



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2020 Voluntary National Reviews Synthesis Report

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Foreword



I am pleased to share with you the fifth Synthesis Report of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) conducted at the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) in 2020. The HLPF was held in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, the report pays significant attention to its impact on us all. Moreover, it underscores the value of multilateralism and global solidarity during these difficult times.

47 countries presented their VNRs at the 2020 HLPF, out of which 26 were first timers. This brings the total number of countries who have presented their VNRs since 2016 to 168. It is heartening that, despite the many challenges countries faced in their last stage of preparations for the VNRs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they succeeded in finalizing their report and presentation at the HLPF. Countries described

how the pandemic hampered the full engagement of stakeholders in their VNR preparations, but also the alternative approaches they took, by using virtual tools where possible, or conducting interviews over the phone or through community radio stations.

In many cases, the reporting countries expressed concern that the pandemic will adversely impact progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and disrupt their development efforts in the short term. Many described the health, social and economic effects of the pandemic and were open and candid in acknowledging their challenges, so that others can learn from their experiences.

Financing has always been a challenge for developing countries and especially for countries in special situations. But with the spread of COVID-19, a new layer of vulnerability has been added to pre-existing macro-economic and financial difficulties. Depending on the country context, countries also reported challenges that included a steep decline in industrial activity; high unemployment; elevated levels of household debt among vulnerable groups; increased inflation; capital flight and record public debt levels. The pandemic has also exposed even more the vulnerabilities of those who are being left behind, ranging from women and children, to youth, persons with disabilities, older persons,

people in situations of conflict, and migrants. The VNR countries reported on measures they adopted to alleviate their situation during the pandemic, such as providing better safety nets including disbursing cash transfers or providing food and healthcare free of charge.

Overall, the number of 2020 VNRs, and the fact that 20 countries presented a VNR for the second time and one for the third time, show the continued commitment to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. The VNRs present a rich gamut of policies and measures to realize the SDGs amidst the crisis.

Limited evidence and data availability, disaggregation and collection remain a challenge

for many countries. But significant improvements have been made and the majority of the 2020 VNR countries incorporated data into their reviews. Over half of all VNRs reports include a Statistical Annex.

The 2020 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) give an idea of ways to overcome the pandemic and recover better and of the obstacles that stand in the way. We must learn from those lessons as we engage in the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs by 2030 and celebrate the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, reaffirming our dedication to multilateralism and international cooperation.



Liu Zhenmin

Under-Secretary-General for
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Despite the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its global impacts, 47 countries presented their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) during the first virtual high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) held under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council from 7 to 16 July 2020. Since 2016, when the first reviews were presented, a total of 168 countries have reported on their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With the launch this year of the Decade of Action and Delivery for sustainable development, some countries reaffirmed their commitment to the principles of the 2030 Agenda and expressed the urgent need to a strengthened and accelerated implementation of the SDGs over the next ten years.

As in previous years, this synthesis report provides an overview of the approaches and actions taken by all countries reporting in 2020, and showcases best practices, lessons learned, gaps and challenges encountered in working towards the achievement of the SDGs. Drawing from the VNR reports, key elements pertaining to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda are examined, including institutional arrangements and coordination mechanisms, the principle of leaving no one behind and its application in national contexts, monitoring and data, stakeholder engagement and awareness raising, as well as the means of implementation. In addition, the report outlines actions taken on each of the SDGs. The report is not exhaustive; all examples chosen are illustrative, and their selection does not imply that the collection of 2020 VNRs do not also contain other equally valid and useful examples of country practices.

Bringing SDGs into the national context: assessments, strategies and budgets

Five years since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, countries have made significant progress in integrating the SDGs into national development plans and sectoral strategies, elaboration of indicators. There has been an increased focus on implementation at the sub-national level. In some instances, countries have begun to take stock of initial implementation efforts.

Yet many countries expressed deep concern about the effects of COVID-19 on their societies and economies. This included the impact on national budgets and the need to redirect existing expenditures towards emergency responses, with some countries reporting that their initial response packages amounted to significant proportions of their annual budgets.

Institutions for implementing the 2030 Agenda

A number of specific institutional mechanisms have been consistently reported in the VNRs, to facilitate decision-making and coordination for implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Many inter-ministerial committees and commissions have been created, with some chaired or overseen by the Head of State or Government. Other countries are utilizing existing institutional structures, with a specific ministry designated as responsible for advancing SDG implementation. Numerous governments have also established multi-stakeholder engagement mechanisms, which are essential for whole-of-society approaches to achieving progress.

Coordinating mechanisms at multiple levels of government, including local government, is also considered important in many countries, as the implementation of the SDGs relies on the concrete application of programmes and policies at the local level, requiring effective vertical alignment between national and local governments. The involvement of parliaments in SDG implementation has been variable

across countries presenting VNRs in 2020.

While most countries have established institutional arrangements for implementation of the SDGs, the VNRs provide little information on the actual impact that these arrangements have had on overall policies and SDG implementation. Some countries also reported challenges in making these arrangements as effective as possible. Systematic assessment of the effectiveness of institutional arrangements, including through auditing, may prove useful.

Leaving no one behind

Most VNRs dedicated a specific section on the principle of leaving no one behind (LNOB) and its meaning in their national context. Many VNRs highlighted a human rights-based approach to development, and referred to LNOB as a cross-cutting principle in their strategies, programmes and plans. Most often the principle of LNOB was reflected through the lens of social protection, as targeted actions to support the most vulnerable or as universal services with equal treatment.

Many VNRs included assessments of populations considered most at risk of being left behind, including children and youth, women and girls, migrants, persons with disabilities, older persons, indigenous peoples, and people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or intersex and queer (LGBTI). Other vulnerable groups identified in some instances included stateless persons, populations affected by conflict, people suffering from the impacts of natural disasters and health emergencies, widows and widowers, orphans, trafficked and street children, child soldiers, deportees, sex workers, drug users, the mentally ill, prison inmates, ex-convicts, small farmers, and people working in informal sectors.

The majority of countries outlined the importance of international development cooperation to addressing the principle of leaving no one behind and most also stressed

the importance of acquiring disaggregated data, with the lack of available disaggregated data often highlighted as a major challenge.

Countries in special situations

This year's synthesis report includes a new section on countries reporting in 2020 that fall into one or more of the categories of least developed countries, landlocked developing countries, small island developing States, countries in conflict or post-conflict situations, African countries, and middle-income countries. These groups of countries bear the heaviest burden of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic impacts, and existing vulnerabilities can be further exacerbated by ongoing conflicts, political instability and the climate crisis.

The VNR countries in special situations are often struggling to achieve more peaceful and inclusive societies that guarantee justice for all and build effective, accountable, and stronger institutions at all levels, which they describe as a necessary prerequisite for achieving the SDGs. Countries in post-conflict situations reported that years of conflict, entrenched inequality, widespread infrastructure deficits, and economic deprivation remain barriers to sustainable peace, growth and development.

SDGs

All SDGs were under review this year, and the VNRs reflected a variety of different review approaches, with many countries reporting on the SDGs individually in dedicated sections, and others following a more integrated analysis through various policies or actions. Some countries presented their findings through dedicated chapters on people, prosperity, planet, peace and partnership.

Most reports addressed how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted overall progress toward the SDGs, expressed concern about how the pandemic could lead to an overall increase in poverty and inequality, and underscored the importance of international cooperation.

While the poverty rate has been reduced in several countries, numerous countries reported that progress on SDG 1 could be stalled or reversed, with vulnerable segments of the population falling back into poverty, as the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic begins to be felt more strongly around the world.

A few countries reported their full achievement of SDG 2 and its targets, while many others reported on their national plans, strategies, and frameworks to combat continuing challenges of hunger, food insecurity, malnutrition, and the ongoing rise in obesity. Many countries offered food security and nutritional support for children and the most vulnerable groups. The VNRs defined a variety of mechanisms to support sustainable agricultural production through small-scale and family farmers, reduce land degradation and conserve agricultural biodiversity, with such efforts linked to related approaches and strategies on poverty, health, water, energy, climate, finance, science and technology.

Countries reported a variety of measures to accelerate the implementation of SDG 3, including strengthening public health programs, prioritizing mental healthcare, expanding capacity to increase access to quality health care, enhancing food security and nutrition, and promoting private sector participation in health care delivery. The maternal mortality rate has reportedly dropped in some countries, as has the mortality rate of children aged five and under. The prevalence of tuberculosis and malaria are declining in some countries, but non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory disease and cancer, continue to rise in many areas.

Nearly all countries attached high importance to education, and reported progress in achieving SDG 4, with many countries offering free and quality education for all, and prioritizing early childhood education. Several countries emphasized the critical importance of inclusion

in education policy during the COVID-19 pandemic, to reach marginalized groups and to leave no one behind.

Although gender equality and women's empowerment are described as essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda, progress toward SDG 5 is slow and uneven, and challenges to gender inequality persist in nearly every area. This year countries also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively and disproportionately affected women. Violence against women and girls remains the most serious challenge, and more than half of reporting countries described measures and policies put in place to address these issues.

For SDG 6, countries have reported on improving access to basic sanitation services as well as improving accessibility, quality and availability of water resources. However, issues related to water scarcity are increasing due to the effects of climate change and increasing natural disasters. Some countries reported improvements in the percentage of homes with access to safe drinking water services and use of basic sanitation services both in rural and urban areas, and the COVID-19 pandemic has had some positive impact by increasing global awareness of proper sanitation and hygiene practices.

Many countries outlined plans, strategies, and legislative frameworks for achieving SDG 7, including guaranteeing access to energy for all, the promotion of electricity generation from renewable sources of energy, and phasing out the use of fossil fuels.

Most countries reported on progress made in implementing SDG 8, recognizing the importance of decent work and economic growth, reducing youth unemployment and income inequality. Efforts to promote a green economy and environmentally sustainable solutions were addressed by many, and several countries reported on use of artificial intelligence, digitalization, a digital economy and ICT to further productivity, training and development

Progress toward SDG 9 included institutional measures and policy innovations aimed at upgrading, diversifying and greening infrastructure and industry, including, in some countries, a focus on fostering innovation and advancing digitalization. The need for improvements in health infrastructures was also highlighted.

SDG 10 was often reported on as a cross-cutting goal, with several countries addressing inequality in the context of other SDGs or within larger themes in their reviews. All countries addressed the problem of income inequalities, with the majority reporting that income inequality has remained largely the same or gotten worse. Measures to address inequality faced by migrants, persons with disabilities, and gender inequality were highlighted.

Many VNRs emphasized that, to achieve SDG 11, cities must take action to find effective solutions to ensure housing quality and affordability, improve infrastructure, and reduce pollution. The increase in urban slums remains a problem and the health and well-being of countries' urban dwellers remains a priority. For countries with specific disaster vulnerabilities, this has translated into planning for climate-resilient housing, services and infrastructure.

On SDG 12, many countries stressed the implementation of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on SCP, efficient management and use of natural resources, reducing various types of waste, and responsible management of wastes and chemicals, and adoption of sustainable business practices. Reviews addressed measures and policies to address the areas of sustainable food systems, sustainable lifestyles, sustainable public procurement, sustainable building and construction, sustainable tourism, and consumer information.

Many countries reported on SDG 13, outlining their mitigation actions and commitments, with many references to nationally determined contributions under

the Paris Agreement. The impact of climate change on the well-being and livelihoods of humans, especially in relation to key sectors such as agriculture, water, and human settlements, were described, and many reviews indicated that disaster risk preparedness is a priority.

A majority of VNRs dedicated a specific section to SDG 14 on oceans, including several landlocked countries, and reported on their efforts to address challenges such as marine pollution, overfishing, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Many countries also reported on their progress towards establishing marine protected areas.

Many of the SDG 15 targets are far from being met. Countries reported many challenges related to biodiversity loss, deforestation, land and soil degradation, invasive species, and illegal poaching and trafficking of protected wildlife. However, numerous countries also noted progress towards increasing protected areas and preserving wetlands, and some countries reported positive changes in forest coverage.

Efforts to achieve progress toward SDG 16 was widely reported, including measures to reduce all forms of violence, end abuse and violence against children, promote the rule of law, reduce illicit financial flows and corruption, and develop accountable and transparent institutions. Many countries highlighted the importance of upholding the rule of law, ensuring universal access to justice and information, building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, and the delivery of public services.

Aspects of progress toward SDG 17 have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has derailed sustainable development progress in many countries, highlighting the importance of a revitalized global partnership. Some aspects of SDG 17 were already challenged by circumstances prior to the onset of the pandemic, including the mobilization of adequate financial

resources, the multilateral trading system, and the availability of crucial data. Countries highlighted different levels of access to essential resources, and underscored the need for clear commitments to international cooperation.

Monitoring and data

Data availability is a critical component of progress, and there has been much global activity this year to close data gaps and provide support to all countries, who in turn are taking action to address issues related to data availability, gaps, disaggregation and collection. A majority of countries are incorporating data into their reviews, and over half of all VNRs in 2020 include a Statistical Annex. Countries are also taking steps to modify and adapt the global indicator framework to fit national contexts, conditions and priorities. Measures taken to strengthen national statistical capacity also include creating ownership for data collection and reporting. The national statistical system in many countries had a central role in preparations for the VNRs, and in some countries the national statistical office had a coordinating role related to the data in the VNRs.

