martinez-Schutt, Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD); Fraser Reilly-King, CCIC; Deirdre de Burca, Forus; Lynn Wagner, IISD; Andrew Griffiths, SightSavers; Isabella Montgomery, Together 2030; Arelys Bellorini, World Vision International; and Ruth Fuller, WWF-UK.

In addition, the authors would like to thank Ben Myers, who copy edited the country profiles.

While many have reviewed and commented on the report, Shannon Kindornay, Javier Surasky, Nathalie Risse and Anas El Hasnaoui assume full responsibility for any factual errors.

* * *

This report was produced with financial or in-kind support from the following organizations:

Steering Committee

ActionAid, Action for Sustainable Development, Arab NGO Network for Development, Bond, Canadian Council for International Co-operation, Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Forus, International Institute for Sustainable Development, SightSavers, Together 2030, World Vision International and WWF-UK.

Contributors and additional funders

Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional (Cepei), ChildFund Alliance, Christian Children's Fund of Canada, Waterloo Global Science Initiative and UKSSD.

Kindornay, Shannon. (2019). *Progressing National SDG Implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum in 2018*. Ottawa: Canadian Council for International Co-operation.

Canadian Council for International Co-operation, 39 McArthur Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1L 8L7
© CCIC, 2019

Charitable Registration # 11883 0439 RR0001
Corporation Number: 034565-2

Design and layout: phivedesign

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International Licence.

The opinions expressed in this collaborative report do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Steering Committee's respective members or the funders of this report.

Executive Summary

Four years after the adoption of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and its [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) in 2015 by world leaders, 2019 marks the end of the first four-year cycle of review. As such there will be two meetings of the United Nations [High-level Political Forum \(HLPF\)](#) on Sustainable Development to examine progress on their implementation in 2019: the Seventh Meeting of the HLPF at the Ministerial level in July under the Economic and Social Council; and a Heads of State and Government level meeting in September under the General Assembly.

The HLPF 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 their [voluntary national reviews \(VNRs\)](#) on an annual basis at the HLPF. In 2019, 51 countries will present their VNRs, ten of whom will present their second VNR. [The purpose of the follow-up and review process](#) is to promote accountability to citizens, support effective international cooperation and foster exchange of best practice and mutual learning.

This report, the third edition of *Progressing National SDGs Implementation*, aims to provide useful insights and suggestions to inform these discussions and help guide improved implementation and reporting. It documents and analyses all 46 VNR reports submitted in 2018 to the HLPF, as well as a sample of civil society reports also produced in 2018 for the HLPF; and it includes recommendations for improving implementation of the 2030 Agenda the VNR process and reports, and strengthening accountability. The review identifies good and best practices and provides recommendations on how governments, civil society organisations and other stakeholders can improve their efforts. It also provides recommendations on how countries can improve their reporting to the HLPF by meeting and building on the Secretary General's voluntary [common reporting guidelines for VNRs](#). Importantly, the review also provides a comparative assessment of how VNR reporting is evolving over time through a comparison of analysis of the VNRs in 2016 and 2017 with findings for 2018.

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 2018 have been noted. Nevertheless, this is a clear limitation of the findings.

FORTY-SIX (46) COUNTRIES REPORTING TO THE HLPF IN 2018

Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Australia, Bahamas, Bahrain, Benin, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Canada, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Greece, Guinea, Hungary, Ireland, Jamaica, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Mali, Malta, Mexico, Namibia, Niger, Paraguay, Poland, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Singapore, Slovakia, Spain, Sri Lanka, State of Palestine, Sudan, Switzerland, Togo, United Arab Emirates, Uruguay, and Viet Nam.

What's new in the 2018 edition

A number of new findings emerge from the 2018 review of VNR reports, though many of the recommendations and best practice from the 2017 edition of this report remain relevant and have been included here. Findings and contributions from the 2018 review of VNR reports that stand out in comparison to the 2017 review include:

GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

- A significant increase in participation by non-state actors in formal governance mechanisms.
- Principles to ensure timely, open, transparent, informed and iterative stakeholder engagement.

