

# PROGRESSING NATIONAL SDGs IMPLEMENTATION:

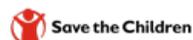
An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2020



The **Fifth Edition** in an annual series commissioned by civil society organizations



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## Acknowledgments

This report was written by Ana de Oliveira, Researcher and Shannon Kindornay, Director of Research, Policy and Practice at Cooperation Canada (formerly the Canadian Council for International Co-operation, CCIC). It includes 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 six VNR reports for Europe, and Zahra Bazzi (Program Manager, Arab NGO Network for Development, ANND) who reviewed three VNR reports for the Middle East and North Africa region. A team of researchers at the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) was responsible for reviewing the French and Russian VNR reports. 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 is the fifth of its kind, following on [earlier reports](#) produced by Cooperation Canada for 2017, 2018 and 2019, 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 Cooperation Canada and comprised the following individuals and organizations: Sesheeni Joud Selvaratnam, ActionAid [Denmark]; Oli Henman, Action for Sustainable Development (A4SD); Bihter Moschini, Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND); Alice Whitehead, Bond; Javier Surasky, Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional (CEPEI); Shannon Kindornay and Ana de Oliveira, Cooperation Canada; Jennifer Padilla, CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE), Deirdre de Burca, Forus International; Sarah Kristine Johansen, Global Focus; Lynn Wagner, International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD); Lilei Chow, Save the Children (UK); Aissata Ndiaye, Sightsavers; and Arelys Bellorini, World Vision International.

While many have reviewed and commented on the report, the research team assumes responsibility for errors and omissions.



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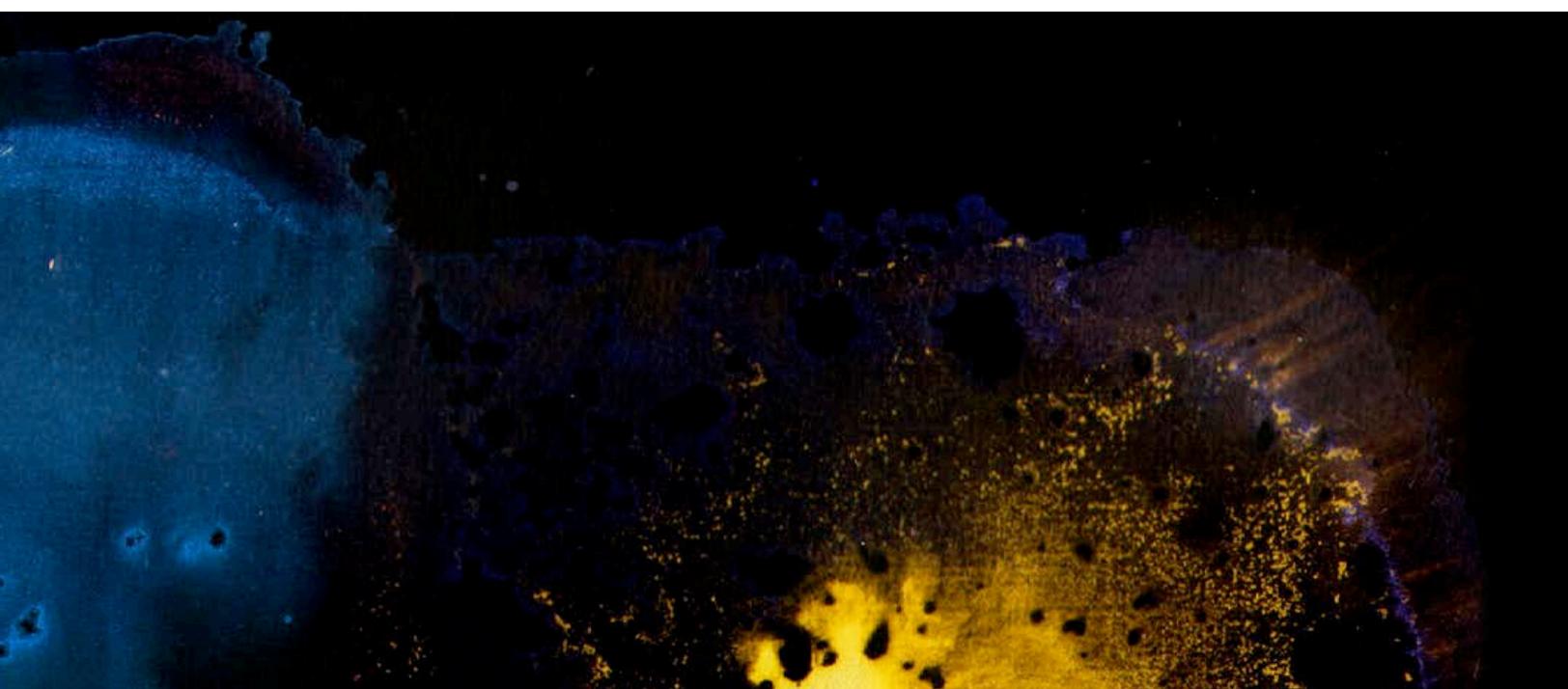
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## HIGHLIGHTS