Stakeholder engagement and awareness raising

Stakeholder engagement and participation is at the heart of implementation, and the 2030 Agenda mandates the inclusion and involvement of all relevant stakeholders in achieving the SDGs. Countries reported on how they are working to ensure stakeholder participation in SDG-related decision-making processes, engagement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and inclusion in monitoring and reporting, including with preparation of the VNRs. There is also recognition that fostering awareness of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs among all stakeholders is essential for progress, and countries reported on their initiatives in this regard.

Means of implementation

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous countries

highlighted an urgent need for access to international financing to scale up the health response and address the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. Countries also reported on the availability and need for financial and non-financial resources, efforts to forge new partnerships, increase capacity building and further the contributions of science, technology and innovation to the achievement of the SDGs. Many reported on measures to strengthen domestic resource mobilization, improve domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection, and ensure that ODA commitments are met. Some stressed the critical importance of global and regional trade agreements and the international trading system.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

The 2020 VNRs add to the existing wealth of good practices and lessons learned that have been reported since 2016. Despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, progress can be observed on many fronts toward the SDGs, and many examples can be found

throughout this year's VNRs. Yet many challenges remain, as the pandemic continues to destabilize the world and threatens an increasing humanitarian and economic crisis for many countries and peoples. In addition, climate change and biodiversity loss continue to breach the limits of the Earth's natural systems, and accelerated consequences are becoming more evident each day with increases of natural disasters and the attendant human suffering they cause.

During the Decade of Action and Delivery for sustainable development, and in the second four-year cycle of the HLPF and its VNRs that begin this year, it is important that the means of collecting, measuring, disaggregating and analyzing all relevant data can be improved so that all targets can be measured. More importantly, however, is to combine this with a redoubled effort to build back better from the pandemic, to retain and bolster the political will to maintain the momentum already achieved, and to accelerate the actions necessary to achieve the shared vision of the 2030 Agenda and ensure its realization.

INTRODUCTION

The present report examines some of the main issues addressed in the fifth round of VNRs that took place during the 2020 HLPF under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which was convened entirely virtually for the first time due to the COVID-19 pandemic, from 7 to 16 July 2020. Despite the pandemic and its impacts, global interest in preparing a VNR remained high, and 47 countries prepared and virtually presented their VNRs this year, including 16 from Africa, 11 from Asia-Pacific, 11 from Europe, and nine from Latin America and the Caribbean. Twenty-six countries conducted their first VNR¹, 20 countries conducted their second VNR², and one country conducted its third VNR³ over the course of the HLPF, including on 10 July and from 13 to 16 July during the ministerial segment.

This year's VNRs synthesis report provides highlights of country progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals and its SDGs. As with past years, the report identifies examples, best practices, lessons learned and challenges from countries conducting reviews. It also addresses specific topics, including national ownership, stakeholder involvement, institutional mechanisms, incorporation of the SDGs into national development frameworks, means of implementation and partnerships. It also provides

¹ Austria, Barbados, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gambia, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Federated States of Micronesia, Mozambique, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Syrian Arab Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Zambia.

² Argentina, Armenia, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Honduras, India, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Samoa, Slovenia, and Uganda.

³ Benin.



an overview of how countries addressed each of the SDGs, and examines actions to implement the principle of leaving no one behind. While the synthesis aims to highlight practices from all reporting countries, it is not exhaustive; the examples included are illustrative and their selection does not imply that the 2020 VNRs do not contain other equally valid and useful examples of country practices. Background information and details concerning the mandate for the VNRs is contained in the 2016 Synthesis Report of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and it is not repeated in the present report.⁴

⁴ See UN DESA, 2016 Synthesis Report of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/126002016_VNR_Synthesis_Report.pdf

BRINGING SDGS INTO THE NATIONAL CONTEXT: ASSESSMENTS, STRATEGIES AND BUDGETS

This section briefly examines how countries are addressing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs in the context of their broad developmental and societal objectives and the steps that are being taken to create ownership. It also outlines different approaches that countries pursue to tap into the interlinkages among the SDGs and build on the co-benefits of some policy actions, while minimizing trade-offs. The section further notes some approaches that countries are taking to incorporate the SDGs into national development plans and strategies.

National context

Countries outlined, and in some cases detailed, ongoing processes and steps taken to align national development policies and plans with the 2030 Agenda. In some instances, countries have begun to take stock of initial implementation efforts. Overall, many countries described still being engaged in the process of integrating the 2030 Agenda into national policy frameworks, including at the sectoral and sub-national levels. Recognizing that the Agenda extends beyond government, many countries reported extensively on actions taken by other societal actors.

Countries referred to whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to help overcome inadequate coordination and resource constraints, showcasing ambitious efforts to integrate the 2030 Agenda in the work of public administrations at all levels, institutionalize stakeholder consultation, and foster multi-stakeholder partnerships (Bangladesh, Finland, Georgia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, North Macedonia). For example, Ecuador adopted a decree declaring the 2030 Agenda public policy of the national government and assigning to the

national secretariat for planning responsibility for aligning planning instruments with the Agenda, in coordination with public administration and different levels of government.

Some countries provided examples of legislation passed, which is of relevance to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mozambique). A few countries reported that their parliaments have resolved to support the implementation of the SDGs, through monitoring (Georgia) and checking that legislative outputs support the SDGs (Ecuador, Georgia, Nepal). In Finland, motions adopted by Parliament oblige the Government to take the 2030 Agenda as a guiding document when formulating its programme and to link the 2030 Agenda to all relevant policies and measures.

Some countries indicated the crucial role that civil society organizations (CSOs) and academic institutions play in fostering dialogue in the formulation, implementation, and review of sustainable development policies (Finland, Kenya). For example, the SDGs Kenya Forum is an inclusive platform for coordinated and structured civil society organizations' engagement with Government, citizens, the private sector, media, academia, and development partners. Some countries noted that uptake by civil society was strong, while engagement by the private sector was at an embryonic stage (Democratic Republic of Congo). The important role of civil society organizations in delivering services was also mentioned in a number of reports (Austria, Kenya, North Macedonia). Countries recognized that the achievement of the 2030 Agenda requires effective multi-stakeholder partnerships (Austria, Costa Rica, Finland, Nepal, Kenya). Costa Rica reported on a multi-stakeholder survey of signatories of the National Pact, designed to assess progress, identify good practices, challenges, lessons learned in the implementation the 2030 Agenda.

Countries are carrying out a range of activities and projects to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, including participation in initiatives such as the European Sustainable Development Week (Estonia), sustainability days highlighting actions to implement the 2030 Agenda (Austria), initiatives to reach youth (Finland) and in universities (Costa Rica). In the Gambia, advocacy and sensitization efforts have contributed to enhanced capacities and increased ownership of the SDGs, supporting the integration of the 2030 Agenda into the national development planning processes.

Countries reported on actions and initiatives taken by the private sector to advance implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Austria, Finland, Gambia, Kenya, Micronesia, Nigeria, Seychelles, Slovenia), often in the context of partnerships. A few countries noted the role of the national UN Global Compact networks in providing companies with tools for implementing the SDGs (Austria, Finland, Costa Rica). India underlined that the private sector can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs through innovative business models for developmental challenges, replication of good practices, influencing supply chains and participation in multi-stakeholder initiatives.

Some countries reported working with the UN to advance the implementation of the SDGs (Burundi, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nepal, North Macedonia, Uganda), including preparation of national development plans (Gambia, Kenya). In Kenya, UN support to implementation has addressed mainstreaming SDGs into the national and sub-national development plans, public institutions strategic plans, as well as advocacy and capacity building of key stakeholders and Parliament on the SDGs. A few countries referred to UNDG Mainstreaming Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) missions resulted in the development of SDG implementation road maps (Gambia) and the identification of accelerators (Ukraine).

Assessing the SDGs for national implementation, inter-linkages and trade-offs

Countries recognized that the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs provide a general framework to support the development of a coordinated and integrated approach towards sustainable development. In their approach to national implementation of the SDGs, some countries noted the benefit of integrated policy-making and implementation (Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of Congo, Seychelles), but overall there was little explicit consideration of trade-offs. Ecuador noted that the national planning system was oriented towards comprehensive policies that go beyond sectoral approaches and create synergies between different actors, with a view to the consideration of long-term impacts. The Gambia has in place a platform called the Planners Forum, which brings together central and local government planners to review planning and implementation of sector policies and programmes, with a view to promoting integrated policy formulation by addressing gaps in sector policies and promoting synergies among sector policies.

In the process of integration of the SDGs, several countries mapped the alignment of SDGs with national priorities (Costa Rica, Gambia, Georgia, Honduras, India). Some countries, reviewing the SDGs for national implementation, identified priority targets and indicators, and reported applying participatory approaches involving a range of stakeholders (Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo).

Some made reference to analytical approaches and tools, such as the Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA) tool (Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova) to evaluate the alignment between the national policy framework and the SDGs, including gaps and weaknesses within the national policy framework. In the Democratic Republic of Congo,

the outcomes of the assessment exercise informed the preparation of the national plan, among other things, identifying gaps in relation to the integration of gender equality and the empowerment of women, environmental management not included in the programmatic framework, and promoting inter-sectoral cooperation. Malawi used the iSDG model to arrive at a list of priority areas for investment, taking into account interlinkages and interactions between sectors.

SDGs in national development plans and strategies

Five years since its adoption, countries have significantly progressed with the integration and localization process of the 2030 Agenda. This is a continuous process, with a number of stages, including elaboration of indicators, integration into national development plans, sectoral strategies, and local government planning. The reports reflect an increased focus on implementation at the sub-national level, as well as the through sectoral plans and strategies.

Most countries noted that their national development plan or strategy was the main instrument for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. For instance, Burundi outlined the main elements of the national development plan and the key sectoral policies and strategies associated with the implementation of each SDG. Some countries indicated that mainstreaming was being carried out at the sectoral level, with ministries charged with integrating the SDGs in their sectoral strategies and programmes (Argentina, Austria, Estonia, Russian Federation). Countries outlined integration efforts underway at the sub-national level (Benin, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Estonia, Ecuador, Honduras, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Peru, Uzbekistan). For instance, Ecuador has developed guidelines and procedures for reflecting the 2030 Agenda in sub-national, territorial plans.



Samoa

Some countries stated that the development plans were the product of consultative processes (Burundi, Comoros, Seychelles, Uganda), including citizen participation through a public consultation (Costa Rica, Estonia), and on the basis of legislation or guidelines for engagement (Ecuador, Estonia). Reference was also made to the use of integrated modelling tools in the development of national plans (Nigeria, Uganda). In Costa Rica, the ministry responsible for planning collaborated with the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank, statistics office, and academic institutions, to develop scenarios and estimate data for the preparation of goals in the national development plan.

Some countries detailed various steps taken to advance implementation of the SDGs through national policy frameworks, including through guidance to ministries and departments on the integration of the SDGs (Seychelles) and preparation of SDG action plans by ministries (Bangladesh). In Estonia the regulation on the preparation of strategic development plans stipulates that the preparation of sectoral development plans must be based, among other things, on the SDGs. Nepal referred to its SDGs Localization Guidelines, which spell

out baselines, targets and implementation and financing strategies for each SDG. Finland stated that report of the National Audit Office found that, in a number of ministries, sustainable development had become the basis for their strategy or a strategic objective; however, the connection between sustainable development and the content of policy preparation in individual Ministries was found to be missing or limited.

Financing and budgets

National budgets are the link between countries' sustainable development objectives, plans and strategies and their public spending and overall outcomes. Increasingly, Member States are mapping their budgets to the SDGs (Argentina, Bangladesh, Burundi, Gambia, Samoa); undertaking institutional reforms and legislative changes in support of more effective planning and budgeting processes (Armenia, Zambia); and implementing stronger budgetary analysis and coordination mechanisms into SDG implementation plans across Ministries (Argentina, Benin, Seychelles, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda). Gender-responsive budgeting was highlighted as an effective method for integrating the SDGs into national budgets (Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh). Despite varied efforts to integrate sustainable development into budget processes, it is not yet universally prioritized, and challenges—including capacity constraints—remain.

Countries identified key priorities for strengthening national capacities for more effective budgeting and financial planning for the SDGs. Countries requested specific methodologies and tools as key ingredients for building these capacities. Given the scale of resources needed and complexity of financing, the ability to devise proper financing plans for the SDGs was flagged as an important next step in integrated planning and budgeting by some countries (Bangladesh, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo). The integrated national financing frameworks (INFFs) were cited as a useful advance

in this regard. Strengthening the underlying public financial management system provides the necessary foundation for improved integration of SDGs into national budgets (Burundi). Medium-term budgetary forecasting beyond the annual budget cycle toward fiscal policy and resource mobilization efforts over a longer-term time horizon was identified as a priority (Benin, Bulgaria). Further, building municipal budget and planning capacities were critical, particularly in countries where local and regional governments play important roles in implementing the SDGs (Costa Rica, Georgia, Uganda). The availability, reliability and transparency of data, including administrative data across ministries and public institutions related to SDG plans and budgets, as well as related statistical capacities were also identified as priorities (Benin, Slovenia, Zambia).