POLICIES

- Inclusion of culture as a national priority for 2030 Agenda implementation, in addition to other dimensions of sustainable development.
- Marked improvement in terms of reporting on all SDGs in 2018; however, there is still limited reference to linkages between the dimensions of sustainable development, a finding that represents a backsliding in comparison to 2017.

MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION

- Improved reporting on the means of implementation – notably international public finance, trade, technology and systemic issues.
- Reporting on best practices increased in 2018, however gaps still remain in terms of reporting on lessons learned or areas in which countries would like to learn from others.
- Limited reporting on leaving no one behind despite the inclusion of this component in the Secretary General's voluntary common reporting guidelines. There is a need for countries to examine the extent to which policies and programmes are addressing the needs of those left behind first.
- The status of local implementation efforts, as highlighted by the 2018 VNR reports, suggests that much more work is needed to promote localisation.
- Marked improvement in reporting on contributions from civil society, parliamentarians, the private sector and academia. However, only a handful of VNR reports still included contributions from non-state actors and local governments throughout.
- A limited number of countries committed to regular reporting on implementation. Through their VNR report, some countries, including two who have reported previously, signalled progress against targets.

USE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL'S VOLUNTARY COMMON REPORTING GUIDELINES

- VNR reports continue not to be structured according to the outline in the guidelines though they capture most elements, as was the case in 2017. Nevertheless, all elements of the guidelines were included by at least 70% of reporting countries, with the exceptions of leaving no one behind, structural issues and the annexes.

In short, the 2018 VNR reports show that the majority of countries have made progress in terms of incorporating the SDGs into national policies, developing institutional mechanisms for implementation, efforts to build partnerships and/or attention to monitoring and

evaluation of progress. This is consistent with the assessment of VNR reports in 2017. However, despite the advances being made, country progress on establishing the building blocks for 2030 Agenda implementation - governance structures, institutional arrangements, policies and means of implementation - by our assessment, still varies substantially across countries. Some countries have made significant progress on some building blocks, but not all, and they still have much to learn from emerging good and best practice. Furthermore, very few countries are actively engaging in the more transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda, such as incorporating the 2030 Agenda principles into policies and approaches, integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development, localising implementation in line with local needs and establishing effective mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and partnership. Progress in these areas, *inter alia*, will truly drive an integrated and sustainable approach to 2030 Agenda implementation and go beyond business as usual. It is our hope that these findings will encourage governments and stakeholders to redouble their efforts, as we believe that the next two years provide a number of key opportunities to address these shortfalls.

Key opportunities to improve VNRs and the HLPF over the next two years

A number of meetings in 2019 will offer an opportunity for stakeholders to commit to accelerating 2030 Agenda implementation. The second meeting of the HLPF in September 2019 will serve as the first [summit](#) in a series of Heads of State and Government HLPFs, which are set to occur every four years over the course of the 2030 Agenda. The Summit is meant to reconfirm political commitment to the 2030 Agenda and will reinforce other high level events scheduled for September 2019, namely the [2019 Climate Summit](#) and the [High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development](#). It will result in a "political declaration" that aims to give guidance on how to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The two meetings of the HLPF in 2019 are political moments that present an opportunity to review both process and progress to date on SDG implementation. This report provides comprehensive guidance on how to make progress on implementing the SDGs at the national level - guidance that will help shape and inform the process as countries return to New York in July and September to improve and refine their plans for the coming years of delivery. Critically, this report shows that there is a need for member states to improve the quality of VNR reporting, and as such, the HLPF process. This is particularly important given the planned review of the format and organisation of the HLPF for early 2020. The review of the HLPF is intended to learn lessons from the first four years

of implementation and follow-up and review. It is our expectation that this review of the HLPF will be open and inclusive to all stakeholders. Civil society organisations will provide a number of recommendations based on the detailed findings of this report and its predecessors.

