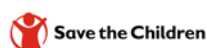# PROGRESSING NATIONAL SDGS IMPLEMENTATION:

Highlights

Highlights

In 2022, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the 2030 Agenda), which provides a fifteen-year agenda for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership, entered its seventh year. At the same time, the world faces unprecedented crises which not only threaten the delivery of the 2030 Agenda but also pose a deep existential threat to people around the world. These include the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as overlapping socio-economic and climate crises, which have been severely exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. There is therefore an urgent need for governments everywhere to prioritize and accelerate actions to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in order to deliver transformative change and achieve a just recovery.

In this context, the 2030 Agenda, with the SDGs at its heart, provides a global roadmap towards building a better future, while achieving equality and sustainability for all. It is more important than ever that Heads of State and Government meet the commitments of the Decade of Action and Delivery to realize the 2030 Agenda and all SDGs while ensuring that no one is left behind.

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

This report, the seventh edition of *Progressing National SDGs Implementation*, aims to provide useful insights and recommendations on the VNR reports presented at the HLPF in 2022, in order to inform discussions on SDG delivery and help guide improved implementation and reporting on the 2030 Agenda. You can find all the reports on this dedicated website.

This report covers various aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation through an assessment of the VNRs according to key criteria, including consideration of governance arrangements, institutional mechanisms for stakeholder engagement, policy frameworks, means of implementation, and reporting. The report offers a review of the 44 VNR reports and/or main messages[1] submitted to the HLPF in 2022, as well as an analysis of 21 VNR-related civil society reports. It presents key findings, good practice case studies, emerging best practices and recommendations for action.

The key messages arising from the analysis of 2022 VNR reports are highlighted below and are numbered for ease of reference, rather than in order of priority.

1. **'Whole of society' approach:** The review of 2022 VNR reports included a similar level of references to the inclusion of non-state actors in formal SDG governance arrangements as 2021. However, within these institutional mechanisms, there was an increase in references to non-state actors' participation in technical working groups.

2. **SDG assessments:** In 2022 a higher number of countries mentioned having conducted a baseline or gap analysis than previous years. However, there was more limited reporting on national priorities, as well as regarding information on the integration of the SDGs into national planning.

3. **Transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda:** There has been some improvement in the reports' inclusion of information on key principles - mainly on leaving no one behind and human rights. However, reporting on universality, planetary boundaries and intergenerational responsibility is still uneven.

4. **Reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda and other relevant international agreements:** There were mixed results on interlinkages, with the Paris Agreement on climate change once again being the most frequently cited agreement in the VNRs, and the global aid/development effectiveness agenda being the least mentioned.

5. **'Leave no one behind' (LNOB) principle:** The VNR reports in 2022 included a high level of references to the LNOB principle. However, challenges remain in terms of data availability, the level of detail and quality of information provided on LNOB, and on the incorporation of the LNOB principle in national policies and plans.

6. **Civic space:** The VNR reports continue to be largely silent on shrinking civic space, including in relation to the ongoing attacks against human rights defenders, journalists and environmentalists in many countries.

7. **Partnerships and Implementation:** There was a decrease in examples provided in the VNRs of contributions to implementation by non-state actors. Overall, there was an increase in references to some aspects of the 2030 Agenda's Means of Implementation, but in most cases detailed information regarding SDG-costing and resource-identification was missing.

8. **Localisation:** While the ambition to localise SDG implementation has been widely discussed, the 2022 VNRs contained fewer examples of localisation, and less information on the formulation of Voluntary Local Reviews than in 2021.

9. **Follow up and review:** Information remains very limited on data availability and fewer countries reported on the use of unofficial data in their VNR reports.

10. **Common reporting guidelines for VNR processes:** While most countries presenting VNRs in 2022 did follow the majority of the Secretary-General's common reporting guidelines, there are still considerable gaps in the use of these guidelines, which undermines the valuable possibilities for greater comparability between VNR processes of different member states

1. 'Whole of society' approach:

The review of 2022 VNR reports included a similar level of references to the inclusion of non-state actors in formal SDG governance arrangements as 2021. However, within these institutional mechanisms, there was an increase in references to non-state actors' participation in technical working groups.

