

PROGRESSING NATIONAL SDG IMPLEMENTATION REPORT 2023

Executive summary



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Insights from the 2023 Voluntary National Reviews

The report outlines shifts needed, not only in energy sources, consumption patterns, and supply chains, but also in values, hearts, and minds.

[2023 UN Secretary General's Report on Progress towards the SDGs]

At the half-way point of the 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) “are in deep trouble.” This is one of the strong conclusions drawn by the 2023 Special Edition of the UN Secretary General's Report, Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a rescue plan for people and planet.

The report notes that out of roughly 140 targets for which data is available, only around 12% are on track. Among other stark consequences of continuing current trends, the report highlights:

Around **575 million** people will still be living in extreme poverty by 2030;

Only about **one third** of countries will meet the target to halve national poverty levels;

It will take **286 years** to close gender gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws; and

By 2030, some **84 million** children will be out of school and **300 million** children or young people who attend school will leave unable to read and write.

Confirming that “planet” is equally at risk as “people”, the 2023 [Global Tipping Points report](#) warns that five natural thresholds are already at risk of being crossed, and further irreversible impacts can be expected if current climate change trends are allowed to continue unabated. This year’s SDG review coincided with the publication of the second quadrennial Global Sustainable Development Report by an independent group of scientists, titled, [Times of crisis, times of change: Science for accelerating transformations to sustainable development](#). The report echoes other global assessments of the consequences of continued non-action on the SDGs, but also sounds a note of cautious optimism that “the future is not a given” if countries take decisive action now to adopt ambitious “SDG-push” scenarios to transition towards more inclusive and greener economies.

The [political declaration](#) adopted at the second SDG Summit in September 2023 reaffirmed that the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs “remains our overarching roadmap for achieving sustainable development and overcoming the multiple crises we face.” The Declaration also underscored countries’ commitment to act with urgency to realize the collective vision underscored in the Agenda, and “endeavour to reach those furthest behind first.”

Amid these stark warnings and renewed commitments, what insights can we draw from the annual Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of SDG progress? Between 2016 and 2023, UN member states have produced more than 300 VNRs. While their tone is sometimes self-congratulatory and data availability not always sufficiently robust or comparable across countries, VNR reports do offer a contextualized glimpse into the realities of SDG implementation. At the 2023 High-Level Political Forum, 39 VNRs were presented, including the first-ever supranational review by the European Union (EUVR). The bulk of countries (36) were presenting their second VNR, while Chile presented its third VNR. The only first-time VNR was by Saint Kitts and Nevis.

In parallel to these official processes, civil society organizations have prepared at least 100 spotlight reports and other independent assessments over the years, which aim to offer a more complete picture of national progress, particularly with respect to the fundamental 2030 Agenda principle to leave no one behind.

As we have done for the past eight years, this *Progressing National SDG Implementation* report provides an annual “SDG reality check” by interspersing countries’ official analysis with direct responses and additional insights from spotlight reports submitted by broad coalitions of civil society organizations that are directly involved in SDG implementation and monitoring in each country. The overall aim is to:

- analyze the VNRs and a sample of civil society reports produced in 2023 to assess and compare how different governments are using the VNR process as a tool to account for national implementation of the SDGs.
- provide concrete examples, across a range of domains, of best practices in terms of policy engagement, implementation and monitoring by governments and civil society with regards to the 2030 Agenda, with a view to offering inspiration and leverage to CSOs in different countries to improve practice in their respective countries.
- use this comparison to make forward-looking recommendations, including on how to improve the reporting by governments for the review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

The 2023 *Progressing National SDG Implementation* report assesses the VNR reports against a set of common parameters that are analyzed in eight standalone chapters. The chapters are further clustered around three overarching sections that are highlighted below. In

line with the principles of the 2030 Agenda, 'leave no one behind' (LNOB) is an important cross-cutting theme across the report, as well as the focus of a dedicated chapter that examines SDG progress from the perspective of groups most at risk of being left behind, including children, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, women, migrants and ethnic minorities, and diverse gender identities. A final brief section examines the extent to which countries have adhered to the UN Secretary-General's (UNSG) [Updated Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for VNRs](#).

Compared to previous years, an overall assessment of the 2023 VNRs finds that most countries have continued to improve means of implementation and their overarching policy processes to formally mainstream the SDGs within national frameworks. A considerable number of reports also focus on cross-cutting and systemic issues, in part due to lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to address new and intersecting global crises. Many reports also highlight intersections between gender exclusion and other vulnerabilities, including entrenched poverty, access to education and other basic rights, and women's social, economic and political empowerment.

