

PROGRESSING NATIONAL SDGS IMPLEMENTATION

An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2021



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



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HIGHLIGHTS

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

For the past six years, civil society organizations have reviewed reporting by governments to the United Nations' High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports submitted by governments as part of the follow-up and review processes indicate the

status of 2030 Agenda implementation at the national level. VNR reports are meant to be prepared through inclusive and participatory processes, serve as a source of information on good practices, lessons learned and challenges in implementation, and provide a basis for peer learning and accountability at the global level.

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

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

KEY MESSAGES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As in previous years, reporting countries continue to refer more to the SDGs than to the broader 2030 Agenda and its transformational principles. Among these principles, **leaving no one behind** was the main focus of 2021 VNR reports, while there has also been an increase in the number of countries pointing to **human rights-based approaches, inter-generational responsibility, and planetary boundaries**. However, mentions to

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