Furthermore, there were more references to civil society participation in the definition of national priorities and the VNR process itself. However, it remains difficult to quantify the level and quality of participation of civil society since the VNRs provide limited details on the nature and scope of consultations.

The review of the 2022 VNR reports included a similar level of references to the inclusion of non-state actors in formal governance arrangements related to the 2030 Agenda. In 2022, 66% of countries noted the inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements, while this figure was 64% of countries in 2021 and 70% in both 2020 and 2019. However, the picture regarding civil society inclusion in technical working groups and councils or committees improved, with an increased number of countries (from 19% in 2021 to 32% in 2022) referring to inclusion in technical working groups, and a similar level of references to civil society's inclusion in a 'Lead Council or Committee' (17 countries mentioned this in 2022, similar to the 16 that did so in 2021), this suggests a slight shift towards greater participation by civil society in technical inputs rather than high level governance and policy dialogue.

Furthermore, in 2022, 32 VNR reports (73%) provided information on processes for stakeholder engagement beyond formal governance mechanisms (such as consultations, workshops, conferences, parliamentary committees, and/or local participation mechanisms) confirming and expanding slightly the upward trend started in 2021 – with 67%, compared to 47% in 2020 and 60% in 2019. However, further details regarding the nature, scope, level of inclusiveness, and outcomes of these processes for stakeholder participation are scarce, which prevents a detailed assessment of the quality and extent of engagement, or its influence on policymaking.

In terms of **engagement in the VNR process itself,** in 2022, references to civil society participation in VNRs increased, with 41 out of 44 countries (93%) highlighting a role for civil society in consultations, up from 81% in 2021, however the details regarding the nature and outcomes of these consultations are similarly limited. Regarding **consultations to define national priorities**, half of VNR countries in 2022 noted consultations on national priorities with non-state actors (55%), up from 31% in 2021. However, this quantitative improvement must again be tempered, given that the VNRs rarely provide further details on the nature and scope of the consultations, or on the degree to which different stakeholders were able to make contributions and influence the process.

Regarding the **effects of the COVID-19 pandemic** on stakeholder engagement, only 32% of countries included information on the effects of the pandemic in 2022, compared to 43% reporting in 2021; this likely reflects an improvement in conditions since late 2021/early 2022, but it may also suggest under-reporting on the effects of the pandemic on the scope of engagement.

Recommendations:

Member States should develop indicators to measure the extent to which stakeholder engagement is being facilitated and supported in relation to SDG implementation, to ensure that the dialogue processes have a truly meaningful impact on policy and delivery.

Furthermore, qualitative information regarding institutional spaces and mechanisms for policy dialogue should be provided, for example this should include explanations of their specific mandates and methodologies, their role in the policymaking cycle, as well as highlighting substantive policy outcomes generated through participatory processes.

2. SDG assessments:

In 2022 a higher number of countries mentioned having conducted a baseline or gap analysis than previous years. However, there was more limited reporting on national priorities, as well as regarding information on the integration of the SDGs into national planning.

In 2022, more than half of reporting countries (61%) reported completion of a **baseline or gap analysis,** constituting an improvement compared to 2021 (52%). Within the set of countries that completed a baseline or gap analysis, 24 countries assessed the entire SDG framework in 2022, which represents 55% of all reporting countries – and also constitutes an increase compared to 2021 (31%).

However, a decrease was measured regarding reporting on the definition of **National priorities**, with 77% of countries doing so in 2022, compared to 91% that reported doing so in 2021. This also represents a steady decrease in comparison to 2020, when almost 96% of countries reported on defining national priorities. As in the two previous years, priorities related to social outcomes and the economy were most cited, followed by the environment. Culture continues to be the least mentioned national priority.