Many countries expressed deep concern about the effect of COVID-19 on national budgets, with some reporting that their initial response packages amounted to significant proportions of their annual budgets. Additionally, some countries have faced challenges when redirecting existing expenditures towards emergency responses. The strain on budgets and related processes provoked by the pandemic underline the need for building better national systems and capacities for SDG-related budgeting (Benin, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of Congo).

Effect of COVID-19 on SDG implementation: socioeconomic and environmental impacts

Most countries made reference to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with small, vulnerable, conflict-affected, highly indebted and tourism-dependent states among the hardest hit. Most countries expressed their concern that the pandemic will adversely impact progress in implementation of SDGs and disrupt development efforts in the short term and later. Countries also described health measures undertaken to combat the pandemic such

as strengthening public health systems, establishing testing and quarantine centers, or building modular hospitals.

Many underlined the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and measures undertaken in this regard. Those included assistance or stimulus packages, direct cash transfer to the most vulnerable, providing additional support to retirees, increasing unemployment benefits, reducing taxes for some economic sectors especially impacted by the pandemic, deferring payment of loans, and giving loans to SMEs (Armenia, Argentina, India, Barbados, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Slovenia, Morocco). Some countries emphasized the overall impact of the pandemic and how already existing structural obstacles and gaps will be further negatively aggravated (Armenia, Bangladesh, Estonia, Liberia, Libya, Zambia). Some described impacts on specific and key sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and transportation (Gambia, Samoa, Barbados, Seychelles, Nepal). Some countries noted that national budgets had been revised, in response to the crisis, with spending priorities shifting towards health care, wage retention, job security for employees, and social protection (Seychelles, Barbados).

Some countries highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on children, resulting from the widening of inequalities between the urban and rural, rich and poor and reduced children access to quality education. Countries warned that the effects of the pandemic on children are likely to be self-reinforcing and cumulative, leading to lifelong challenges in health, education and secure income (Nigeria, Mozambique). Some countries described the establishment of new mechanisms, such as national committees, to combat the pandemic and stressed the need for a coordinated approach and cooperation by all stakeholders in the society (Slovenia, Kenya).

Some countries emphasized lessons learned from the pandemic, as well as potential opportunities for rebuilding

better. In this regard, reference was made to extending the implementation of e-governance, revisiting existing business models and entrenching a culture of electronic delivery of services, including e-learning, e-health care, e-commerce, and e-banking, as well generating youth-centered employment opportunities in ICTs (India, Zambia, Slovenia). Bangladesh referred to addressing existing inequities, exclusion, discrimination, and unemployment during the post-pandemic recovery, and ensuring that

everyone in society receives fair opportunities. Austria noted the potential to align efforts to kick-start economic recovery and overcome the health crisis with the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Nigeria highlighted the importance of protecting the public in times of such pandemics by improving hygiene and prioritizing universal access to clean water, sanitation and essential services to the most vulnerable populations.

INSTITUTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA

This section examines institutional arrangements for the implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda, including mechanisms for localization of SDG implementation and the involvement of Parliaments.

The 2020 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) revealed a variety of national institutional arrangements for the implementation of the SDGs, which suggests that no single institutional model is intrinsically more conducive to SDG implementation than another. Overall, countries seem to choose the institutional arrangement that is suited to their particular needs and circumstances. That said, there are also some commonalities in countries' institutional arrangements.

Mechanisms for decision-making and coordination on the 2030 Agenda implementation

In view of the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda, governments need to work across multiple policy areas and implement whole-of-government approaches to SDG implementation. The creation of inter-ministerial structures is a way to mobilize the various parts of the government around the SDGs and facilitate coherent and coordinated efforts.

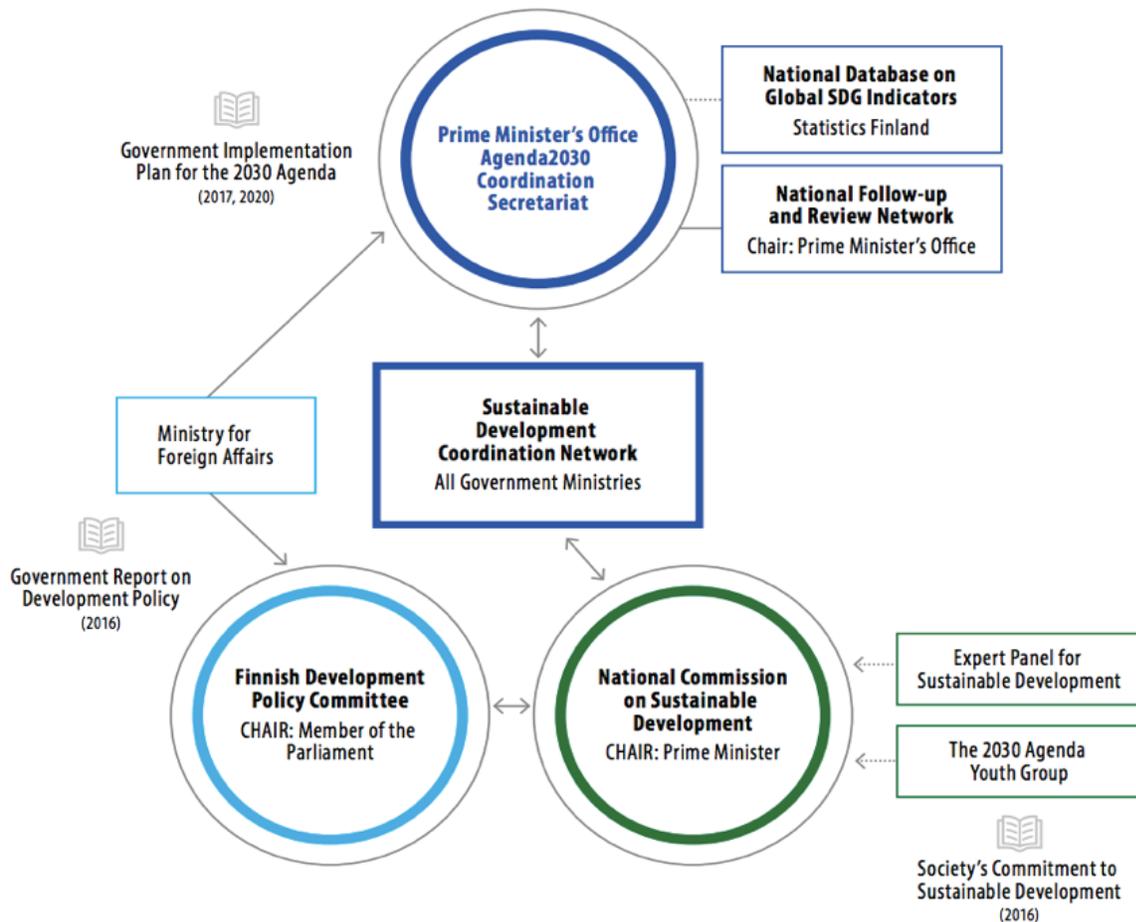
A substantial number of inter-ministerial committees and commissions have been created, demonstrating countries' interest in cross-sectoral collaboration and policy integration (Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Burundi, Costa Rica, Georgia, Honduras, Kyrgyz Republic, Libya, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Panama, Republic of Moldova, Solomon Islands, Uganda, Ukraine, Zambia). For instance, in Argentina, the National

Inter-institutional Commission of Implementation and Follow-up of the SDGs (CNIIS-ODS) has been formed, made up of 24 ministries and national public administrations. Similarly, Bangladesh formed an inter-ministerial SDGs Implementation and Review Committee comprised of Secretaries from 20 Ministries, and with the General Economics Division (GED) of the Bangladesh Planning Commission serving as its secretariat. Libya established a Sustainable Development Committee. The Committee includes among its members representatives from the relevant sectors and authorities. The Committee was assigned a set of tasks, most important of which is the harmonization and the integration of the SDGs into national strategies and plans through coordination with

various sectors.

Some of these inter-ministerial committees and commissions are chaired or overseen by the Head of State or Government (Bangladesh, Kyrgyz Republic, Morocco, Nepal, Republic of Moldova, Uganda). The engagement of the highest level of government can play a critical role in advancing the SDG implementation. In Morocco, following the recommendation of the Court of Accounts which carried out an assessment of the preparedness of the Government of Morocco for the implementation of the SDGs, the Government has set up a National Commission on Sustainable Development with the participation of the various ministerial departments and the High Commission for Planning. The Commission is headed by

Figure 1: Finland's National 2030 Agenda architecture (from Finland's VNR Report, page 91)



the Head of Government. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the Coordination Committee, which is tasked with working on implementation and monitoring of the SDGs, is chaired by the Head of Government.

On the other hand, some countries utilized existing institutional structures for SDG implementation (Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, North Macedonia, Slovenia). For instance, in Estonia, the Government Office coordinates sustainable development issues and the institutional framework for SDG implementation. Finland already has a well-established institutional framework for sustainable development, including the National Commission on Sustainable Development, which is chaired by the Prime Minister (see figure 1).

In particular, some of the countries that utilized existing institutional structures for SDG implementation have entrusted a specific ministry to advance SDG implementation (India, Kenya, Liberia, Niger, Papua New Guinea, Seychelles, Trinidad and Tobago). In India, it is NITI Aayog, which replaced the country's Planning Commission. In Niger, the Ministry of Planning ensures the coordination of the SDGs. In particular, an SDG monitoring division created within the Ministry of Planning is specifically responsible for SDG monitoring, evaluation and reporting. In Liberia, the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning was chosen to serve as the lead and coordinating institution for the domestication of the 2030 Agenda. In the case of the Russian Federation, sectoral government bodies carry out the implementation of the SDGs and their respective targets within the framework of the national development policy. Overall, regardless of which ministries coordinate SDG implementation, it is important that they have sufficient clout with the capacity and resources to spearhead SDG implementation in a coherent and integrated way.

Some governments have put in place multi-stakeholder

engagement mechanisms (Bangladesh, Kenya, Samoa). For instance, the Government of Bangladesh through forming a SDGs Implementation Sub-committee by the NGO Affairs Bureau has taken the initiative to collaborate with NGOs and make their contribution visible and accountable. In Kenya, the State Department for Planning has a comprehensive and robust collaboration and engagement mechanism with stakeholders in implementing and monitoring SDGs. (More examples of multi-stakeholder engagement can be found in Chapter IX).

In some countries (Armenia, Estonia, Finland, Gambia, Georgia, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Mozambique), key coordinating bodies, including inter-ministerial committees, are of the multi-stakeholder type. In Armenia, a Council on the Sustainable Development Goals with the participation of NGOs was established in 2015, which aimed to ensure broad public participation in the national development programmes for SDG implementation. In Georgia, the Sustainable Development Goals Inter-Agency Council engages stakeholders from the public, civil, international, academic and private sectors in its working groups. In Kenya, the multi-stakeholder Inter-Agency Technical Committee which was set up in 2016 under the chairmanship of the government to coordinate SDGs activities is now co-chaired by government, private sector and CSOs.

Coordinating mechanisms at multiple levels of government, including local government

The implementation of the SDGs relies on the concrete application of programmes and policies at the local level. Equally important is the effective relationship and vertical integration between national and local governments.

In some countries, local governments integrated the 2030 Agenda into local planning, encouraging formulation in alignment with national implementation strategies. For example, Burundi undertook the SDG localization exercise



by initiating the process of integrating the SDGs into municipal community development plans.

Argentina, Austria, Benin, Bulgaria, Comoros, Costa Rica, Estonia, Finland, Gambia, Honduras, India, Kenya, Micronesia, Morocco, Nepal, Panama, and Uganda registered the contribution of local authorities to the implementation and follow up of the 2030 Agenda. Argentina's report includes a full chapter on the process of localization of the SDGs while Austria presented several examples of engagement in regions and municipalities and Finland listed municipalities committed to drafting voluntary local reviews of SDG implementation. In India, all States and Union Territories (UTs) have created institutional structures and tasked nodal departments for SDGs implementation. In Nepal, the Steering Committee for the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs headed by the Prime Minister is composed of not only the National Planning Commission, the Foreign Minister and the Finance Minister, but also Chief Ministers of all provinces, presidents of associations of municipalities and district coordination committees as members.

Some countries also created new coordination mechanisms at the local level (Austria, Bangladesh, Kenya, Micronesia). In Austria, the States have put SDG Focal Points in charge of coordinating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This step enables structured communication and promotes

collaboration with the Federal Ministries and stakeholders. Micronesia established an SDG Working Group, which draws from Departments and associated agencies within the government soliciting input from civil society actors and the chambers of commerce. A critical component of this SDG Working Group is the establishment of States Focal Points for effective implementation and reporting. In Kenya, through collaboration with the Council of Governors, the County governments have been encouraged to create the County SDGs coordination units to mirror the SDGs Coordination Directorate at the national level.

Local governments play a particularly important role in federal countries such as India. Indian States and districts drive the adoption of the SDGs and targets, determine the local means of implementation, and design the monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Involvement of Parliaments

The involvement of parliaments in SDG implementation has been variable across countries presenting VNRs in 2020.

Several countries reported that they had organized awareness-raising sessions, briefings, hearings, consultations and capacity building workshops on the SDGs for parliamentarians (Comoros, Morocco, Finland, Nepal, Samoa, Solomon Islands). In Comoros, information and awareness-raising meetings were organized at the national assembly. Parliament was also involved in SDG implementation in Morocco, particularly through organization of seminars. In Finland, the Committee for the Future, which is leading the follow-up of Government's work on the 2030 Agenda implementation in Parliament, organized several open hearings on the 2030 Agenda.

