LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Context

Leaving no one behind (LNOB) is one of the underlying principles of sustainable development. While the world continues to grapple with the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic, **it is essential that the needs of those further behind are addressed first.** The pandemic has significantly affected sustainable development progress, and in the context of meeting the commitments to a Decade of Action and Delivery and the United Nations Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda, heads of state and government urgently need to accelerate actions and promote transformative change to achieve a just recovery. Our independent civil society-led review of the 42 Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports presented at the United Nations' High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF) in 2021 analyzed countries' actions towards progressing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[1] This policy brief focuses on the topics of LNOB and COVID-19, contains examples of case studies in good practice, and lists recommendations.

Policy coherence is an essential element for achieving sustainable development. There are many international agreements and frameworks that support implementation of the 2030 Agenda, such as the Paris Agreement, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the global aid/development effectiveness agenda.[2] In addition to those, the review of 2020 and 2021 VNR reports examined whether countries referred to international commitments related to responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI). Review findings show that more VNR reports referred to outward-facing responses to the pandemic, a positive change in relation to 2020, when reporting countries tended to focus on domestic responses. While no countries explicitly referred to global commitments in this area in 2020, 11 out of the 42 countries reporting in 2021 (or 26%) mentioned adapting their approaches to foreign assistance or commitments to global initiatives, including the ACT Accelerator, CEPI, COVAX, and GAVI. Countries referring to one or more of those commitments include **Bahamas, China, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Paraguay, Qatar, Spain, Sweden, and Uruguay. Given the significant impacts of the pandemic at the global level, countries should report their global actions alongside their domestic ones.**

Alongside human rights-based approaches, universality, inter-generational responsibility, and planetary boundaries, **leaving no one behind is part of the principles that represent the spirit of the 2030 Agenda** and serve as transformative elements of implementation. The recent assessments of VNR reports show that governments have increasingly reported on their commitments to leaving no one behind. Table 1 shows a comparison between VNR reports mentioning the 2030 Agenda principles in 2021 and 2020, and LNOB stands out as the most referred to principle.

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1. For more details, please refer to the series of *Progressing National SDGs Implementation* reports.
2. The Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines for 2021 had encouraged countries to make specific reference to these agreements (and others) in the introductory section of the VNR reports. Same goes for the revised guidelines for 2022.

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

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

(*) Figures are based on 42 VNR reports presented to HLPF in 2021, and on 47 VNR reports presented in 2020.

Although this is a positive trend, research findings suggest that the inclusion of the LNOB principle in VNR reports has been used as a checkbox activity for some countries. **The quality of the information provided, including data availability and the existence of dedicated programs, are essential for (truly) leaving no one behind.** The countries that did provide information around LNOB in their VNR reports (41 countries)[3] – although with varying degrees of robustness and details – identified groups that are being left behind or at risk of being left behind. Figure 1 provides an overview of such groups as mentioned in the 2021 VNR reports, with a comparison with data from previous years, when available. It shows that the **groups identified as the most at risk of being left behind** were children and youth (98% of the countries), persons with disabilities (95%), women and/or girls (95%), the elderly (76%), migrants and refugees (69%), people living in poverty (57%), people living in certain regions (31%), ethnic groups (31%), Indigenous peoples (29%), LGBTQ+ community (19%), and prisoners (12%). In comparison with previous years, 2021 VNR reports are consistent in identifying children/youth, persons with disabilities, women/girls, and the elderly as the 4 major groups at risk of being left behind, this having been the case since the analysis of 2017 VNR reports.