In 2022, most countries (93%) reported **integrating the SDGs into national policies**, a similar level to the 93% of countries that reported on this subject in 2021. Despite this high percentage, most countries do not provide specifics on the scope of the integration, the process through which the integration was made, or the extent to which planning documents provide a frame of reference for policymaking. Another increase was observed in relation to reporting on the selection of **national targets and indicators,** with 68% of countries providing some information on this, which represents an increase compared to the 62% of countries in 2021 that did so (and coming closer to the 77% that did so in 2020).

Recommendations:

VNR countries submitting their second or subsequent reports should aim to provide clear information on integrating the SDGs into national policies in line with the Secretary General's voluntary common reporting guidelines.

Where possible, Member States should aim to highlight the manner and the extent to which the integration of the SDGs into national planning and monitoring frameworks has led to changes in policy approaches and outcomes.

3. Transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda:

There has been some improvement in the reports' inclusion of information on key principles - mainly on leaving no one behind and human rights. However, reporting on universality, planetary boundaries and intergenerational responsibility is still uneven.

As in previous years, VNR 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** appears to be well established and referred to in the 2022 VNR reports, with 96% of countries mentioning the principle (almost as high as 2021). Other key principles that were mentioned include **human rights-based approaches (75%), intergenerational responsibility (43%),** and **planetary boundaries (39%),** as well as **the universal nature** of the 2030 Agenda **(20%)**, however most of these principles (except for human rights) register significantly lower levels of references.

A small increase was observed with regards to the proportion of countries **making direct linkages to all three dimensions of sustainable development,** with 47% of VNR countries doing so in 2022, up from the 40% that made references to applicable linkages in 2021. The percentage of countries giving equal attention to the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development in their VNR reports remained at a similar level, with 52% doing so (compared to 50% in 2021, and 49% in 2020).

Recommendations:

Although the number of reports referring to these cross-cutting principles remained at a similar level, the general trend still highlights limited progress in reporting on the transformative dimensions of the 2030 Agenda. Governments should urgently recognise the interconnected nature of the 2030 Agenda in light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, and develop integrated responses.

4. Reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda and other relevant international agreements:

There were mixed results on interlinkages, with the Paris Agreement on climate change once again being the most frequently cited agreement in the VNRs, and the global aid/ development effectiveness agenda being the least mentioned.

Regarding reporting on links to international agreements, the Paris Agreement on climate change continued to be the most frequently cited agreement, and in similar proportions (80% in 2022 compared to 83% in 2021), with the global aid/development effectiveness agenda the least mentioned international framework (only 7%).

In 2022, countries referring to **policy coherence for sustainable development** registered a small increase compared to both 2021 and 2020, with more than half of reporting countries (61%) mentioning the concept. Approximately 23 countries (or 52%) examined the **impacts of their foreign and/or domestic policies on the realization of the SDGs globally**, modestly continuing the upward trend started in 2021 (where 45% of countries did so), which could be considered a positive sign.

Recommendations:

Governments should report on the interlinkages between global agendas in order to provide greater clarity on how SDG implementation at the national level is interconnected with the implementation of other international agreements.

5. 'Leave no one behind' (LNOB) principle:

The VNR reports in 2022 included a high level of references to the LNOB principle. However, challenges remain in terms of data availability, the level of detail and quality of information provided on LNOB, and on the incorporation of the LNOB principle in national policies and plans.

In 2022, 96% of VNR countries mentioned the principle of **leaving no one behind,** continuing the positive trend regarding this specific aspect (the proportion in 2021 was 100%). Countries used a variety of approaches for addressing this principle in their VNRs, such as providing information in various chapters throughout their VNR report or including a dedicated chapter or section on LNOB. Approximately 93% of VNR countries identified groups that are, or are at risk of, being left behind, with persons with disabilities (82%), women and girls (80%), children (80%), the elderly (50%), and youth (50%) as the most often cited groups.

Nevertheless, the VNRs included limited detail on how the LNOB principle is measured or the extent to which it is included within overarching development plans and/or specific sectoral policy approaches. As in previous years, relatively few countries noted **efforts to Leave No One Behind being informed by existing data** (39%) **or articulated the need for additional data** (39%), which tends to suggest that many countries continue to face challenges in identifying or generating quality data to determine who is being left behind.