In some countries, Parliaments' representatives are members of the SDG coordination entities (Benin, Gambia, Kyrgyz Republic, Mozambique). For example,

in Benin, along with members of government and other stakeholders, the Parliament is represented in the steering committee, which is headed by the Minister of planning and development.

Parliaments have also taken the initiative to follow up on the 2030 Agenda through new institutional mechanisms (Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Zambia). The Kenya Parliamentary Caucus on SDGs and Business was formed in 2017 to promote sustainable development through legislation, resource mobilization, oversight and partnerships. In Malawi, the Parliamentary Committee on SDGs constantly engages with government to ensure effective implementation of the SDGs. In Nigeria, there are two Standing Committees at the National Assembly, namely, the Senate Committee on SDGs and the House of Representatives Committee on SDGs. These two Committees appropriate money for the SDGs and carry out parliamentary oversight on the implementation of SDGs-related projects in Nigeria.

Furthermore and notably, the Ugandan Parliament assesses the performance of the national budget using compliance tools. One example is the Certificate of Compliance, which gauges the country's commitment to achieving the second National Development Plan and the 2030 Agenda through



budget interventions and allocations. This has resulted in the level of compliance of ministerial budgets to the SDGs going up from 54 per cent in 2017-18 to 60 per cent in 2018-19.

Challenges

While countries have established institutional arrangements for implementation of the SDGs, some countries are reporting challenges in making these arrangements as effective as possible.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the ownership of 2030 Agenda began with the establishment of a framework for monitoring and evaluating the SDGs. This led in 2016 to the creation, within the Ministry of Planning, of the Congolese Observatory of Sustainable Development, in order to effectively manage the SDG implementation process. However, their VNR notes that this structure experiences difficulties in achieving its objectives, in particular because of the limited means at its disposal and problems with statistics. Different actors often undertake actions in isolation without coordination. Mozambique reported that the coordination of cross-cutting policies is one of the areas where the country faces challenges in providing coherent and effective responses. Similarly, Kenya stated that weak institutional coordination presents the key challenge to the implementation of the SDGs.

It is also noteworthy that many reviews describe in detail institutional arrangements for SDG implementation, but they provide little information on the actual impact that these arrangements have had on overall policies and SDG implementation. In this regard, systematic assessment of the effectiveness of institutional arrangements, including through auditing, may prove useful. In Liberia, a comprehensive audit by the country's General Auditing Commission was conducted to assess the government's preparedness to implement the 2030 Agenda. In particular,

the audit assessed coordination and institutional arrangements in place for the implementation of the SDGs.

Despite broad recognition of the importance of localizing the SDGs, the specific roles that local authorities can and

should play and the capacities and resources they require have received insufficient consideration to date. Also, while countries have taken steps to strengthen the roles and engagement of local governments, the results have been mixed. For instance, for Nepal, localization of SDGs continues to present one of the prominent challenges.

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

This section provides an overview of how countries are addressing the 2030 Agenda key principle of “leaving no one behind”. Many countries included dedicated sections on the topic in their reviews, while others provided references to ways in which the principle is upheld when discussing progress on the implementation of specific SDGs. Overall, there are two main ways in which countries are working to ensure that no one is left behind: the focus on universal policies and programmes that ensure basic services for all, and the provision of targeted policies and measures to support specific vulnerable groups.

The majority of reporting countries (Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Comoros, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of Congo, Finland, Gambia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, Moldova, Samoa, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, Zambia, Panama) dedicated a specific section on the principle of leaving no one behind (LNOB) and its meaning in their national context. In addition, Austria highlighted the principle as one of its main focus areas throughout its report, and both Libya and Trinidad and Tobago highlighted actions to ensure its fulfillment under each SDG reviewed. Georgia noted that through the VNR process, leaving no one behind was now identified as one of the emerging issues to be addressed.

Several countries stressed the need to address the root causes of inequality and exclusion and referred to overarching analysis and research to ensure that no one is left behind. For example, Kyrgyz Republic conducted a consultative assessment for its VNR with focus on the intersectionality

of four key elements: discrimination; geography; social-economic status and life-death indicators; and fragility, multiple reinforcing disadvantages and deprivations. The assessment also included environmental and security fragilities that often intersect with poverty and inequality. North Macedonia reported on its on-going LNOB analysis being carried out which is expected to inform new policy development.

Many VNRs included assessments of those that are considered at risk of being left behind, identifying groups such as women, children, refugees, internally displaced persons, migrants, ethnic minorities, LGBTI, stateless persons, persons with disabilities, the elderly, populations affected by conflict, people suffering from the impacts of natural disasters and health emergencies, widows and widowers, orphans, trafficked and street children, child soldiers, deportees, sex workers, drug users, the mentally ill, prison inmates, ex-convicts, small farmers, and people working in informal sectors.

Many countries highlighted a human rights-based approach to development and SDG implementation, and several countries (Gambia, India, Uganda, Mozambique) referred to their constitution as the basis for equal treatment for all. Others referred to numerous laws and decrees that aim at ensuring social inclusion, non-discrimination and upholding of human rights. In Argentina, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights organized a multi-stakeholder meeting with the United Nations in order to identify good public policy practices that contribute to SDGs 5, 10, 16 and 17 from a perspective of human rights. Several countries (Argentina, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia) also referred to the findings of their Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR) under the Human Rights Council.

Efforts have also been made to establish dedicated institutional entities for inclusion and to reflect this aim in budgets. Democratic Republic of Congo has established

a Ministry in charge of People living with Disabilities and other vulnerable groups. In Nepal, constitutional commissions on various disadvantaged and marginalized groups have been established to provide institutional and focused policy advice, conduct monitoring and suggest compliance of the implementation of policies, while in Kenya, the National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) prioritizes and champions the rights of persons with disabilities. Uganda reported that the Budget Act, which takes gender and equity issues into consideration, guides the national budget process.

Many countries referred to LNOB as a cross-cutting principle in their strategies, programmes and plans. Most often the principle of LNOB was reflected through the lens of social protection, as targeted actions to support the most vulnerable or as universal services with equal treatment. Kenya described social protection as the cornerstone of a government response to addressing the needs of those left behind.

The existing inequalities and actions targeted specifically to support the most vulnerable were highlighted by the majority of reporting countries in relation to their implementation of specific goals, with particular focus given to SDG 1, which centers on poverty eradication. Numerous references were made to policies in the fields of food security and nutrition, health, education, access to electricity, water and sanitation, as well as housing. Countries also referred to integrated and multi-sectoral strategies to address the challenges faced by particular groups. At the same time, Finland stressed that when individual target groups are dealt with separately, it is easy to forget the holistic view. The most effective way to reduce inequality is to change the structures of society.

The need to ensure non-discrimination was reflected by some countries. According to a study produced by the Ministry of Justice of Finland, discrimination against



people who belong to more than one minority at once is even more frequent and more likely to be continuous. The importance of access to justice for all was highlighted (Comoros, North Macedonia, Ukraine), and references were made to the need to strengthen the capacities of public service providers when working with marginalized groups. Ukraine and India reported on measures to enhance access to free legal assistance.

Countries also reflected on attitudes and prejudices towards the most vulnerable (Finland, Nepal, Liberia). The need to tackle hate speech and hate crimes was stressed (Finland, Georgia, North Macedonia).

The following sections elaborate on efforts to uphold this principle, including actions toward supporting specific groups of those in danger of being left behind. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the most vulnerable are addressed in a separate section.

Addressing geographical inequalities

Countries reported on the importance of ensuring that no region is left behind. The differences between the wellbeing of urban and rural populations were often highlighted (Bangladesh, Ecuador, Federated States of Micronesia, Finland, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Nigeria, Zambia), with hard to reach and areas suffering from lack of basic services. Some countries have taken action to address the rural-urban divide.

In Comoros, to bring justice closer to litigants, mobile court hearings aim at providing access to justice for all. Georgia has increased accessibility to vocational education, with at least one training provider in each region. Benin and Burundi reported actions to ensure rural electrification, including through off-grid electricity.

Several countries (Bulgaria, Kenya, Nepal) also referred to additional provisions to local governments or service providers in disadvantaged areas. In Bulgaria, health care facilities and general practitioners in remote areas receive annual subsidies. In Nepal, federal grants are provided to support less-developed areas.

ICT was discussed as both a divider and as a tool for closing gaps (Bangladesh, Morocco, Niger). Morocco and Niger reported that considerable disparities in access to ICT persist between rural and urban areas. At the same time, the Central Bank of Bangladesh has made great progress in enhancing financial inclusion of rural populations through mobile financial services.

Hearing everyone's voices

While almost all countries reported on the importance of including all relevant stakeholders in their SDG implementation, some countries particularly highlighted their policies to ensure that the most vulnerable are heard. For example, Uganda noted the importance of empowering the most vulnerable through civic engagement and voice as one of its leading principles when ensuring that no one is left behind.

Institutional arrangements have been made to ensure participation. In Nepal for example, due to a constitutional provision, there is a strong representation of women and all marginalized groups in the Federal Parliament, as well as at the provincial and local governments and legislative bodies. The Austrian government has created the dialogue forum 'Leaving no one behind' in which more than 400 stakeholders have discussed and proposed actions towards

inclusive SDG implementation. In Kenya, the National Council for Persons with Disability champions the rights of people living with disabilities through their registration and provision of services.

In other countries, representatives of specific groups such as Roma (Bulgaria) have been included in more general stakeholder participation mechanisms and forums, while some reported having dialogues with specific groups on policies that concern them, such as children impacted by disasters (Mozambique) and LGBTI (Malawi).

Burundi, India, Nigeria, Seychelles, Slovenia, Zambia, also reported on inclusion of specific vulnerable groups in their VNRs preparations, or in national development plans or strategies (Samoa, Solomon Islands, Ukraine).

Comoros and Uganda also stressed the importance of providing the marginalized requisite information for them to meaningfully engage, in Comoros through “caravans of awareness” and in Uganda through “listening and solutions sessions” between community members and decision makers. In Costa Rica, the SDG Technical Secretariat provides public policy advice in its “Guide for the Preparation of Public Policies” on citizen participation.

Role of non-governmental actors

The crucial role of non-governmental actors, both in supporting implementation of action directed towards ensuring that leaving no one behind as well as in advocating and providing normative support to policy development and social change was stressed in some VNRs. Several countries reported on the actions of non-governmental actors in implementing specific SDGs under their sections on Goals.

Countries such as Austria, Estonia, Finland, Honduras, Moldova, Nepal, Panama, Solomon Islands, and Trinidad and Tobago reported on actions taken by the non-governmental actors. For example, in Malawi, community based drop-in centers for LGBTI people offer a parallel

distribution channel to the public sector supply chain system, especially for those who could be stigmatized or face discrimination at public health facilities. In Trinidad and Tobago, the Tobago Institute of Literacy has been providing learning support to vulnerable groups in Tobago for the last 25 years.

As noted by Comoros, non-governmental actors can also fill the gaps and weaknesses of public authorities to educate, raise awareness and mobilize populations against injustices and abuse of vulnerable groups. Comoros and Finland also stressed the capacity of civil society organizations to reach target groups that would be difficult to reach through other channels.

Regarding policy support and normative work, Liberia highlighted the contribution of civil society organizations on the establishment of a temporary and partial ban on the practice of female genital mutilation. In Uganda, non-governmental actors support data collection to support the Orphans and Vulnerable Children programme. Austria stressed the multi-stakeholder approach in ensuring decent work and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Stakeholder engagement is covered in more detail in chapter IX.

Need for disaggregated data

As noted by Morocco, the inclusion of those left behind begins with their identification and analysis of their demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Numerous countries (Argentina, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Gambia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, Moldova, Mozambique, Nepal, Panama, Samoa, Seychelles, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, Ukraine, Zambia) stressed the importance of and challenges with acquiring disaggregated data to support their policies. The importance of utilizing disaggregated data to unveil those suffering from multiple deprivations was also highlighted.

States have taken concerted actions to fill the gaps. Bulgaria is implementing a project titled “Novel Approaches to Generating Data on Hard-to-reach Populations at Risk of Violation of Their Rights” to find innovative methods for data collection, and Kenya’s National Bureau of Statistics is collaborating with the National Commission on Human Rights to implement Human Rights Based Approach to Data (HRBAD) collection. In Uganda, over 30 ministries, departments and agencies and 84 Higher Local Governments (HLGs) have been trained in the collection, usage and dissemination of gender statistics. Niger noted that some of its national household surveys now cover persons with disabilities and refugees.

As noted by Mozambique, much information and analysis is already generated but the work is not sufficiently coordinated among civil society organizations, research institutions, academic institutions and the government. India also stressed the need for ensuring integrity, coherence, comprehensive coverage, and interoperability of existing data sets to analyze overlapping vulnerabilities.

At the same time, issues related to data use and ethics were also referred to. In Finland, disaggregation on the grounds of race, ethnic minority grouping, indigenous status and disabilities is currently void from official statistics for ethical reasons. It has been considered inappropriate to pinpoint minority groups in statistics compiled for the needs of an equal and democratic society.