VNR reporting should be improved following the recommendations outlined in this report, recognising that the VNRs serve as an important mechanism for national accountability for 2030 Agenda implementation and the basis for follow-up and review at the HLPF. More time and space should also be given to the presentation and discussion of the VNRs at HLPF meetings – this is essential if the original vision of the positive and constructive follow up and review mechanisms outlined in the 2030 Agenda are to become a reality. Future HLPF meetings should include constructive forums for the meaningful participation of civil society, recognising their valuable contributions to SDG implementation and follow-up and review. Furthermore, future meetings of the HLPF should provide additional opportunities for exchange of views and inclusion of independent assessments, including reports from civil society and expert analysis, which would enable member states to benefit from a wider pool of knowledge. In doing so, it is our hope that the coming years can provide even greater ambition for our collective future.

Findings and recommendations:

Assessment of Governance and Institutional Mechanisms for 2030 Agenda Implementation

LEADERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

As was the case for VNR reporting in 2017, 2018 VNR reports suggest that institutional mechanisms for implementation and coordination are largely established. Most VNR reports (31) refer to the use of new or existing councils or committees to govern implementation. The most commonly cited leaders for 2030 Agenda implementation include heads of government or state and individual cabinet ministers, although a handful of countries are putting leadership in the hands of multiple cabinet ministers. As in 2017, these governance structures typically oversee and drive national implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including policy alignment, coordination, implementation and monitoring.

In comparison to 2017, formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements has shown a marked improvement, shifting from a commitment to engage non-state actors, to now actually including them. This marks a small shift towards a more

whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation. While the types of non-state actors included in these structures remains wide-ranging, there is a slight drop in the engagement of parliaments in these institutions and a slight increase of local governments relative to the 2017 reports.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- Clearly establish leadership and governance structures to support 2030 Agenda implementation and lay out lines of accountability between various national stakeholders.
- Assign responsibilities for 2030 Agenda implementation across government institutions to create ownership, identify shared responsibilities and ensure transparency and accountability for progress on implementation.
- Formalise non-state actor engagement in governance structures to realise the 2030 Agenda.

ENGAGING PEERS

The 2018 VNR reports signal some movement on participation in regional activities or special country groupings to support regional or sub-regional implementation of the 2030 Agenda. To date these initiatives are focussed on the development of regional frameworks, monitoring initiatives and best practice sharing. The VNR reports continue to make limited references to initiatives that are promoting peer learning and regional follow-up and review.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- 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.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION

While half of the countries examined (26) consulted with stakeholders around setting national priorities, and almost all (43) engaged groups around the development of their VNR, there are still relatively few examples of formal processes and mechanisms that have been established to allow for more widespread and regular engagement with stakeholders. Such engagement contributes to ongoing awareness raising efforts, national ownership and whole-of-society approaches to implementation. There is a need for countries to report on engagement processes. This review proposes a range of ways that stakeholder engagement could meaningfully be enhanced

in the long-term, including through the adoption of principles for effective and inclusive stakeholder engagement.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- Establish and report on formal mechanisms to ensure regular, inclusive stakeholder engagement on 2030 Agenda implementation. Such mechanisms should support multi-stakeholder dialogue across the SDGs and with different sectors with a wide range of stakeholders, in line with the principles for effective and inclusive stakeholder engagement. This will help to promote greater understanding of shared goals and objectives and potential synergies, build momentum and strengthen partnerships in implementation. Ensuring inclusivity in this context is important to contribute to the leave no one behind agenda.
- Ensure stakeholder engagement on the 2030 Agenda is timely, open, transparent, informed and iterative. 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; taking steps to include vulnerable groups and their representatives; and, ensuring that information is available in local languages.
- Include non-state actors in institutional mechanisms or drafting teams responsible for the VNR report.
- 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. Ensure a formal response to civil society reports.

Policies for 2030 Agenda Implementation

BASELINE OR GAP ANALYSIS

The VNR reports reveal that a majority of countries reporting in 2018 have carried out an assessment of their policies, data or both to inform 2030 Agenda implementation – albeit less countries carried out an assessment relative to 2017.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- Conduct an assessment that identifies gaps in existing policies and programmes, examines data availability, and sets 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.

INCORPORATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA INTO NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND POLICIES

Similar to the findings in 2017, most countries have also incorporated the 2030 Agenda into their national policies or prepared a strategy for implementation. As was the case in 2017, VNR reporting for 2018 shows that countries tend to focus on the SDGs rather than the broader 2030 Agenda and its transformative principles. While most countries refer to leaving no one behind (41), substantially fewer refer to inter-generational responsibility (17) and universality (16), and even less to human rights-based approaches (six) and planetary boundaries (three).

 Based on these findings, member states may 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. VNR reports should demonstrate how approaches to sustainable development are transforming, based on the principles of the 2030 Agenda and not just the SDGs.
- Inform policies and programmes by efforts to leave no one behind, including by prioritising those most in need to consistently reach marginalised communities.
- 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.
- Address domestic and global dimensions of sustainable development, and the relationships between them, in efforts to realise the 2030 Agenda, respecting the principle of universality.
- Undertake actions with reference to and respect for planetary boundaries and responsibilities towards future generations.

NATIONALISING THE 2030 AGENDA

While most countries have selected national priorities (and two countries sub-national priorities) that reflect all or most dimensions of sustainable development, the environment was listed less frequently as a priority for countries reporting in 2018 versus 2017.

Conversely, a focus on culture and national identity emerged as a priority for a handful of countries in 2018. The selection of national targets and indicators for implementation remains limited with only seven countries having selected both national targets and indicators.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- Identify national sustainable development priorities. This means addressing all dimensions of sustainable development, recognising the interlinkages between society, the economy, and the environment.
- Develop national and sub-national targets and indicators through an inclusive and participatory process to complement global targets and indicators.

INTEGRATION AND POLICY COHERENCE

VNR reports show a marked improvement in terms of reporting on all SDGs in 2018 over 2017, with most countries adopting this approach. The majority of countries provided a detailed analysis of their progress on sustainable development and examined all dimensions of sustainable development. However, there is still limited reference to linkages between the dimensions, with countries taking more of a siloed approach in their goal-by-goal analysis. These findings represent a backsliding in comparison to 2017. As in 2017, countries are still not sufficiently ensuring integration in their approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation. In addition, the analysis presented in the assessment of goals in the 2018 VNR reports is similar to what was noted in 2017. Information is provided largely in terms of pre-existing policies and programmes that happen to be aligned with and supportive of progress on the SDGs.

Policy coherence for sustainable development does not feature strongly in reports. Reporting on the impacts of domestic and foreign policies on sustainable development at home and abroad in the goal-by-goal analysis can help prompt greater policy coherence for sustainable development across countries. Most countries do not consistently refer to existing international agreements that support implementation of the 2030 Agenda, such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, or internationally agreed aid and development effectiveness principles.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- Assess all 17 goals in their VNR reports, respecting the indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

- Demonstrate how existing policies, programmes and practices are changing to address gaps and support progress on the 2030 Agenda, in addition to existing approaches that are supportive of 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 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.

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.

2030 Agenda Implementation

IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA

Most countries have not costed 2030 Agenda implementation, but they have identified public and private domestic and international sources of finance to support implementation, showing a slight improvement in numbers over 2017. More than half of the VNR reports (25) provide no information on inclusion of the SDGs in national budgets or budgeting processes. Five (5) countries provide information on how they have incorporated the SDGs into national budgets and ten countries indicated plans to incorporate the SDGs into budgeting processes.

Reporting has improved on international public finance, trade, technology and systemic issues relative to 2017.

- Information reported on international public finance included the amount of international public finance (such as official development assistance (ODA) or South-South Cooperation) provided, ODA commitments, and challenges facing countries

that have graduated from ODA-eligibility due to income status. Six (6) countries noted challenges resulting from declining ODA flows. Only three countries noted efforts related to improving aid effectiveness. Only two countries noted they would further explore opportunities through South-South Cooperation.

- Countries reporting in 2018 largely focussed on the expansion of trade as a key priority.
- Similar to 2017, countries pointed most to capacity constraints related to 2030 Agenda implementation. This included challenges in monitoring and evaluating the impacts of programmes and changing course as necessary, and challenges in improving coordination.
- More countries reported on technology in 2018 than 2017, focussing on their national investments in this area.
- Finally, there was a marked increase in reporting on systemic issues in 2018 relative to 2017, likely as a result of the inclusion of this focus in the revised Secretary General's common reporting guidelines for the 2018 HLPF. Global financial and economic (in) stability was the most commonly cited systemic issue, followed by efforts to combat illicit capital flows.