Following commitments by heads of state and government around the world to a [Decade of Action and Delivery](#) to realize the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2019, 2020 saw the growth of an unprecedented global pandemic. In early 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) quickly spread around the world, leading to devastating health impacts. Containment measures negatively impacted decades of economic and social progress with some governments harnessing the pandemic response as an opportunity to further close civic space. **The need for governments to accelerate the 2030 Agenda has become more urgent in the context of a global response to COVID-19 with the 2030 Agenda's transformative principles remaining critical to ensure a participatory, just, equitable and sustainable recovery that ensures no one is left behind and harnesses lessons from the pandemic.**

For the past five 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.

The review of the 47 VNR reports submitted to the HLPF in 2020 revealed a range of good practices and both positive and concerning trends in implementation and reporting. **The *Progressing National SDGs Implementation* report covers all aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation through an examination of governance, institutional arrangements and stakeholder engagement, policies, the means of implementation and reporting. Key findings, good practice case studies, emerging best practices and recommendations are presented throughout the report.** The full sets of good practices spotlights and of recommendations are consolidated at the end of the report.

Here we highlight the key messages arising from the analysis of 2020 VNR reports. The messages have been numbered for ease of reference, and further details are provided below.



## KEY MESSAGES

1. Countries are more consistently providing information on most aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation.
2. Broad gains in reporting were also matched by decreased reporting on important issues such as 2030 Agenda budgeting, trade, technology and – not least – main challenges faced in implementation of the Agenda.
3. Many states continued to provide only partial information on the key components of the voluntary common reporting guidelines.
4. Reporting on leaving no one behind increased, as well as embedding this principle in national plans and policies. However, identifying left-behind groups, developing dedicated strategies, and using disaggregated data no leave no one behind remain as challenges.
5. In terms of a whole-of-society approach, non-state actors continue to be included in governance arrangements for implementation and formal processes for stakeholder engagement. However, reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement outside governance arrangements experienced some backslide.
6. The VNR reports are silent on closing civic space globally and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists. The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse by some governments to further close civic space.
7. Although fewer countries reported on contributions by non-state actors, there have been improvements in reporting on partnerships and recognising the role played by civil society.
8. Fewer countries reported conducting baseline and gap assessments, and fewer countries provided information on data availability. Conversely, there has been an increase in the number of countries reporting the integration of the SDGs into national policies and programs.
9. VNR reports from 2020 experienced improvements in the attention given to the transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda. However, there has not been an increase in the linkages with international agreements.
10. While more countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation, 2020 VNR reports revealed a limited analysis of domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally.
11. Overall information on national, regional and global follow-up and review processes suffered from backsliding. Most VNR reports lack reference to accountability mechanisms at the national level.

**1. Countries are more consistently providing information on most aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation.**

In comparison to two previous years, VNR reports for 2020 showed increased reporting on most aspects of implementation. For example, information on awareness-raising activities was available for 98% of countries. Reporting on localization also continues to improve, as 83% of countries provided information on their efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda, and more countries reported on partnerships in 2020 than in previous years. In relation to other aspects, reporting on the means of implementation improved overall for information on international public finance (83% of the countries), capacity development (83%), systemic issues (70%), best practices (58%), lessons learned (53%), and learning from peers (15%). Information on these topics is important for ensuring the success of the HLPF as a forum for peer learning and exchange.