Issues related to data and monitoring are covered in more detail in chapter VII.

Upholding the principle in international development cooperation

The majority of countries outlined approaches to addressing the principle of leaving no one behind through strategies to international development cooperation. For example, Finland noted that its sustainable development policies must reduce inequality according to the LNOB

principle and strengthen the evaluation of human rights impacts of all foreign policy. Estonia aimed to contribute more development cooperation funds to vulnerable countries in areas where it has clear value to offer. Austria committed to enhancing its commitment to LNOB in its development cooperation activities. Brunei noted that solidarity, including with countries in the region, propelled development cooperation policies. Argentina emphasized the importance of South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) as a bridge in the diversity of development paradigms and actors, noting that it will place greater emphasis on the principle of reciprocity and SDG focus in its SSTC partnerships. Costa Rica underscored that its approach to SSTC was framed by the principle of leaving no one behind, through equity, inclusion and sustainability.

Measures targeted at specific groups

Children

The importance of ensuring that children are not left behind was stressed by many through thematic programmes and initiatives, such as those on health, education, food security and nutrition, and poverty reduction, as well as through targeted efforts to support children who are potentially particularly vulnerable. Several countries noted the high prevalence of child poverty and its multidimensional impacts.

Numerous actions such as provision of additional food supplies, scholarships, payment of school fees, transportation allowances, school supplies, school feeding programmes, free pre-school, and direct cash transfers were raised.

Austria, Costa Rica and Uganda referred to their actions to abide by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with Austria including a mapping of the rights reflected in the SDGs in their VNR report. Actions to tackle violence against children were also highlighted (Austria, Benin, Samoa) as were the challenges related to child labor (India, Samoa) and trafficking (Liberia).

Some countries mentioned the active participation of children (Armenia, Austria, India, Mozambique). India highlighted the need for substantive child participation in policy groups and decision-making bodies involved in building child friendly physical and social infrastructure and has made mandatory the formation of children's committees under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme. For the Mozambique VNR, civil society organizations conducted a survey of children affected by natural disasters, asking about their experiences and recommendations. In Slovenia, a project encourages schoolchildren or pre-school children to walk or cycle to kindergarten or school.

Youth

References were made to youth in 45 VNRs. The majority of countries see young people as critical to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In particular, countries including Finland, Liberia, Malawi, North Macedonia and Papua New Guinea recognize the unique contribution of youth to the peace and security agenda, while Austria, Brunei Darussalam, Estonia, Finland, Malawi, Papua New Guinea and Slovenia noted youth impact on the climate change agenda. Several countries, including



Malawi, North Macedonia, Uganda and Ukraine, actively consulted youth in their VNR preparation.

Various strategies were implemented to address youth unemployment and high rates of youth NEET (not in employment, education or training), including increasing the synergies between skills development and labour market needs. Argentina, Barbados, Georgia, India, Liberia, Malawi, Nigeria, Panama and Samoa have invested in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) interventions. Others countries have enhanced STEM education and digital skills (Austria, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Estonia, India, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria and Slovenia). A large number of countries increased support for young entrepreneurs, including Bangladesh, Barbados, Benin, Burundi, Estonia, Georgia, Honduras, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Morocco, Moldova, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Samoa and Slovenia. Countries such as Benin, Brunei Darussalam, Morocco and Samoa implemented initiatives to generate green jobs for young people.

The health of young people, including mental health and sexual and reproductive health, was also a priority for many countries such as Austria, Bangladesh, Burundi, the Gambia, India, North Macedonia and Moldova. Austria, Benin, Comoros, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Gambia, Morocco, and Panama underscored the issue of violence against children and youth. Countries reported initiatives seeking to ensure respect for young people's human rights or aiming to advance gender equality with and for youth. Several countries implemented initiatives aiming to provide young people with affordable housing, while others worked on ensuring that young people have access to social protection. The role of young people in rural development was also the focus of several interventions. A few countries developed initiatives to address mass youth migration.

Several countries noted the lack of age-disaggregated

data has hindering targeted interventions supporting youth development. Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia and Finland highlighted the impact of their participation in the UN Youth Delegates Programme run by UN DESA.

Women and girls

In addition to reflecting on their efforts to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, countries also reported on their challenges and actions to support most vulnerable and marginalized women and girls. For example, India noted that while many schemes address nutrition and health related challenges pertaining to pregnant women, lactating mothers, adolescent girls and women in general; access to these services for elderly and single women, women living with HIV, female sex workers and other specific vulnerable groups is a cause for concern. Ukraine also noted the multiple deprivations of women and the prevalence of older women, single parents and large families among the poor.

Regarding specific policies, Austria reported on its systematic efforts in supporting women entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection in their integration into the labour market. In Democratic Republic of Congo, special efforts are made to ensure the safety of women with disabilities, while Bangladesh reported providing education stipends, adult allowances, maternal allowances, allowances for the widow, deserted and destitute women. Nigeria provides empowerment programmes for women's groups, especially older women and widows.

Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, India, Liberia, Moldova, and Samoa highlighted the problem of violence against women. Bulgaria reported on its Alliance for Protection Against Gender-Based Violence, an association of organizations from across the country working professionally to prevent and protect against all forms of gender-based violence by providing psychological, legal, and social support. The Alliance pays special attention to vulnerable groups

of women and girls from ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, women seeking and in the process of international protection. In Liberia, a National Psychosocial Training Manual was revised and will be used for training of social workers, mental health clinicians and community-based service providers to mitigate trauma, mental health and psychological issues caused by substance abuses, gender-based violence, and harmful traditional practices. India stressed the need for comprehensive policies for rehabilitation and reintegration of violence survivors as well as gender responsive urban policies and active technological interventions in public places and transport systems to ensure the safety of women.

Migrants

Several countries reported that migrants and their families are at risk of being left behind. In Finland, for example, many migrants are at higher risk of poverty when compared with the general population and even second-generation immigrants have lower learning outcomes than mainstream population.

Several countries, such as Armenia, Moldova and Seychelles reported challenges in the protection of migrant workers and actions to address them. In Moldova, many labour migrants are facing issues related to abuse and exploitative conditions in the recruitment process by the private employment agencies, which can charge exorbitant recruitment fees. Subsequently on starting their employment, many have no access to efficient complaint and resolution mechanisms, when they face exploitation and work accidents. Armenia reported carrying out reforms to strengthen work permit issuance system to ensure adequate migrant rights protection, prevention of trafficking and labor exploitation. Bangladesh highlighted the need to upgrade migrant workers skills to ensure higher earnings. India noted that a significant proportion of migrants are employed in the informal economy, making them more vulnerable.

Steps have been taken to ensure the equal treatment of migrants. According to Russian Federation, foreign citizens and stateless persons are endowed equal rights and obligations with the citizens of Russia, including in education. Morocco has revised its laws and regulations in order to allow migrants to access public services under the same conditions and on the same basis as Moroccans. Several countries reported on actions to ensure access to services related to health, education or legal services by migrants. Bulgaria, Estonia, and Russian Federation also reported on services to ensure integration of migrants, including through language training and awareness-raising of rights and services.

Persons with disabilities

References to persons with disabilities were made in 44 VNRs. Many reviews have engaged persons with disabilities in the process and a majority of countries have in place national policies, strategies, action plans, laws and programmes that aim to remove barriers for persons with disabilities, including through targeted social protection measures.

In many countries, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted persons with disabilities. Moldova and Trinidad and Tobago recognize that students with disabilities without access to technology are the most at risk of falling behind. Bulgaria has allocated 22.5 million EUR targeting older people and people with disabilities while ensuring the continuation of social services during the state of emergency. Samoa ensured sign language is provided in the Prime Minister's daily media programme.

Many reviews underline action to support inclusive education. Kyrgyzstan and North Macedonia introduced programmes that lay out methods for inclusive learning and teaching. Zambia introduced a quota system, whereby 10 percent of teacher recruitment is reserved for persons with disabilities. However, the adaptation of schools for

students with disabilities continues to remain a challenge for many countries.

Promoting employability and inclusion in the labour market is high in the priority agenda of many countries. Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Mozambique introduced measures to improve entrepreneurship skill sets. Seychelles made amendment to the Social Security Act to ensure that persons with disabilities do not lose all their benefits when they take up employment, and Estonia launched a programme to promote diversity in companies.

Many reviews highlighted ongoing challenges in data collection, with few countries managing only some SDG indicators to be disaggregated by disability. The Gambia, Kenya and Solomon Islands introduced questionnaires on disability status based on the Washington Group Short Set of Questions. Samoa introduced a disability monograph to document the extent of disabilities and the impact on people's lives, access to services and employment opportunities.

Persons with disabilities continue to experience discrimination. Benin, Comoros, the Gambia, Niger, North Macedonia and Slovenia are implementing measures to ban discrimination. Argentina, Finland, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine recognize that stronger measures are required to address multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities.

In addition, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Mozambique and the Russian Federation have established measures on accessibility to buildings. Georgia introduced the Public Service Hall, a One-Stop-Shop to deliver public services adapted for persons with disabilities. Benin, Ecuador and Panama took specific measures on early detection to prevent disability.

Older persons

References to older persons were made in 43 VNRs, either by identifying them as a vulnerable population among

other groups, or by engaging in discussions that focus on their specific needs, challenges and gains in different areas.

Where reviews discussed social protection systems, and in particular pensions, the situation of older persons was frequently examined in more detail. Several reviews recognized the challenges still faced by countries to ensure that social protection systems address the needs of all older persons, while others provided a view of recent policy reforms.

In Liberia, the majority of older persons do not have access to the pension scheme in the country, which is contributory, due to their engagement in the informal labour sector. In Papua New Guinea, traditional safety net systems have weakened and demands for a more coherent policy framework to social protection have risen. Estonia reports that a recent law amendment makes the pension system more flexible and links the retirement age to the average life expectancy from 2027 onwards.

In linking the need for adequate social protection to the prevention of poverty, several countries provide data that show high levels of poverty among households headed by older persons, as is the case in Kenya and Liberia.

Other sectors that are analyzed by some of the VNRs include access to healthcare, promotion of employment among older workers, long-term care, prevention of

violence and age-based discrimination, nutrition, transport, access to public spaces and to digital services.

Indigenous peoples

17 VNRs included references to indigenous peoples (Argentina, Bangladesh, Burundi, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, Honduras, India, Kenya, Federated States of Micronesia, Nepal, Panama, Peru, Samoa and Zambia). Indigenous peoples were most frequently highlighted in reviews of SDGs 4, 17, 15 and 1.

Bangladesh and Nepal noted the constraints faced by indigenous children and youth in accessing an education. Costa Rica has implemented 65 new programs for the study of indigenous languages and culture. Ecuador introduced a scholarship program to assist indigenous peoples to complete primary and secondary school, and to access university level studies. Finland made progress in the teaching of (and in) Sámi languages, including the option to study the languages at university (outside the Sámi homeland) as well as during early childhood education and care.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo created a national support fund for the development of indigenous peoples, recognizing the need for multi-stakeholder partnerships and including indigenous peoples at the forefront of project implementation. In Honduras, the Government's Alliance for the Development of the Honduran Mosquitia, proposed a framework of inclusive participation for cooperation and coordination and emphasizes the principle of "Leaving no one behind" by involving indigenous peoples in government interventions, dialogues and governance structures.

Bangladesh, Burundi, Honduras, India and Nepal noted the important role of indigenous peoples in protecting the environment. Burundi plans on involving indigenous peoples in the management of ecosystems. India's national





Brunei Darussalam

network of Biodiversity Management Committees has an 18 percent mandatory representation of indigenous peoples, which operationalizes the access and benefit-sharing provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Kenya noted that a sizeable proportion of the population suffers multidimensional poverty and exclusion from basic social and economic benefits and opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, with the highest rates in Turkana and Samburu indigenous communities, among others. To support indigenous peoples, Panama has developed an investment project for social integration, and poverty reduction within the framework of the Indigenous Peoples Development Plan, which encourages entrepreneurship among indigenous populations in their territories in order to minimize dependence on social assistance programs.

LGBTI

Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Estonia, Georgia, India, Malawi and Seychelles referred to specific initiatives to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex (LGBTI) people are not discriminated against or receive additional support in situations where they would otherwise face the risk of being left behind.

Countries reported on new or existing legislation that aim at prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Georgia, India, North Macedonia). North Macedonia noted the need to complement its National Strategy and amended laws with the development of the National Action Plan for LGBTI Rights. Ecuador reported that despite its National Agenda for Equality of Women and LGBTI Persons 2018-2021 and the progress on laws, additional inclusion and anti-discrimination policies are needed. Georgia and Malawi noted actions and aims to ensure that LGBTI people have equal and non-discriminated access to social and health services.

Several countries, such as Costa Rica and Georgia, also reported on actions taken to ensure that public officials are equipped to provide services and ensure non-discrimination of LGBTI people. In Georgia, to help enhance the effective investigation of hate-crimes, a specialized training module has been introduced for prosecutors and investigators.

India highlighted that multifarious social challenges including and not limited to discrimination and stigma will not only require interventions by the state but also active involvement of the civil society and markets. The role of non-governmental organizations was also highlighted by Estonia and Seychelles, where the creation of NGO LGBTI-Sey has helped to raise awareness of LGBTI rights in social and mass media, aiming at changing negative social norms.