In 2022, only 64% of countries made explicit references to **embedding leaving no one behind or efforts to address inequality and social exclusion within overarching development plans or national priorities.** This represents a significant decrease in the incorporation of the principle of leaving no one behind in the creation of national sustainable development policies – compared to 84% of countries in 2021. There was also a small decrease in the proportion of reporting countries (77%) that provided information on the specific impacts of the **COVID-19 pandemic from an LNOB perspective,** compared to 86% of countries that did so in 2021.

Recommendations:

Member States should strengthen reporting on LNOB and ensure the implementation of policies to address gaps among vulnerable or marginalised groups that have already been identified.

VNR countries reporting for the second or subsequent time should report on progress in terms of planning, policymaking and implementation to support previously identified marginalized groups such as women, children, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, racial, ethnic or religious minorities, migrants and refugees, Indigenous Peoples and other groups facing discrimination.

6. Civic space:

The VNR reports continue to be mostly silent on shrinking civic space, including ongoing attacks against human rights defenders, journalists and environmentalists in many countries.

Only 12 out of the 44 VNR reports (27%) presented in 2022 included commentary on the state of national civic space. Furthermore, the references were mainly limited to specifying constitutional, regulatory, or policy-based reforms adopted in order to enhance freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, access to information and/or democratic participation. That said, this does constitute an increase in the proportion of countries referring to civic space, up from the 2% that did so in 2021.

On the other hand, **many civil society reports specifically outline how the closure of civic space is being carried out in their countries.** These independent assessments include

information on government actions that hinder freedom of expression, assembly, association, and access to information. In some cases, this information contradicts or at least puts into context the official government information contained in the VNRs.

Recommendations:

It is important that the core freedoms of assembly, association and expression are guaranteed and enhanced by all UN Member States. It is a grave concern that, while information on this topic is being shared through civil society reports, it remains largely absent from official VNR reports.

Governments should report on efforts to respect, protect and fulfil fundamental rights and freedoms, such as freedoms of assembly, association and expression, as well as the right to participation, which are a prerequisite to achieving sustainable development.

7. Partnerships and Implementation:

There was a decrease in examples provided in the VNRs of contributions to implementation by non-state actors. Overall, there was an increase in references to some aspects of the 2030 Agenda's Means of Implementation, but in most cases detailed information regarding SDG-costing and resource-identification was missing.

Among the 2022 VNR countries, 59% provided examples of contributions by non-state actors to 2030 Agenda implementation beyond consultation on priorities and participation in governance arrangements, which represents a significant decrease compared to 2021, when 93% of countries did so. Decreases were observed regarding the specific role played by civil society in SDG implementation (66%), as well as by parliamentarians (34%), the private sector (73%), academia (50%), and children and youth (34%).

In the case of **civil society contributions,** although a number of Member States continue to recognize a wide range of roles played by civil society, there was a decrease in reporting on specific contributions from CSOs; only 66% of countries provided such information, compared to 86% of countries in 2021. A drop in reporting on the role of civil society in implementing specific projects and participating in multi-stakeholder partnerships and/or initiatives to support 2030 Agenda implementation were also observed.

At the same time, the proportion of countries highlighting actions from CSOs in terms of awareness-raising increased slightly in 2022 (25% of countries included these actions, compared to 18% in 2021). Mentions in the reports to the role of civil society in promoting accountability for 2030 Agenda implementation also increased slightly (18% of countries referred to this role compared to 14% in 2021). Nevertheless, these references still remained low overall.

In the 2022 VNR reports, the inclusion of information on the **means of implementation was relatively high** in terms of information on challenges (95% of countries), systemic issues (89%), international public finance (86%), technology (86%), impacts of COVID-19 (87%), capacity development (86%), and trade (73%).

On the other hand, the VNR reports showed slight decreases in references to best practices (66%) and lessons learned (55%), and a more significant drop in references to learning from peers (27%).