**2. Broad gains in reporting were also matched by decreased reporting on important issues such as 2030 Agenda budgeting, trade, technology and – not least – main challenges faced in implementation of the Agenda.**

While more countries provided information on the means of implementation overall, 2020 saw decreased reporting on budgeting and costing for the 2030 Agenda, trade, technology, and challenges faced in implementing the 2030 Agenda. A little over half of the counties (51%) reported information on budgeting for the 2030 Agenda, and there was a slight decrease in reporting on trade (58%), challenges (94%) and technology (79%). While improved reporting on best practices and learning from peers is a positive gain for supporting the HLPF’s mandate, declines in other areas are worrisome, particularly in terms of planning for implementation and addressing encountered difficulties.

**3. Many states continued to provide only partial information on the key components of the voluntary common reporting guidelines.**

While VNR reports showed increased compliance with reporting against the Secretary-General’s voluntary common reporting guidelines over 2016 to 2019, there has been little change between 2019 and 2020 in terms of overall compliance. Reporting increased in six components listed in the guidelines, with the most significant gains seen in reporting on structural issues, whereas reporting declined in six other components. Although many of the 2020 reporting countries have fully met various guidelines’ components, there was still a considerable amount of countries providing only partial information.

**4. Reporting on leaving no one behind increased, as well as embedding this principle in national plans and policies. However, identifying left-behind groups, developing dedicated strategies, and using disaggregated data no leave no one behind remain as challenges.**

There continues to be an increase in reporting on leaving no one behind (LNOB). In 2020, 92% of reporting countries provided either robust information throughout their VNR report, or a dedicated chapter to LNOB. Moreover, more countries reported incorporating the principle of leaving no one behind in the creation of national sustainable development policies. Although data to leave no one behind improved in 2020, with 40% of the VNR reports indicating that efforts to LNOB were informed by existing data, disaggregated data remains a challenge to many countries.

All countries (45) reporting in 2020 with full VNR reports identified groups left behind or at risk of being left behind, which indicates a positive upward trend in comparison to previous years. Most VNR reports listed people with disabilities (85%), women and girls (83%), and children and youth (79%) as at risk of being left behind. Although these three groups continue to be the topmost ones facing more vulnerabilities, there was a decline in the number of countries that promoted such identification between 2019 and 2020. In terms of countries’ overall plans and approaches, there has been some positive movement towards incorporating the principle of leaving no one behind to create national sustainable development policies. In 2020, 28 countries (60%) highlighted embedding leaving no one behind or

efforts to address inequality and social exclusion as part of overarching development plans.

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**5. In terms of a whole-of-society approach, non-state actors continue to be included in governance arrangements for implementation and formal processes for stakeholder engagement. However, reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement outside governance arrangements experienced some backslide.**

Formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements is becoming a standard practice. Over 2016-2020, 70% of reporting countries noted that non-state actors are included in governance arrangements to guide implementation. Moreover, instead of engagement happening mainly through technical working groups, as it had been the case in the previous year, the countries reporting in 2020 mostly mentioned more lead councils or committees. The increase in engagement in high-level governance arrangements is positive, suggesting that there may be more opportunity for non-state actors to input overall strategic direction and coordination.

However, reporting on multi-stakeholder engagement outside governance arrangements experienced some backslide, as 47% of countries (versus 60% in 2019) reported on formal processes for stakeholder engagement, such as communication strategies to support awareness-raising, participatory budgeting processes, multi-stakeholder forums, youth councils or annual events. The percentage of countries reporting on consultations to define national priorities also decreased significantly, from 89% in 2019 to 47% in 2020.

Conversely, in terms of engagement in the VNR process, all but one (98%) of the countries that presented a full VNR report in 2020 referred to consultations and/or non-state actor engagement to prepare the VNR report. Although there continues to be a steady increase in the number of countries directly including non-state actors in drafting VNR reports or providing written inputs, the actual inclusion of non-state actors' recommendations in the final reports continues to be less verifiable. In 2020, 25 out of the

47 reporting countries (53%) included information on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement.

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**6. The VNR reports are silent on closing civic space globally and ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists. The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse by some governments to further close civic space.**

While some countries emphasized the creation of enabling policies for non-state actors engagement and participation in 2030 Agenda implementation, no VNR report referred to closing civic space or to attempts to create a more enabling environment for civil society. Over 2017-2020, VNR reports have been largely silent on these issues despite increasing calls for action by civil society organizations and others worldwide to address the deteriorating human rights situation in many countries and protect human rights defenders and environmentalists. Moreover, reports by civil society organizations on 2030 Agenda implementation continue to point to the need for improvements in the quality of interactions and engagement between government and civil society.