Liberia reported on positive change in attitudes from the Liberian National Police and the Ministry of Health towards the LGBT population. At the same time, according to Moldova, while the level of social exclusion of minority groups is falling in general, LGBTI and persons living with HIV and AIDS still suffer from significant levels of exclusion.

COUNTRIES IN SPECIAL SITUATIONS

This section provides an overview of the VNR countries reporting this year that fall into the category of “countries in special situations”. These include the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries, small island developing States, countries in conflict or post-conflict situations, and African countries, as well as middle-income countries.

African countries, LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS

Out of the 47 countries presenting VNRs in 2020, 31 of these fall into one or more of the following categories: least developed country (LDC), landlocked developing country (LLDC), small island developing State (SIDS), or are from the Africa region (see table).

These groups of countries bear the heaviest burden of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic impacts. Although the number of cases may not currently be as high in these countries as in other parts of the world, they remain vulnerable in critically vital areas including health and social protection systems, financial resources and data, and dependence on international trade and finance. Accurate data is not yet available on how the global economic recession will cause a rise in poverty, but it is clear that existing vulnerabilities are exacerbated by external economic factors, and in some countries the effects of the pandemic are further amplified by ongoing conflicts, political instability and the climate crisis.

Africa’s efforts to obtain universal regional reporting gained strength this year, with a total of 16 countries from the region presenting their VNRs (Benin, Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Seychelles, Uganda, and Zambia).

Table: African countries, LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS

2020 VNR countries	Africa	LDC	LLDC	SIDS
Argentina				
Armenia			X	
Austria				
Bangladesh		X		
Barbados				X
Benin	X	X		
Brunei Darussalam				
Bulgaria				
Burundi	X	X	X	
Comoros	X			X
Costa Rica				
Democratic Republic of the Congo	X	X		
Ecuador				
Estonia				
Finland				
Gambia	X	X		
Georgia				
Honduras				
India				
Kenya	X			
Kyrgyz Republic			X	
Liberia	X	X		
Libya	X			
Malawi	X	X	X	
Federated States of Micronesia				X
Morocco	X			
Mozambique	X	X		
Nepal		X	X	
Niger	X	X	X	
Nigeria	X			
North Macedonia			X	
Panama				
Papua New Guinea				X
Peru				
Republic of Moldova			X	
Russian Federation				
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines				X
Samoa				X
Seychelles	X			X
Slovenia				
Solomon Islands		X		X
Syrian Arab Republic				
Trinidad and Tobago				X
Uganda	X	X	X	
Ukraine				
Uzbekistan			X	
Zambia	X	X	X	

Eleven of these countries (Benin, Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Uganda, and Zambia) are considered LDCs, and five of the LDCs are also LLDCs (Burundi, Malawi, Niger, Uganda and Zambia). Comoros and Seychelles are also SIDS. Kenya, Libya, Morocco and Nigeria are the only African countries that do not fall into any of these categories, although they are developing countries.

A total of 14 LDC countries presented VNRs this year; along with the 11 LDCs from the Africa region, Bangladesh, Nepal and Solomon Islands also conducted VNRs in 2020. Eleven LLDCs from three different regions—Africa, Asia and Europe—prepared a VNR (Armenia, Burundi, Kyrgyz Republic, Niger, Malawi, Nepal, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Zambia). Six of these countries (Burundi, Malawi, Nepal, Niger, Uganda and Zambia) are also LDCs.

From the group of 2020 VNRs there are also nine SIDS countries (Barbados, Comoros, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Trinidad and Tobago). Comoros and Solomon Islands are also LDCs.

Some countries highlighted progress in areas such as reduction of poverty (Bangladesh, Nepal, Niger, Solomon Islands, Uganda, Zambia), although the challenges of providing basic services and infrastructure to remote rural populations were also presented as challenges (Bangladesh, Benin, Comoros, Malawi, Nepal). Landlocked developing countries often focused on actions in their priority areas of transit policy issues, infrastructure development and maintenance, international trade and trade facilitation, international support measures, and implementation and review.

Many countries in special situations highlighted progress in areas such as strengthening institutions for

SDG implementation, including for promoting justice (Bangladesh, Comoros, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, and Uganda), and combatting corruption (Armenia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Comoros, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, Trinidad and Tobago, and Zambia). Armenia, for example, has been successful in implementing “a wide range of reforms to ensure full and unimpeded realization of civil and political rights, including rule of law, independent judiciary, campaign against corruption and strengthening the democratic institutions” since the democratic transformation manifested by its peaceful Velvet Revolution in 2018.

Fragile countries, and countries in conflict and post-conflict situations

Among the 2020 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) countries, eight countries described challenges to peace and stability, as well as to current and past conflicts that are preventing progress in sustainable development. A common message in these reports was the aspiration for more peaceful and inclusive societies that guarantee justice for all and build effective, accountable, and stronger institutions at all levels as a condition for delivering the SDGs.

Libya underscored that the most important challenge it faced in achieving the SDGs was political instability and the fragility of the security situation, as well as illegal immigration and the numbers of displaced people. Instability included challenges in the political system and the threats to the peaceful transfer of power, which all contributed to the conflict and violence that are a threat to achieving the SDGs in the country.

Nigeria focused on the enabling environment of peace and security (SDG-16) as a high priority for achieving the SDGs. The conflict created by Boko Haram in the north-east had led to 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), and thwarted efforts to collect data on the current



state of development and peacebuilding interventions, in addition to efforts to extend basic services to the population living in the three most affected states. The rising levels of insecurity and vulnerability within this humanitarian and development context had signaled peacebuilding and a reduction of conflict as of paramount importance to bringing greater stability.

In Papua New Guinea, the unique case of Bougainville represented a key destabilizing issue if not managed properly. Bougainville and the national government were enmeshed in a decade-long civil war in which thousands of people lost their lives and livelihoods. The Bougainville Peace Agreement was signed in 2001 and one of its terms was to hold a non-binding referendum to determine the future of Bougainville, addressing a secessionist movement to break away from mainland Papua New Guinea that had begun well before the country itself achieved independence in 1975. A referendum was held in December 2019 and an overwhelming 98 percent of Bougainvilleans voted for independence. The results of the upcoming election and the parliamentary debate on the referendum's non-binding results are both critical to the relationship between PNG and Bougainville, as well as the greater agenda of decentralization between the national government and the provinces.

Ukraine addressed the conflict in the east of the country regarding Crimea as a threat to peace, security, and cooperation in Eastern Europe. The VNR called for resolution of the conflict by means of political settlement and reintegration of the conflict-affected part of the country, as contributing to progress toward the SDGs.

The most mentioned measures to achieving peace and security included commitment to seeking peaceful political solutions based on national reconciliation and facilitating durable solutions for displacements as a result of situations of fragility and conflict that could also address core causes of instability, including inequality and lack of opportunity, as well as inclusion, transparency and accountability under the law.

Syria reported that it was setting integrated national policies to launch the implementation of a post-war development plan, which will also place the SDGs within the national context. Other peacebuilding measures included expanding and institutionalizing the base for participation in implementing development plans, especially with the private sector, academia, civil society and the media, in addition to strengthening cooperation with the United Nations system and other international and regional organizations.

Several countries in post-conflict situations stressed that many years of conflict, entrenched inequality, widespread infrastructure deficits, and economic deprivation remained barriers to sustainable peace, growth and development.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo noted that as a post-conflict country, it still faced security challenges, even if large-scale military operations had reduced the number of armed groups. The country had taken action to curb corruption and enable everyone to have access to justice and enjoy human rights as a foundation for durable peace and stability.

In Liberia, a critical lesson learned was that the economic

and political structures of the past, which produced widespread income disparities, economic and political marginalization, and deep social cleavages, fueled past conflicts. In the design and execution of its National Development Programme the country is striving to create enhanced economic and political opportunities for all its citizens and ensuring that growth and development are pro-poor and widely shared, with the benefits spread more equitably throughout the population. They reported that despite many years of conflict followed by the Ebola outbreak, Liberia had made remarkable progress on key national aggregate indicators such as per capita income growth (550.00 USD), the Human Development Index (0.465), life expectancy at birth (63.7), and mean years of schooling (9.6).

Mozambique pointed out that despite the adversities imposed by climate vulnerability and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the armed attacks in Cabo Delgado, Manica and Sofala provinces, which affect the implementation of both the national agenda and the 2030 Agenda, the country continued to record progress and the Mozambicans' average life expectancy had improved from 49.4 (2007) to 53.7 (2017).

Georgia stressed its commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, and fulfilling the principle of leaving no one behind, while also pointing to the challenges of the situation where 20 per cent of the

country's territory is currently under occupation. Georgia sustained stable economic growth in 2019 with an annual real GDP growth rate of 5.1 per cent, and has been elevated from a lower middle to an upper middle-income country under the World Bank classification.

In most of the country reviews, the COVID-19 pandemic was cited as a factor that exacerbated preexisting situations, and if not countered effectively would further entrench fragility or conflict and hinder efforts towards durable solutions for sustainable peace and development.

Middle-income countries

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed challenges in many middle-income countries (MICs), with potentially far-reaching implications for efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. The national experiences given through the 2020 VNRs of MICs elaborated on the crisis, the responses towards recovery and the way forward. Vulnerability to sudden shocks like COVID-19 and the existential threat of climate change were highlighted.

Some VNRs indicated that pre-pandemic progress on many SDGs could potentially mitigate impacts. SDG implementation in MICs has been pursued through a holistic approach. In many, the SDGs are integrated into national development plans and with other national policies, legislation and budgets. For example, Nigeria developed its own Integrated Sustainable Development Goals (iSDG Model), an analytical framework for assessing how policy making can address the indivisible nature of the SDGs. There has also been a realignment of national statistical systems with the SDG indicators.

Many VNRs highlighted the value added of evidence-based planning and accountability mechanisms at the country level for accelerating implementation during the Decade of Action and delivery for sustainable development. For example, in Papua New Guinea, a proposed SDG Multi-Stakeholder Engagement Strategy focuses on improving



whole of Government institutional arrangements and coordination and society-wide approaches to leave no one behind.

The reviews also highlighted accelerated actions and transformative pathways for realizing the Decade of Action. These include the importance of supportive leadership, systems and capacities; constructive partnerships at all levels; effective management of significant amounts of national data and reports supported by data analysis capabilities; and consistent implementation of evidence-based SDG-oriented policies. It is anticipated that the localization of the SDGs will incentivize for disaggregated data collection. Data-related complexities remain a significant challenge in defining targets for the prioritized indicators for monitoring SDGs in MICs such as the Federal States of Micronesia, India, Moldova and Nigeria.

The aspiration of the SDGs and leaving no one behind was viewed as requiring the transformation of deeply rooted economic, social and political systems, as well as governance structures and business models at all levels.



Bangladesh



Nigeria

For this, the voices of different stakeholders are being included through integrated social policy frameworks that aim to progressively achieve universal coverage, while addressing the specific needs of vulnerable people through targeted policies and programmes, decent work for all, macroeconomic and fiscal instruments that promote inclusive growth, and the reduction in inequalities.

In view of the current shrinking fiscal space and continued requirement to repurpose funds for recovery due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many MICs may need to pursue financial requirement assessments to adjust projections, and VNRs often underscored the continuous need to diversify revenue sources for financing. Public financing and private capital are equally important in filling financing gaps. Nigeria noted that the banking sector can play an important role in supporting country efforts to leverage greater private sector-led growth by providing access to finance, particularly for micro, small and medium enterprises. India highlighted the need for international cooperation for curbing illicit financial flows, defining aid unambiguously and establishing robust systems for monitoring commitments made by donor countries.

International cooperation is significant for debt sustainability. Bangladesh monitors debt services in

association with development partners as it moves from concessional finance to finances of a more commercial nature involving much higher debt service liabilities, where their partners' support should act as an early warning system and help avoid any possible systemic shock to the economy. Additional strategies being implemented by MICs include adapting international best practices in improving national tax systems, reducing illicit financial flows, financing infrastructure, developing capital markets and promoting foreign direct investment.

Building upon the experiences of MICs, VNRs underscore that the multilateral system can be pivotal in supporting their strategic priorities their COVID-19 response and

recovery during these unprecedented times. This can set a course for achieving the SDGs through maintaining progress already made, enabling universal access to an expanded set of quality essential services, and reversing environmental degradation through mutual learning and capacity building.

the resident coordinators and UN country teams with sufficient capacities to elaborate their own analysis and advise governments on relevant economic issues. The Department has built on the analytical tools and products already at its disposal, including its economic forecasting model and the CDP framework for expanding productive capacities in LDCs, to develop country specific policy guidance.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND TARGETS

The following chapter gives an overview of progress made on the Sustainable Development Goals and targets. There was no uniform method of reporting on the goals, although many reviews addressed the goals individually, with some countries grouping the goals together to review cross-cutting issues. A few countries also did not report on all the SDGs in dedicated sections of the reports.

Structure and sources

A variety of approaches were chosen to showcase results in the reviews, with many countries reporting on the SDGs individually. Some did not include dedicated SDG sections, but followed a more free-flowing analysis in presenting policies or actions. Some countries, such as Malawi, also presented their findings through dedicated chapters on the five dimensions of the 2030 Agenda—people, prosperity, planet, peace and partnership.