However, the reports also reveal continuing capacity and funding gaps that impact on countries' ability to effectively plan, implement and track their SDG actions in an integrated and inclusive way. Another notable gap involves participatory SDG governance, with only a third of countries mentioning multi-stakeholder institutional arrangements, and the scope of participation being often less substantive than VNRs would suggest. Many reports also generally lack tangible evidence of iterative policy making for the SDGs, which is critical in learning from past experience to set future targets that are both realistic and ambitious. While there are some good examples of self-critical and forward looking analyses, the bulk of reports fall short of the standard set in the UNSG's VNR Guidelines, which underscore the opportunity for second and subsequent VNRs **"to share knowledge, strengthen accountability and inclusiveness, improve coherent reporting across different levels of government, and express their need for increasingly specific support from external partners."**

When placed alongside the independent reports from stakeholder groups, it becomes clear that while in a number of cases there have been formal steps to consult with the "whole of society", many such consultations often lack meaningful engagement and outputs. There is an increasing tendency to view dialogue opportunities as a "tick box" exercise, a formal requirement with limited impact on the drafting of the final text. Unfortunately this sits in the context of a global trend towards growing authoritarianism, with a number of countries implementing laws aimed at reducing the rights of stakeholder groups to operate independently around the world.

As in previous years, the report is based primarily on the evidence drawn from official VNR reports and there has not been sufficient scope to verify all aspects of these reports. However, where possible, the views of national civil society coalitions have been placed alongside the official assessment as a way to offer additional independent insights on progress from country level expert partners.

The following are key messages from each section.

I. Governance, institutional mechanisms and engagement

This section consists of two chapters exploring the overall enabling environment for SDG planning, action and review, with a focus on institutional arrangements, multi-stakeholder engagement, and the role of effective leadership in driving progress towards the SDGs. Particular attention is paid to innovative approaches to facilitate stakeholder engagement and ensure the full participation of non-state actors in VNR processes, while also exploring links to overall civic space and broader mechanisms for more democratic and inclusive decision making.

Key insights include:

- There is no one-size-fits-all model of SDG governance: countries employ a wide range of approaches to coordinate policy making, implementation, monitoring and accountability, with coordination duties ranging from inter-ministerial structures to single ministries or multi-stakeholder councils or committees. A range of independent views from CSOs notes that some SDG governance structures exist only in theory, while others are fragmented, discontinuous, and lack clear remits or accountability mechanisms.
- Compared to 2022, more countries report that they have established new SDG coordinating institutions to enhance a “whole-of-government” approach. However data on multi-stakeholder involvement in SDG coordinating institutions and processes is particularly low in 2023 (38%, compared to 66% in 2022).
- Additionally, assertions on participation in governance arrangements made in VNRs tend to be superficial and not always verified by societal stakeholders on the ground, indicating a need for greater transparency and accountability regarding efforts to bring about participatory planning, delivery, and monitoring processes.
- Many countries continue to face entrenched challenges to civic participation, especially marginalized groups. Irrespective of political context, all countries and regions can do more to strengthen transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in their 2030 Agenda policy frameworks to ensure that diverse voices are heard and integrated into efforts to achieve the SDGs.
- An area where information is available for most countries is in relation to stakeholder participation in the formulation of VNRs, although the bulk of reports do not offer real insights about how inputs from societal stakeholders influenced the final VNR reports. Although bright spots can be found regarding more inclusive VNR processes, views from the ground suggest that this rarely translates into more continuous forms of policy dialogue, coordination and monitoring beyond the VNR.

II. Policies for 2030 Agenda Implementation

This section comprises three chapters examining country progress in integrating the 2030 Agenda into national policy frameworks, policy coherence for sustainable development, and integration with global agreements. It includes an assessment of data and monitoring tools in place to facilitate effective SDG planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting mechanisms. The following key points and conclusions emerge:

- Most countries have incorporated the SDGs into their national planning processes through dedicated strategies or integration in national development plans. However, approaches for monitoring vary, with examples ranging from alignment only at goal-level, target and indicator level, to more decentralized planning and priority-setting processes.
- In most cases the extent to which these plans or strategies are the result of inclusive processes or provide guidance in policy making is unclear. Some countries do mention using these frameworks as templates for regular national monitoring processes, which would suggest a degree of linkage between planning, policy making, implementation and monitoring.
- While acknowledging the importance of policy coherence for sustainable development, no country provides a comprehensive assessment of progress along all eight domains called for in the composite SDG indicator for policy coherence (17.14.1). With many countries highlighting the role of climate change action as a central connector across sectors and scales, this offers one potential entry point for policy coherence in SDG actions from national to the local level.
- The reports reveal an overall positive trend towards improving data availability for monitoring all 17 SDGs, although challenges remain. Many countries are actively working to enhance their national statistical systems and data analysis capabilities to better monitor SDG progress. The strengthening of National Statistical Offices, collaboration among government agencies, investment in capacity development, inclusion of disaggregated data and incorporation of unofficial data sources are among the strategies employed.
- With most countries conducting their second review, there is scope to fully tap the potential of VNRs as an iterative reporting process by establishing the first VNR as a baseline, tracking progress over time and identifying areas that need further attention. However, to facilitate global tracking of SDG progress, more needs to be done to improve common methodologies and promote more granular and continuous monitoring processes at the country and local levels.
- Countries need to do more to institutionalize SDG monitoring, fostering national and subnational mandates for regular reporting outside the VNRs, and involve non-state actors more meaningfully to ensure effective oversight and accountability.