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**7. Although fewer countries reported on contributions by non-state actors, there have been improvements in reporting on partnerships and recognising the role played by civil society.**

There has been a decline in the percentage of countries reporting on non-state actors' contributions, with 89% versus 98% in 2019. Conversely, there continues to be a positive trend in terms of countries recognizing the contributions by civil society organizations in their VNR reports. In 2020, 79% of countries provided this information. There has also been an improvement in how reporting countries showcase civil society organizations' actions and the role they play in 2030 Agenda implementation. Moreover, there has been an increase in reporting on the role of parliamentarians (53%), the private sector (75%), and academia (55%). In addition, 45% of the 2020 VNR reports specifically mentioned the participation of children and youth in

SDGs implementation, another increase in the category of partnerships noted compared to previous years.

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**8. Fewer countries reported conducting baseline and gap assessments, and fewer countries provided information on data availability. Conversely, there has been an increase in the number of countries reporting the integration of the SDGs into national policies and programs.**

In 2020, the percentage of countries that indicated their approach to 2030 Agenda implementation had been informed by an assessment of policies, data, or both declined to 64%. Significantly fewer countries (45%) provided information on data availability. Conversely, all the countries reported integrating the SDGs into their policies in 2020. Another positive trend in comparison to previous years refers to the selection of national priorities, with 45 countries (almost 96%) providing this information. Priorities related to social outcomes and economy were most commonly cited, followed by the environment. In 2020, 77% of countries provided some information on national targets and indicators selection, another increase in relation to the previous year.

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**9. VNR reports from 2020 experienced improvements in the attention given to the transformative principles of the 2030 Agenda. However, there has not been an increase in the linkages with international agreements.**

The 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 continues to receive more focus in the 2020 VNR reports, and there has been an increase in the number of countries pointing to the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda and human rights-based approaches.

There has also been an improvement in reporting integrated approaches to implement the SDGs. Although only 49% of countries gave equal attention to economic, social and environmental dimensions

of development in their VNR reports, more than half referred to appropriate linkages between the goals. Seventy percent of VNR reports assessed the full set of SDGs, a considerable increase in relation to 2019, where this figure had been 40%. On the other hand, reporting on linkages between the 2030 Agenda and relevant international agreements such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda showed mixed results in 2020 over 2019. Such linkages point to the recognition of synergies between the 2030 Agenda and other relevant agreements to promote sustainable development. The variation of results in relation to different agreements does not suggest an increase in such recognition. Moreover, a minimal number of countries (4%) referred to COVID-19-related actions apart from measures carried out at the domestic level. No country referred to global commitments regarding the pandemic.

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**10. While more countries focused on policy coherence for sustainable development as a guiding framework for 2030 Agenda implementation, 2020 VNR reports revealed a limited analysis of domestic and foreign policies on the realization of the SDGs globally.**

Furthermore, 2020 experienced an increase in the number of countries reporting on including the SDGs into national budgets: almost 45% of countries mentioned having already incorporated the SDGs into budgeting processes, and 4% of countries mentioned such incorporation as a plan. This might suggest an improvement in relation to the previous year in the sense that more countries are doing such incorporation, instead of mentioning it as a future plan. In terms of financing, 70% percent of countries reporting in 2020 identified finance sources to support 2030 Agenda implementation, pointing to domestic resources, private investment, remittances, and, where applicable, official development assistance (ODA) and South-South cooperation.

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**11. Overall information on national, regional and global follow-up and review processes suffered from backsliding. Most VNR reports lack**

**reference to accountability mechanisms at the national level.**

In 2020, fewer countries provided information on follow-up and review processes at the national level (63%) and on data availability (45%). Apart from lesser reporting, countries continue to provide a limited reference to when, how and to whom national reporting will occur. Only five countries referred to parliament's role in follow-up and review processes, same as in 2019. This raises concerns over how countries are ensuring accountability through elected officials. On the other hand, two countries referred to engagement in regional review processes, and two mentioned future engagement at the HLPF.

In 2021, the global community starts a new cycle of follow-up and review. The procedures and mechanisms of the HLPF are under review. This provides an opportunity to strengthen comparative analysis and tracking progress further as many countries return for their second or even third VNR. The HLPF delivers the critical forum for VNRs to take place and links the monitoring and accountability cycle from national to regional and global level reviews. Following promising trends concerning stakeholder engagement at the national level, it is hoped that the future development of the HLPF will include even more time for meaningful dialogue and engagement between member states, civil society organizations, experts and other stakeholders.