Most reports also referred to how the COVID-19 pandemic has made an impact on their overall sustainable development progress, as well as how the pandemic has challenged individual goals and undermined progress already made. Countries such as Honduras also expressed concern about how the pandemic is affecting the most vulnerable groups to a greater extent, which in turn is expected to lead to an increase in income inequality. Other countries had similar concerns in their reporting, and noted that commitments to international cooperation will be crucial.



Goal 1

Most VNRs addressed SDG 1 as a standalone goal, while also recognizing the multidimensional nature of poverty, as it cuts across nearly all the SDGs. In this respect, Armenia, Bangladesh, Benin, Ecuador, Honduras, India, and Kenya, among others, noted that poverty should be measured not just in monetary terms but also by the access, or lack thereof, to social protection and the provision of social services (e.g. health, quality education, and access to basic infrastructure, etc.). Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, India, Liberia, Kyrgyz Republic, Panama, Micronesia, Nigeria, Seychelles, and Zambia were among the countries that made use of a multidimensional poverty index in order to ensure data disaggregation, to understand service delivery challenges and effectiveness, and to inform national policies and programming.

A variety of measures and policies have been launched to promote poverty reduction. Gambia and Brunei Darussalam for example implemented national action plans that focus on breaking the cycle of poverty through job creation and capacity building for employment and

entrepreneurship. In turn, Slovenia's Active Employment Policy programme covers a set of labour market measures that are aimed at enhancing employment and reducing the at-risk-of-poverty rate. Furthermore, countries identified children and youth as being particularly at risk of living in poverty (among them, Armenia, Bangladesh, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, and Panama). In addition to children and youth, efforts are also targeted at supporting other specific groups, mainly women, elderly persons, persons with disabilities, LGBTI, refugees, and indigenous peoples. Bangladesh, for example, through its government initiative "Strengthening Women's Ability for Productive New Opportunities" promotes the employment and future employability of extremely poor rural women by engaging them in public works essential for the economic and social life of rural communities. Countries also provided details of steps taken with respect to social protection policies and schemes, including those targeting vulnerable groups. For example, Georgia, Burundi, Panama, Malawi, and Nepal were among the countries that reported on cash transfer programmes targeting poor, labour-constrained households and people from marginalized groups. Lastly, Benin, Comoros, and Nigeria, were among the countries that pointed to some challenges such as the underdevelopment and insufficient impact of social programmes and the difficulties in accessing hard-to-reach areas.

The reviews of Bulgaria, Georgia, India, Kenya, Micronesia, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Uzbekistan, and Zambia mentioned regional disparities. Additionally, in many places, such as Liberia, Nigeria, Gambia, India, Morocco, Malawi, Mozambique, Solomon Islands, and Zambia, poverty is overwhelmingly concentrated in rural areas.

The poverty rate has been reduced in several countries (among them, Austria, Armenia, Bangladesh, Morocco, Nepal, Niger, North Macedonia, Russian Federation, Solomon Islands, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and

Zambia). However, numerous countries reported that progress on SDG 1 could be stalled or reversed, with vulnerable segments of the population falling back into poverty, as the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic begins to be felt more strongly around the world (among them, Argentina, Barbados, Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Morocco, Nepal, Niger, Papua New Guinea, and Peru). To mitigate the effects of the pandemic, many countries highlighted a set of actions taken to provide social protection to vulnerable groups. Micronesia for example deployed the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program, which provides temporary benefits to individuals whose employment or self-employment has been lost or interrupted as a direct result of COVID-19. India has launched the Prime Minister's Welfare Scheme, providing relief to the poor and migrant population. Armenia initiated an assistance package of USD \$300 million, which includes financial support to vulnerable groups, tuition fee support, and direct grants to SMEs and micro-entrepreneurs. In Samoa, as part of its COVID-19 Stimulus Package, the government provided an additional one-off cash benefit to the elderly under the Senior Citizen's Scheme.

Some countries underlined that the fight against poverty is a concerted effort of all stakeholders. For instance, Peru created a roundtable to facilitate dialogue between the State and civil society to overcome the profound problems of inequality and social exclusion. In Nepal, the government has been collaborating closely with cooperatives to eradicate poverty, as the cooperative sector is considered one of the three pillars of Nepal's economy. Seeing the increasing trend in its poverty rates, Micronesia pointed to the need to initiate programs that lifts the capacity of government agencies, civil society organizations and the business community to implement projects that tackles poverty successfully.

Some other challenges mentioned by VNR countries that hamper poverty reduction include youth unemployment

and its associated poverty (Malawi, Republic of Moldova, and North Macedonia), persistent underfinancing of social infrastructure sectors (Ukraine), vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change which calls for preparedness and recovery (Comoros, Micronesia, Samoa, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), and lack of detailed poverty data, which hampers effective policy analysis and evidence-based decision-making (North Macedonia and the Republic of Moldova). Nigeria also stressed the specific challenges faced by small-scale agricultural businesses, such as environmental degradation and barriers to market access, as 50 per cent of its workforce is engaged in agriculture.

Austria, Finland, Estonia, Slovenia and Morocco were among the countries that outlined their support for poverty reduction through regional and international development cooperation, with Armenia emphasizing that effective poverty reduction cannot be combatted only by the application of state governance tools; it requires joint efforts of the whole population, diaspora, and international partners. On the other hand, Micronesia stressed that any interruption to the flow of external assistance would greatly affect the economy, and disproportionately those already facing hardship conditions. Some countries provided examples of international projects].

Goal 2

Most countries reported on their progress towards SDG 2, where a few (Austria, Finland) reported their full achievement of the goal and targets.

Countries reported on their national plans, strategies, and frameworks in response to SDG 2 (Armenia, Austria, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Georgia, Honduras, North Macedonia, Malawi, Papua New Guinea). Armenia adopted the Strategy of the Main Directions Ensuring Economic Development in Agricultural Sector for 2020-2030, which will expectedly triple the value created

2 ZERO HUNGER



by an average farm by 2029. Austria launched the “Food Is Precious” Initiative, with a pursuit of drastically reducing avoidable food waste at the retail and consumer level. Brunei Darussalam continued to strengthen whole-of-nation actions under the “National Strategy for Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition (MIYCN) 2014-2020”. Bulgaria adopted a National Strategy for Conservation of Biological Diversity, a Regulation on the Physiological Norms of Nutrition for the Population, and the Strategy for Digitization of Agriculture and Rural Areas. Costa Rica implemented important instruments that have been guiding the actions to reduce undernourishment, including its “National Policy for Food and Nutrition Security 2011-2021 (SAN) and the Strategic Plan for Food Security, Nutrition and Hunger Eradication 2025” and more recently with the “National Policy for Sustainable Production and Consumption 2018-2030”. Georgia approved a long-term policy document - Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy for 2021-2027, which has three main cornerstones: increased competitiveness; sustainable use of natural resources, maintenance of ecosystems and climate adaptation; and effectiveness of

food safety systems in all agricultural sectors. The National Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development 2014-2020 of North Macedonia outlined measures and reforms aimed at increasing food production, supporting young farmers and rural women, restoring agricultural machinery, and growing livestock. Malawi developed the National Resilience Strategy, a strategy that will guide the design and implementation of national resilience programs aimed at breaking the cycle of food and nutrition insecurity and chronic vulnerability to climate change and disasters. Papua New Guinea’s food policies, including National Food Security Policy 2018-2027, and Multi-Sectoral National Nutrition Policy 2016-2026, set the medium to long-term direction and signals priority areas to focus resources.

The challenges of malnutrition and obesity are still twofold. While some countries still put their focus on eliminating malnutrition (Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Gambia, India, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Papua New Guinea, Uganda, Zambia), some other countries have been coping more with the rapidly increasing obesity rate (Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Kyrgyz Republic, Slovenia). In Bulgaria, the proportion of overweight adults is nearly 60 per cent, increased by nearly 10 per cent from 2008 to 2017.

Bangladesh and India have benefitted from new research and biotechnologies. Bangladesh’s agricultural research organizations are developing varieties of different crops that are high yielding, insect and disease resistant, and tolerant to salinity, drought, heat, cold, and submergence. There has also been a success in new cropping patterns and efficient water use technologies.

Some countries took financial and taxation measures to foster the achievement of SDG 2 (Armenia, Bulgaria, India, Kenya, Morocco, Seychelles, Slovenia). Armenia launched a program that subsidizes interest rates for loans, helping economic entities in pedigree stockbreeding. Bulgaria

eliminated VAT on goods subject to food banking in 2016.

Many countries offered food security and nutritional support for children and the most vulnerable groups (Kyrgyz Republic, Panama, Russian Federation, Zambia). India launched a Breast Milk Bank to provide access to breast milk for low birth weight, pre-term and orphan babies. The Estonian Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce in cooperation with the Estonian University of Life Sciences and the Association of Estonian Food Industry is actively raising awareness regarding food safety among agricultural and food producers. Samoa engaged donor partners in projects where the need is clearly identified, such as the Samoa-China Agricultural Technical Aid Project, which enabled capacity building through 25 agricultural experts from China, distribution of new facilities and processing equipment, application of cost-efficient and effective technologies towards mechanization, and provided agricultural training for more than 7,000 farmers and scientists. Brunei Darussalam reassured the general public of sufficient rice stock of more than six-months supply during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many challenges regarding SDG 2 have been identified, including food loss and waste (India, Kenya, North Macedonia, Slovenia); large population or high population growth rates (Burundi, Kenya); underdeveloped rural infrastructure (Bangladesh, Burundi, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, North Macedonia, Ukraine); unbalanced and unhealthy diets (Burundi, Kyrgyz Republic, North Macedonia); lack of access to adequate services like weather forecasts (India); uncultivated arable lands (Armenia, North Macedonia); excessive fragmentation of agricultural land and the small size of farms (North Macedonia); inefficient production systems, a weak policy and business environment and human resource challenges (Liberia); and the effects of climate change (Burundi, India, Kenya, Malawi, North Macedonia).

Several countries stressed their active cooperation with United Nations entities, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (Armenia, North Macedonia, Panama, Russian Federation), the World Food Programme (Armenia, Mozambique, Russian Federation), United Nations Development Programme (Armenia, Liberia), United Nations Children's Fund (Papua New Guinea) and the World Bank (Samoa) to strengthen national capacities and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.



Goal 3

Countries recognized good health and well-being as important determinants of socio-economic development. Most countries reported on their progress on SDG 3.

Many countries have adopted policies to promote the well-being of people and universal health coverage (Bulgaria, India, Finland, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Seychelles, Slovenia). Slovenia adopted the Resolution on the National Programme on Healthcare 2016–2025 “Together for a Health Society”, which addresses key health issues regarding the healthcare system. Seychelles’ health

sector has been guided by the National Health Strategic Plan 2016-2020 which aims to achieve all the national and global health targets focused on promoting, protecting and restoring the health and well-being of all people in Seychelles throughout the life-course. The National Health Policy of the Republic of Moldova 2007-2021 aims to improve the health of the population and reduce inequities between social groups and regions in the country. The Health Strategy 2020 of North Macedonia set a range of priorities, including but not limited to managing the burden of non-communicable disease, preparedness and responses to communicable diseases, health systems and resources, and other public health initiatives. The Russian Federation's national project "Health" aims to achieve an increase in the life expectancy of the population.

Countries reported a variety of measures to accelerate the implementation of SDG 3, including strengthening public health programs, prioritizing mental healthcare, expanding capacity to increase access to quality health care, enhancing food security and nutrition, promoting private sector participation in health care delivery, imposing an excise tax on alcoholic beverages and tobacco, and accelerating human resource outputs, recruitment and retention.

The maternal mortality rate has reportedly dropped in some countries (North Macedonia, Samoa, Zambia), due to interventions such as procurement of emergency obstetric and neonatal care equipment, training and mentorship of health workers, maternal health reviews for action, access to safe blood transfusions, and training and placement of skilled health workers in health facilities. The mortality rate of children under age five in many countries has dropped, which was achieved due to the introduction of modern perinatal technologies; reorganization of obstetric and neonatal departments, and the creation of a network of perinatal centres.

Tuberculosis has been alleviated in many countries, due

to expanded diagnostic capacity, intensified case finding campaigns, scaled-up preventive therapy, enhanced infection prevention and control, and implementation of new WHO-recommended treatment regimens using new specialized tuberculosis drugs and maintaining a steady supply chain.

The prevalence of malaria has dropped in many VNR countries, due to the successful adoption of interventions including indoor residual spraying, use of long-lasting insecticide-treated nets, and intermittent presumptive treatment.

Non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory disease and cancer, remain a source of concern. Many countries highlighted increasing public or private spending on health and the use of statistical data for the implementation of evidence-based policies

Tobacco usage in some countries has been reduced. Ukraine integrated the key measures provided in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control into its legislation.

Data played an important role in many countries' measurements of interventions. Uganda measured five health impact indicators—maternal mortality ratio, neonatal mortality rate, infant mortality rate, total fertility rate, and adolescent pregnancy rate—on a five-year basis, by using data from the Uganda Demographic Health Survey. Seychelles reported an urgent need to improve collection, analysis, sharing, and use of data for health, in both the public and private sectors.

Countries also reported challenges related to urban-rural health coverage gaps (Republic of Moldova, Samoa, Uganda), insufficient training capacity to produce the number of health workers to meet population needs (Papua New Guinea), and improvement of infrastructure (North Macedonia).