III. Implementing the 2030 Agenda in Partnership

This final cluster of chapters takes an in-depth look at three key elements for transformative and inclusive SDG processes: leaving no one behind (LNOB); localization; and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Some overarching messages per chapter are:

- **LNOB:** While some countries have made progress on collecting disaggregated data, no single country has a full picture of who is left behind or at greater risk of falling behind in SDG efforts. The bulk of reporting countries still need to substantially improve disaggregated data collection- including on gender, multidimensional poverty, domestic inequalities, and specific vulnerable or excluded groups such as persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, migrants, ethnic minorities and diverse gender identities. Furthermore, countries can improve reporting on LNOB by providing more information on the impact of planned policy and programmes to reach the furthest behind and the impact these interventions have had.
- **Localization:** Subnational governments and local non-state actors are increasingly engaged in SDG reviews, although only a third of 2023 reporting countries have conducted voluntary local reviews (VLRs) so far. Examples of systematic SDG processes at the local level include: defining sub-national priority targets and action plans; instituting mandatory SDG reporting; and participating in international partnerships to localize the SDGs. However, much more needs to be done to fully devolve and incentivize SDG planning, implementation, and monitoring to the local level.
- **SDG partnerships:** Specific stakeholder groups involved in SDG implementation include parliamentarians, children and youth, CSOs, the private sector, academia, and international development partners. While diverse and innovative partnership approaches are highlighted, much more needs to be done to leverage the comparative advantages of these different groups to overcome the many challenges faced in accelerating SDG progress.



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Recommendations for future VNR reporting

As this report is being published in early 2024, the second review of the HLPF and ECOSOC is underway. The first review was interrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and therefore it had quite limited scope and failed to offer any significant enhancement. This time in 2024, there is apparent appetite to consider a broader review to enable more meaningful monitoring and assessment of national SDG progress.

It is essential to provide a greater sense of urgency in the VNRs and this review should offer clear actionable pathways to agree on recommendations and tackle the obstacles to implementation. To move in this direction, the guiding principles should be to strengthen the comparability of the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, based on specific commitments.

The SDG Summit provided a crucial moment at the half-way point of the 2030 Agenda, for reflection on delivery and monitoring and we note that Member States agreed to make specific additional commitments to accelerate action on the SDGs. As there is no time to lose, we call for these additional commitments to feature at the HLPF with an annual “commitment tracker” where member states can show progress on their key commitments, including by identifying key drivers that hinder or foster implementation. We also call for clearer opportunities for inputs from independent reports to be featured alongside the VNRs.

- a. Broad recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of the global process:
 - Establish an annual “commitment tracker” whereby Member States include progress on commitments made as part of their VNRs or at the 2023 SDG Summit.
 - Ensure dedicated financing for delivery of the 2030 Agenda with a strong focus on a specific fund to support those communities who are most often left behind.
 - A space should be created at the HLPF for the presentation of Voluntary Stakeholder Reviews, in a similar way to the space created for Voluntary Local Reviews to ensure that independent assessments of progress are presented alongside the official reports.

- b. Specific country level recommendations for stronger VNRs:
 - Member States are encouraged to seek inputs from CSOs to ensure a comprehensive and balanced assessment of progress towards the SDGs. CSOs can offer valuable insights, data, and case studies that reflect the realities on the ground and highlight areas for improvement.
 - Member states are encouraged to report on progress in collecting disaggregated data on various groups agreed in the 2030 Agenda. The UN development system could support Member States in identifying, mapping and collecting quality, disaggregated data on these groups to leave no one behind. Further, Member States should incorporate a LNOB lens as a cross-cutting issue when evaluating goal-by-goal progress in their VNRs.
 - Member states are encouraged to report on efforts to reach agreed groups in VNRs, even where data is lacking.
 - Member States are encouraged to report on national SDG monitoring mechanisms as well as meaningful participation of stakeholders, particularly those that are the most left behind.

This report was coordinated by Action for Sustainable Development (A4SD), in collaboration with diverse partner organizations, including Cooperation Canada, British Overseas NGOs for Development (BOND), Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), CSO Partnership for

Development Effectiveness (CPDE), Forus, Global Focus, International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), Save the Children UK and Sightsavers.

2023 VNRs were submitted by: Bahrain, Barbados, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brunei, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Canada, Central African Republic, Chile, Comoros, Croatia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, European Union, Fiji, France, Guyana, Iceland, Ireland, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Maldives, Mongolia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Rwanda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovakia, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan, Tanzania, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam and Zambia.