Reporting on other aspects of implementation remained stable, such as in the case of **awareness-raising activities (81% of countries compared to 79% of countries in 2021). Information on Budgeting for 2030 Agenda implementation** increased (77% in 2022, compared to 65% in 2021), although the level of detail and clarity of the information provided, such as distinguishing between costing and resource-identification, remains low.

Recommendations:

A more dynamic and inclusive approach to partnerships is needed, including a stronger role for civil society organisations in 2030 Agenda implementation and clear development of partnership opportunities.

Member States should also adopt a systematic approach to reporting on budgeting (costing and resource-identification) for the 2030 Agenda, to enable a better understanding of the gaps and requirements in the resources available for SDG Implementation.

8. Localisation:

While the ambition to localise SDG implementation has been widely discussed, the 2022 VNRs contained fewer examples of localisation, and less information on the formulation of Voluntary Local Reviews than in 2021.

In 2022, the proportion of countries that provided some level of information on their **efforts to localise the SDGs** decreased slightly to 77%, compared to 83% in 2021. A low proportion of countries (36%) referred to integrating the 2030 Agenda into local plans and policies, although this represents a modest increase compared to the proportion of countries that did so in 2021 (31%).

Coordination between national government institutions and local governments was explicitly noted by sixteen countries (or 36%) reporting in 2022, similar to the 38% reporting in 2021.

Regarding Voluntary Local Reports, in 2022, only 7 out of the 44 reporting countries (or 16%) mentioned VLRs, which is lower than the 15 countries reporting on VLRs in 2021 (or 36%).

Recommendations:

In order to achieve the 2030 Agenda it will be necessary to ensure local level delivery of the goals. National governments should urgently develop coordination plans with their sub-national counterparts and provide resources and support for local authorities to catalyse local level partnerships for the SDGs.

9. Follow up and review:

Information remains very limited on data availability and fewer countries reported on the use of unofficial data in their VNR reports.

In 2022, only 43% of VNRs provided information on data availability. This percentage is slightly up from 2021, when 36% did so, but represents a lower proportion than in previous years (2019 and 2020). Regarding indicator coverage, 20% of countries reported that data was available for less than 50% of SDG indicators, which is similar to 2021, when it was 17%. Regarding unofficial or third party data, only 30% of countries included or mentioned its usage in their VNR report in 2022.

At the same time, 64% of VNR countries provided some information on national level reporting, similar to the 62% and 63% of countries that did so in 2021 and 2020. In terms of defining the lead body for accountability within national reporting, this information was provided by 24% of countries, again largely similar to the 21% of countries that provided such information in 2021, although still rather low. Most countries that provided information on national reporting identified Parliament as the main institution to which reports are presented (as in 2021), which suggests a degree of accountability through elected officials.

Recommendations:

In this context, there are clear gaps still to be addressed in terms of evidence-based monitoring, based on sound and comprehensive data frameworks.

Governments should be supported by the UN to urgently define data sources and methodologies for all relevant indicators within the Global Indicators Framework. At the national level, Member States should expand their support to strengthen statistical systems and work with research bodies to clarify measurement of in-country progress.

10. Common reporting guidelines for VNR processes:

While most countries presenting VNRs in 2022 did follow the majority of the Secretary-General's common reporting guidelines, there are still considerable gaps in the use of these guidelines, which undermines the valuable possibilities for greater comparability between VNR processes of different member states.

Reporting increased in relation to 12 of the 15 components listed in the guidelines in 2022 compared to 2021. As part of the positive trend, two components experienced the highest level of reporting/inclusion in the whole of the 2018-2022 series, namely 'Leaving No One Behind' and 'Structural Issues' for SDG implementation, although with almost half of countries applying these components only partially.

However, there was a reduction in references to three components out of 15 compared to 2021, there were the sections entitled: 'Highlights', 'Institutional Mechanisms', and a more significant decrease regarding reference to the 'Means of Implementation' component.

Recommendations:

VNR countries should strive to follow the UN Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines as closely as possible, as well as the set of questions provided by the UNDESA Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews in order to promote best practice where VNR processes are concerned. These guidelines are designed to ensure VNRs report on integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, and to facilitate greater comparability between the VNRs produced by different UN Member States.