With respect to experiences in 2030 Agenda implementation, countries report on their challenges and, to a lesser degree, best practices. Data availability and monitoring progress are the most commonly cited challenges to implementation across VNR reports, followed by mobilising financial resources. This is consistent with findings from the 2017 review of VNR reports.

While there was a notable improvement in reporting on best practices in 2018, with some valuable examples provided, there are still very few countries (14 of 46) who explicitly note their lessons learned or areas in which they would like to learn from others. Equally, more countries could also identify priorities for development partner support. The provision of such information generates understanding of country needs, provides a basis on which to hold stakeholders accountable for their efforts to support 2030 Agenda implementation and assists in the identification of the best entry points for support. This is a gap that undermines the VNR process and creates a missed opportunity for making the most of HLPF discussions. The United Nations needs 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.



Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- Clearly include best practices, lessons learned in accelerating implementation, challenges going forward and where opportunities exist to learn from peers in VNR reports.
- As an essential part of the process, examine national and subnational budgets and start integrating the SDGs into them to ensure that resources are allocated for implementation, building on the good practice in costing out SDG implementation and identifying 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, including in terms of identifying where greater domestic and international efforts are needed. Member states failed to meaningfully operationalise Millennium Development Goal 8 on global partnership. Member states should ensure that SDG 17 on partnerships for the goals of the SDGs is fully implemented.
- 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 capital flight, tax avoidance and tax evasion, among other things.



LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

Even with the inclusion of a component on leaving no one behind in the Secretary General's common reporting guidelines for the 2018 HLPF, only 16 countries provided a detailed account of efforts to leave no one behind. As was the case in 2017, VNR reports provided little information on the status of data to leave no one behind. Women, children and youth, persons with disabilities and elderly people continue to be the most commonly cited groups at risk of being left behind. However, the emphasis placed on different groups changed in 2018, with more countries pointing to persons with disabilities and children and youth, compared to women, which was the top group cited in 2017. Beyond the most common choices of those being left behind, there was tremendous diversity in the different types of people that countries feel are being left behind, a striking increase in 2018 over 2017.

Countries also tended to highlight their existing policies and approaches to leave no one behind, rather than signal the development of new approaches. However, half of reporting countries (23) noted a mix of specialised and universal programmes.

Given that combining universal policies with targeted approaches and strong leadership can be an effective approach to reaching marginalised communities, this is a positive step in the right direction. That said, this is still only the case for half of the countries reporting. Countries also highlighted a range of policies and programmes related to social protection, health, education and other initiatives. Twenty (20) countries noted the development or use of strategies to target specific groups. The findings suggest that countries have yet to adapt new programmes to target those left behind and rely, for the most part, on existing programmes. Overall, there is a need for countries to examine and adapt existing policies and programmes in light of the focus on leaving no one behind, particularly to first examine the extent to which such policies and programmes are addressing the needs of those furthest left behind.

Information on the results of efforts to leave no one behind was in the form of specific figures on the results of programmes and initiatives, and overall trends (including data) or information (without data) on the status of progress. Reporting on efforts to reduce inequality improved substantially in 2018. Countries highlighted the use of policies and strategies to address inequality, followed by social protection.

Finally, efforts to realise gender equality as outlined in the VNR reports centre around legal instruments (31), specific policies and strategies (25), and projects and other benefits that support women (24). The status of gender-disaggregated data is still very mixed across VNR reports.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- Include a specific chapter on leaving no one behind in VNR reporting and demonstrate how the leave no one behind approach 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. Approaches to gathering qualitative assessments, especially for populations for whom data is not available should also be presented. Such efforts could include engagement with key experts and representatives of marginalised groups. Ensuring no one is left behind means knowing who is being left behind, by how much, and in what areas.
- Highlight existing and planned efforts to leave no one behind, including how policies and programmes are being adapted, and in particular new approaches developed, to first reach the people who are furthest behind.