In addition to identifying groups, in 2021, 30 countries (71%) presented some information on **progress and results of efforts to leaving no one behind.**[4] Such progress has been sometimes backed up with data,
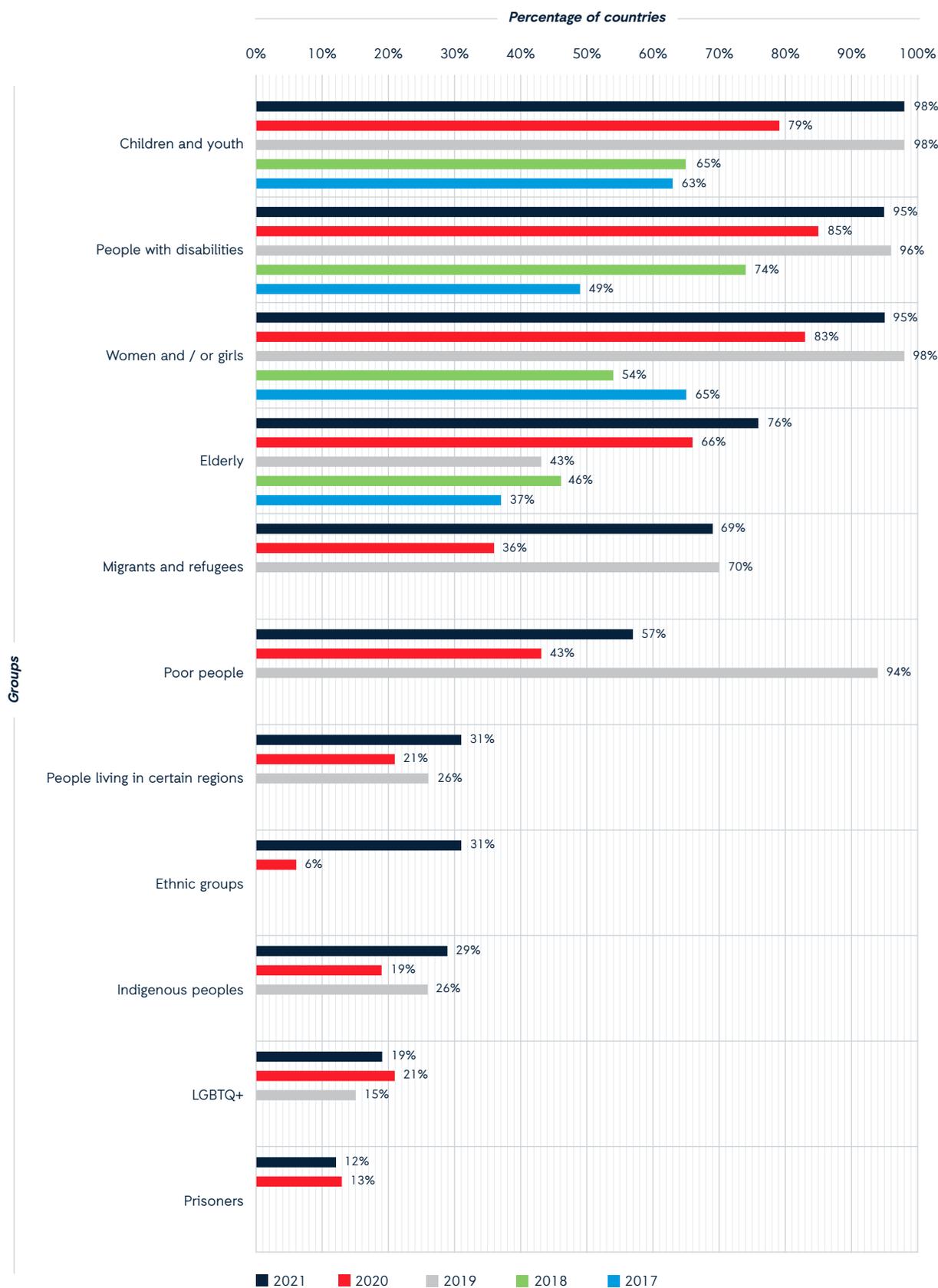
with countries presenting evolution of percentages regarding, for example, levels of poverty (including the Gini coefficient), the wage gap between men and women, and youth's participation in education. Countries that have presented comparative data to refer to results of LNOB efforts include **Afghanistan, Cabo Verde, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, Madagascar, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Niger, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Spain, and Sweden.**

With regards specifically to COVID-19, in 2021, 26 out of the 42 countries presenting VNR reports (or 86%) provided information on the **specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from an LNOB perspective.** This shows an increase in relation to 2020 and positively points to countries' acknowledgment that **the most vulnerable are most affected by crises.** In 2021, supports focused equally on strategies to tackle health-related impacts (including in terms of mental health), and socio-economic ones. As some examples, **Azerbaijan's** government covered the tuition of students from socially vulnerable groups. **Bhutan's** assistance programs for essentials' distribution included people undergoing retreat (as a spiritual practice) in secluded places, and stray canines living on the streets have also been fed. **Guatemala** published a document with recommendations to protect the rights of Garífuna, Xinka and mestizo women within the framework of the country's COVID-19 response.

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3.   This excludes Bahamas, as the country did not present a full VNR report in 2021 and did not refer to leaving no one behind in its main messages.
4.   This compares to 35 countries (or 75%) reporting in 2020. In 2019 and 2018, VNR reports did not provide enough information on leaving no one behind data to evaluate the outcomes of activities.