- Develop a mix of targeted and universal approaches to leaving no one behind, drawing on the latest evidence of what works and best practice.
- 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.
- 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.
- Adopt a range of internationally recognised best practices to promote gender equality, such as gender budgeting, gender-based analysis and mainstreaming into policies and plans, and appropriate legal, policy and institutional frameworks.

AWARENESS RAISING AND LOCALISATION

Fewer countries reported on efforts to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda in 2018 over 2017. That said, VNR reporting countries in 2018 continued to recognise that awareness-raising is an area for ongoing effort throughout the course of 2030 Agenda implementation and part of public engagement strategies (seven countries specifically noted that more efforts to raise awareness are needed). Countries are making use of a wide range of innovative in-person and online mechanisms, with a number of VNR reports noting the use of the VNR to contribute to awareness-raising efforts.

As was the case in 2017, the VNR reports continue to show a wide variance in terms of where countries and their local governments are in terms of localising the SDGs. That said, reports in 2017 compared to 2018 tended to be more detailed in terms of articulating next steps for localisation and outlining existing activities, including the status of policy development and local institutional structures for implementation. The status of local implementation efforts, as highlighted by the 2018 VNR reports, suggests that much more work is needed to promote localisation.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- Continue to promote, or immediately begin adopting, 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.
- Provide support to sub-national levels of government to raise awareness of the SDGs, strengthen local institutional structures

and resources for implementation, and further develop capacities for local level implementation, including translation of the SDGs into local plans, programmes, and monitoring efforts.

PARTNERSHIP TO REALISE THE SDGS

For the most part, VNR reports stress the important contributions that non-state actors and others play in 2030 Agenda implementation, similar to 2017. Reporting on the contributions from civil society, parliamentarians, the private sector and academia improved in 2018. However, only a handful of VNR reports still included contributions from non-state actors and local governments throughout. VNR reports continue to remain silent on the enabling environment for civil society, and a limited number speak to other challenges that civil society organisations face in contributing to the 2030 Agenda. Nevertheless, the range of activities (in particular, specific projects, awareness raising and promoting accountability, particularly in the areas of independent monitoring of progress) and the variety of roles attributed to civil society organisations in terms of supporting 2030 Agenda implementation expanded in 2018. That said, the predominant focus on projects and awareness raising demonstrates a narrow perception of the roles that civil society organisations play in broader society.

Marginally more VNRs in 2018 (relative to 2017) reported on ways in which parliaments, the private sector and academia are being engaged. The main ways parliamentarians are contributing to the 2030 Agenda include through committee work, the adoption of resolutions in support of implementation, and oversight – similar to what was reported in 2017. For the private sector, VNR reports cited specific projects, company specific commitments and participation in multi-stakeholder partnerships. The most common examples of academic or expert contributions noted in VNR reports related to specific projects, followed by expert analysis. While reporting has improved on the contributions from academics and experts, only half of the VNR reports for 2018 included their contributions. Finally, the provision of finance (official development assistance, finance from international financial institutions and South-South Cooperation) was the most commonly cited role identified by countries for development partners, followed by technical assistance. Interestingly, twice the number of countries (14) than in 2017 explicitly noted that they received support to carry out their VNR, in partnership with the United Nations. With a few notable exceptions, VNR reports continue to not be specific enough to really inform future areas for development partner support and the establishment of partnerships, as was noted in 2017.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- Support civil society to engage in 2030 Agenda implementation by creating a more enabling environment, including through institutionalised dialogue and consultation, inclusion in formal governance arrangements, finance, and 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 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, though less countries reported this information in 2018 than in 2017. Information on data availability, including disaggregated data, is often unclear or not articulated, similar to the findings from the review of VNR reports in 2017. Both availability and disaggregation need to be strengthened. Eleven (11) countries noted the use of a dashboard or web portal to report on data, an increase over the five countries noting this approach in 2017.

Fourteen (14) countries noted that they engage in regular reporting. Five (5) countries have given indications of when they will report next to the HLPF, including some who provided a reporting timetable. As in 2017, national reports on progress in 2018 still tend to be government reports, rather than whole-of-society reports. A limited number of countries pointed to the role of parliament in reviewing progress on 2030 Agenda implementation. Some countries, including two who have reported previously, are starting to use their VNR reports to signal progress against targets.

 Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- 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.
- 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 consultation 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.

Assessment of VNR Reports against the United Nations Secretary General’s Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines

Similar to 2017, many of the VNR reports are not structured according to the outline in the guidelines though they capture most elements. This can hinder comparison of shared challenges and good practices.

The majority of countries include most elements of the voluntary common reporting guidelines in their VNR reports. All elements of the guidelines were included by at least 70% of reporting countries, with the exceptions of leaving no one behind, structural issues and the annexes. Reporting on these elements was lower.

Despite these missing elements, VNR reports still tend to be very long and in some cases unnecessarily detailed. Repetition was identified as a key issue in the 2017 review of VNR reports, however this was less of an issue for the 2018 VNR reports.

In terms of reporting against the specific sections in the voluntary common reporting guidelines, the review showed the following:

- The VNR reports showed continued growth in terms of inclusion of an opening statement with 38 countries including an opening statement in 2018.
- The majority of reports (33) included a highlights section or captured the main elements of the highlights section in the report, a decrease in comparison to 2017.
- All countries, with the exception of Kiribati and Sudan who both only submitted main messages, included an introduction or the main elements of the introduction in 2018.

- Reporting on the methodology for the review improved in 2018.
- More countries did not include information on creating ownership in 2018 (nine) than in 2017 (three).
- Australia and Singapore were the only countries that did not include information on how the SDGs have been incorporated into national frameworks in 2018.
- A larger proportion of countries reported on how they integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development in the 2018 reports (33 or 72%) compared to previous years.
- Reporting on leaving no one behind could be improved with just under 61% (28 of 46 countries) addressing this component fully or somewhat in their VNR reports.
- Sudan and Singapore were the only countries that did not report on institutional mechanisms in 2018.
- Structural issues, a new component in the guidelines for the 2018 HLPF, were captured by 31 (67%) of the VNR reports for 2018.
- The analysis of goals and targets was met or partially met by all countries in 2018 with the exception of Bahrain, Kiribati, Slovakia, and Sudan. The majority of countries reported on all goals rather than a sub-set of the goals as was the case in 2017.
- More countries provided information on the means of implementation in 2018 than in 2017, however around half of the reporting countries did not follow the instructions as per the guidelines.
- Most countries (34) provided information on next steps in 2018.
- Most VNR reports (37) included a conclusion.
- Over half of the countries reporting in 2018, or 28, included an annex in their VNR report; however only 20 countries met this component as instructed by the guidelines. A number of countries also included annexes with best practice or views from other stakeholders, as suggested by the 2018 voluntary common reporting guidelines.



Based on these findings, member states may still need to:

- 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.
- Include a statement from a head of state to demonstrate commitment and give profile to the agenda.

- Include highlights as a tool to provide a snapshot of context, the review, integration of the three dimensions, efforts to leave no one behind, best practice, challenges and lessons learned.
- Include an introduction to set the scene and outline components of the VNR report that avoids repetition of the opening statement and executive summary.
- Continue to 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, successes and lessons learned in this process.
- Continue to provide information on efforts to incorporate the SDGs into national frameworks, in particular key initiatives and successes and lessons learned in this process.
- 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 efforts to leave no one behind as instructed by the voluntary common reporting guidelines, including information on who is being left behind, data, efforts, and results.
- Continue to provide information on institutional mechanisms for 2030 Agenda implementation, including governance arrangements.
- Report on structural issues that hinder progress on 2030 Agenda implementation and approaches to addressing such issues.
- Continue to report on all SDGs with specific attention to trends, gaps, best practice, and lessons learned.
- Report on progress between first and subsequent VNRs, providing an indication of trends over time.
- 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 the HLPF.
- Include lessons learned from the VNR process in the conclusion to showcase the value of the VNR process to national and international stakeholders and how it can be improved next time as a result of the lessons learned.
- Include a statistical annex in the VNR report as suggested by the voluntary common reporting guidelines.
- 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.