Figure 1. Groups most commonly identified as vulnerable in VNR reports

Percentage of countries

Children and youth
- 2021: 98%
- 2020: 79%
- 2019: 98%
- 2018: 65%
- 2017: 63%

People with disabilities
- 2021: 95%
- 2020: 85%
- 2019: 96%
- 2018: 74%
- 2017: 49%

Women and / or girls
- 2021: 95%
- 2020: 83%
- 2019: 98%
- 2018: 54%
- 2017: 65%

Elderly
- 2021: 76%
- 2020: 66%
- 2019: 43%
- 2018: 46%
- 2017: 37%

Migrants and refugees
- 2021: 69%
- 2020: 36%
- 2019: 70%

Poor people
- 2021: 57%
- 2020: 43%
- 2019: 94%

People living in certain regions
- 2021: 31%
- 2020: 21%
- 2019: 26%

Ethnic groups
- 2021: 31%
- 2020: 6%

Indigenous peoples
- 2021: 29%
- 2020: 19%
- 2019: 26%

LGBTQ+
- 2021: 19%
- 2020: 21%
- 2019: 15%

Prisoners
- 2021: 12%
- 2020: 13%

Groups

Legend: 2021 | 2020 | 2019 | 2018 | 2017

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

Case studies in good practice

A measure to protect children during COVID-19 in Angola

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

(Source: Excerpt adapted from Angola's VNR report)

An innovative way to engage youth in SDG efforts and COVID-19 response in Bhutan

The *De-Suung* (Guardian of Peace) Programme, a value-based personal development programme to encourage greater citizen engagement in nation-building built on the spirit of volunteerism, advocates for a sense of community, harmony and cooperation. Since its inception, the trainees/graduates or *De-Suups* have actively engaged in various voluntary initiatives, especially in post-disaster relief operations. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, *De-Suups* have been providing voluntary services as frontline workers. Services range from assisting security forces in patrolling border areas, to assisting with coordination efforts for public services, delivery of essential items during lockdowns, facilitating the enforcement of COVID-19 protocols in public places, among other essential tasks. In view of the critical role being played by these volunteers in supporting national efforts to deal with the pandemic, the Accelerated and Specialized Training Programme for *De-Suups* was initiated with a focus on engaging unemployed youth. Thousands of young Bhutanese signed up to join the programme, and today there are more than 22,000 *De-Suups* in the country.

(Source: Excerpt adapted from Bhutan's VNR Report)

Cyprus' actions to leave no women and children behind during the pandemic

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

(Source: Excerpt adapted from Cyprus's VNR report)

Preventing diseases in Guatemala's archaeological sites and parks

The National Council of Protected Areas and the Guatemalan Tourism Institute developed a Guide of good practices for preventing COVID-19 and other infections aimed at archaeological sites and parks. Its application was followed by the publication of good practice guides for COVID-19 and other infection preventions backed by the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance. As a result, strict hygiene and sanitation protocols were applied, leading to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) including Guatemala on the list of countries that have obtained the Safe Travel Stamp, which is expected to accelerate the increase in the number of tourists visiting the country.

(Source: Excerpt adapted from Guatemala's VNR report)

Recognition of disproportionate effects of the pandemic in Malaysia

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

(Source: Excerpt adapted from Malaysia's VNR report)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Given the importance of the COVID-19 pandemic to the global context, future VNRs should include reference to international and global commitments on COVID-19 and outline how multiple stakeholders can be involved to address crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

- In view of COVID-19, report on how it affected the means of implementation of the SDGs, highlighting actions taken to address the crisis and reduce its impact. For countries presenting a subsequent VNR report to the HLPF, identify where progress has been made since initial policy and data assessments and provide information on changes between reporting years at national and subnational levels and for the furthest behind.

- Ensure that stakeholders continue to be engaged even in light of challenging situations (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic) by promoting resilience and finding alternative ways through which to secure participation.

- Scale up efforts to address systemic issues that impact SDG implementation, in particular international peace and security, illicit and other illegal activities, effects of climate change, and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Ensure policies and programs are informed by and integrate efforts to leave no one behind, including by prioritizing those most in need to consistently reach marginalized communities.

- Highlight existing and planned efforts to leave no one behind, including how policies and program are being adapted, and in particular, new approaches to reach the people who are furthest behind first.

- Provide information on the status of data collection or plans to improve data availability to inform efforts to leave no one behind. This includes information on gender disaggregated data. Ensuring no one is left behind means knowing who is being left behind, by how much, and in what areas. The Inclusive Data Charter (IDC) is a useful tool to this end, as it advances the availability and encourages the use of inclusive and disaggregated data while fostering transparency, accountability, and knowledge sharing to ensure no one is left behind.

- Include major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts being made to ensure no one is left behind, outlining which groups are being covered and detailing what approaches are being taken.

- Report on the outcomes of efforts to leave no one behind, including by drawing on civil society expertise and citizen-generated data. Clearly present links between specific policies and actions with results, presenting progress for specific marginalized groups.