Some countries reported on best practices and new initiatives. To build up the medical infrastructure, India set up 141 new medical colleges with an increase in the intake capacity of medical students. Ukraine plans to launch a national blood system as a component of the public health system, which will ensure the circulation of safe donor blood components on the nationwide level by means of establishing a three-tier European-type national blood system. Seychelles spent at least 10 per cent of the national budget on its universal health coverage.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, countries proposed to: ensure infection control and safe working conditions for physicians and patients in health care facilities; build the capacity of laboratories for COVID-19 testing; develop the system of health care financing further on to provide high-quality services accessible to patients and reduce out-of-pocket payments; improve material and technical facilities in health care facilities, and develop physicians' capacity to provide high-quality medical aid according to standards and evidence, and strengthen the system of medical services, prevent any interruptions in services and medicines able to endanger human and societal life and welfare.



Goal 4

Nearly all countries attached high importance to education and reported progress in achieving SDG 4. Some countries highlighted holistic and inclusive international development cooperation in education.

New plans and initiatives towards SDG 4 were reported, including Estonia's new Education Development Plan for 2021–2035, which is a continuation strategy of the current Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020. Through its "Strategic Plan for 2018-2022", Brunei Darussalam set its mission to deliver holistic education to achieve the fullest potential for all in line with its vision of "Quality Education, Dynamic Nation". Slovenia adopted the National Framework for Determining and Ensuring the Quality of Education and established a Professional Coordination Centre for International Research and Studies. Panama has implemented its Strategic Plan of Education "Of Policies Educativas a la Acción".

Countries emphasized the importance of early childhood care and education (Armenia, Austria, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Georgia, India, Russian Federation, Uzbekistan). In terms of improving access to quality early education, Brunei Darussalam has seen an increasing trend in the gross enrolment rate and net enrolment rate in pre-primary and primary education. It has successfully achieved and maintained high pre-primary enrolment of five-year-old children. School leaders actively engage parents at least eight months before the school year starts.

Many countries also offered free and quality education for all (Brunei Darussalam, Estonia, Finland, India), while Finland also guarantees all citizens high-quality education free of charge from pre-primary to higher education. Some featured in critical thinking and cognitive skills (Austria, Bulgaria, India); acquisition of skills about Information and Communication Technology (Brunei Darussalam, Estonia, India, Uzbekistan, Ukraine); pupil-teacher ratio (India);

pursuant to higher QR World University Rankings or Times Higher Education Rankings (India, Russian Federation, Ukraine), further educations and life-long learning (Austria, Brunei Darussalam, Ecuador); vocational training (Ecuador, Zambia); digitalization (Austria, Costa Rica, Georgia); adequate investment to education (Russian Federation); public-private cooperation (Bangladesh); and capacity building for teachers (Brunei Darussalam).

The principle of leaving no one behind is the overarching spirit of education in many countries, with special attention given to girls and persons with disabilities in many countries. Several countries emphasized the critical importance of inclusion in education policy to reach marginalized groups and to leave no one behind. They stressed the equal access of education for men and women (Armenia, Austria, Bangladesh, Estonia, India, Panama, Russian Federation, Uzbekistan, Ukraine). In India, more incentive was given to encourage girls in STEM majors. A quota has been set for women to make up 50 per cent of collegial bodies at Austrian universities. The Russian Federation implemented a set of measures to increase the availability of quality education for children and adults with disabilities by introducing inclusive education, developing adapted educational programs, creating conditions for vocational education of disabled people, and promoting their further employment. Armenia and Uzbekistan took different measures to facilitate children from remote areas to go to school, including the reimbursement of their food and transport costs.

Challenges reported in the implementation of SDG 4 included urban-rural educational gaps (Bangladesh, India); lack of teachers and professional personnel (Uzbekistan, Zambia); capacity building for teachers (Bangladesh); high classroom density (Zambia); the decline of national Gross Enrolment Rate (Niger); specific groups of children facing greater constraints to access such as working children, disabled children, indigenous children and children living

in remote areas or slums or living in poverty (Bangladesh, Ecuador). The infrastructure of schools (electricity supply, access to computers, clean water, and sanitation facilities, etc.) in developing countries, especially in remote areas, requires more investment.



Goal 5

For SDG 5, countries agreed that gender equality and women's empowerment are integral to reaching a more equal, just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

Countries stressed the importance of legislative and constitutional guarantees of equality before the law (Bulgaria, Burundi, Comoros, Georgia, India, the Kyrgyz Republic, Morocco, Russian Federation, Syrian Arab Republic, Uganda, and Zambia). Many also reported on the legal framework in place to promote gender equality and end all forms of discrimination (Armenia, Benin, Bulgaria, Morocco, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Zambia). Additionally, countries unanimously highlighted the revisions of existing laws or the enactment of new ones. For example, Slovenia amended its Equal Opportunities for Women and Men Act to appoint in all

its ministries a coordinator responsible for ensuring that the gender perspective is incorporated in measures and policies. Some countries, including Zambia, noted the challenge of implementing or enforcing statutory laws in a traditional setting.

Other concrete actions taken by countries included the creation of an institutional and national mechanism for gender policy implementation (Argentina, Armenia, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, North Macedonia, and Panama), developing action plans and national policies for gender equality (Bulgaria, Burundi, Costa Rica, Liberia, Micronesia, Malawi, North Macedonia, Trinidad and Tobago and Uganda), implementing gender-responsive budgeting (Armenia, Finland, Gambia, India, Morocco, North Macedonia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda), and empowering women socially and economically through targeted programs for skills development (Armenia, Bangladesh, India, Bulgaria, Libya, and Slovenia) in fields such as information and communication technologies.

Violence against women and girls was one of the main challenges mentioned, and more than half of the countries reported on measures and policies in place to address the issue. For example, Trinidad and Tobago reported on the establishment of a Gender-based Violence Unit within its Police Service. Additionally, many countries elaborated on the legal framework and other measures in place in support of victims and to prevent and reduce the incidence of different forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence (Armenia, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Burundi, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Uganda, Trinidad and Tobago and the Solomon Islands) and trafficking (Armenia, Burundi, and Uganda).

Furthermore, countries recognized that harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage are pervasive, dangerous, and must be eliminated. Liberia introduced a temporary and partial ban on the practice

of female genital mutilation, and reached an agreement in 2019 to suspend all bush traditional schools. Comoros, Morocco, Malawi, Micronesia, Mozambique, Nepal, North Macedonia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Kenya, Georgia, Uganda, and Zambia were among the countries who reported on the issue of early, forced, or child marriage, with Georgia, North Macedonia, Mozambique, and Trinidad and Tobago highlighting the recent changes or adoption in legislation that outlaws this practice. Uganda, recognizing that ending child marriage could generate US \$3 billion per year by 2030, launched a National Strategy to end Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy. Additionally, many countries related positive steps towards promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls (Comoros, Ecuador, Finland, Malawi, and Uganda), while identifying some of the challenges that hamper progress such as low knowledge of rights and services and poor service availability and accessibility. Finland emphasized the work it carries out internationally to strengthen sexual and reproductive health and rights, which are currently being challenged on a global scale.

Another challenge emphasized by countries was the low participation of women in decision-making or leadership positions, both in the public and private sphere (Austria, Comoros, Costa Rica, Estonia, Bangladesh, Burundi, Georgia, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Uzbekistan). They reported that women continue to be underrepresented at all levels. They lag in political life, hold fewer managerial and executive positions, and experience higher rates of harassment. For example, Liberia shared that despite electing in 2017 its first-ever female Vice President, female representation in its house of representatives has dropped. To increase women's participation in political decision-making, Burundi, Benin, Slovenia, and Ukraine introduced quota systems or quota laws, while Zambia reported on capacity development of women and mentorship programs for

prospective women candidates for elective positions. Slovenia also reported on initiatives taken to increase women's representation in management and supervisory boards of companies.

Countries also reported on other SDG 5 challenges, including the persisting gender pay gap (Armenia, Austria, Bulgaria, Syrian Arab Republic), with Brunei Darussalam reporting significant progress in ensuring equal pay for equal work. Additionally, one of the main barriers to equal participation of women and men in the labour market identified was the unequal distribution of unpaid work between men and women beyond the labour market sphere: most of the burden of caring for children, the elderly, and other family members who need help fall on the shoulder of women (Austria, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Kenya, Honduras, North Macedonia, Panama, Slovenia, Uganda). Countries mentioned measures to encourage men and women to share this burden equally, such as paid paternity leave (Bulgaria). To reduce the impact of unpaid care work on women, India reported on its Maternity Benefit Programme, which aims to provide partial compensation for the wage loss in terms of cash incentives.

Another major hurdle identified by countries, including Zambia and Ukraine, was the lack of gender-disaggregated data for planning, monitoring, and evaluation. There is a particular need for strengthening the collection of gender-disaggregated data to identify gaps and challenges with regard to violence against women (Trinidad and Tobago) including women with disabilities (North Macedonia), unpaid domestic work (Comoros), and gender inclusiveness in decision-making or leadership positions (Nigeria).

Finally, VNR countries echoed that the COVID-19 pandemic has, directly and indirectly, affected women negatively and disproportionately. The pandemic has put a strain on their everyday lives, as the burden of

care often falls on women (Austria, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Kenya, Honduras, North Macedonia, Panama). Anticipated consequences include a surge in domestic violence (Peru, Republic of Moldova, Honduras), restricted access to routine healthcare services including sexual and reproductive health services (Nigeria), and a dip in income and labour force participation (Nepal). A gender lens is thus needed when developing social protection and preparedness and recovery measures.



Goal 6

For SDG 6, countries focused on improving access to basic sanitation services as well as improving accessibility, quality and availability of water resources. Key challenges to progress include negative impacts of climate change, insufficient infrastructure, and an increasing need for additional funding and investments in the water sector. Action is being taken through creative irrigation methods, improved collaborative water strategies at the national level, as well as increased international cooperation on joint initiatives to help overcome water and sanitation related challenges.

A number of countries reported improvements in the percentage of homes with access to safe drinking water services both in rural and urban areas. Some countries also saw improvements in the use of basic sanitation services in households, an increase of hand washing facilities and practices in households, and some countries achieved a significant decrease in open-defecation practices (Liberia, Nigeria, Bangladesh), which is reportedly explained by sectoral development and increases in connections to water and sanitation networks in both rural and urban areas (Austria, Kenya, Morocco, Niger Uganda).

Many countries noted irrigation and agricultural practices to be large consumers of fresh water. As a result, some countries are improving and implementing creative irrigation systems (Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, Uganda). Bangladesh is practicing an alternate wetting and drying method of irrigation for rice production in different parts of the country, which saves approximately 15 to 30 per cent of irrigation water without sacrificing a reduction in yield. Additionally, most countries have created and implemented water management plans to preserve and/or restore surrounding bodies of water. These plans aim to improve the status of rivers, lakes, coastal waters, and the sea, as well as prevent floods.

Some countries that reported on SDG 6 had not progressed significantly towards meeting the respective targets. There were minor successes from countries as mentioned above, but progress in most countries remained stagnant due to an extreme lack of funding and provision. A number of projects for the rehabilitation of drinking water supply systems in various countries are suffering from a lack of financing for construction of necessary infrastructure. This led some countries to adopt alternative funding mechanisms in order to reduce dependency on government funds and increase financial robustness (Brunei Darussalam, Niger). Likewise, some addressed the need for further investment and complete reform in the

water management sector (Republic of Moldova, Armenia, Congo, Republic of Moldova).

Many countries therefore outline a dire need for investments in the water and sanitation sector. Official development assistance aid is well below what is needed for the water and sanitation sector, for example Niger reported that aid in the water and sanitation sector has fallen from US \$200,690,911 in 2015 to US \$100,348,679 in 2019. In addition to increased investment, it is reported that the responsibility of local authorities needs to be strengthened regarding the management and distribution of safe drinking water supply, adequate sanitation, and productive irrigation.

Furthermore, with the increasing adverse effects of climate change, a number of countries experienced a significant increase in natural disasters. As a result, more issues related to water scarcity are emerging, including a deterioration of water quality and stunted access to safe water in many areas, and this has contributed to an increase of illnesses related to drinking water in rural areas. The current COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness about the weaknesses in sanitation and access to water, and the importance of sanitation and hygiene practices through activities such as hand washing with soap and water (Comoros, Solomon Islands). Moreover, initiatives to promote the importance of hygiene and sanitation practices have risen due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Nigeria). On the other hand, the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic is threatening to slow some countries' progress in achieving the SDGs (Uzbekistan), as some countries are still struggling to eliminate open defecation practices and implement widespread sanitation and hygiene services.

Communities in indigenous areas remain considerably neglected, and lack of access to safe water and adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities further aggravates conditions of poverty and impacts the health and safety

of these populations (Bangladesh, Panama, Peru). A large number of countries have created and implemented water strategies in collaboration with environmental ministries. For example, Finland reported to have initiated the 2019-2023 water protection enhancement programme, with a joint international water strategy in collaboration with five ministries in the country, as well as updating their national goals relating to water and health. The initiative will help overcome a number of water and sanitation related challenges, mainly regarding the deterioration of water and sewage networks, and will improve water quality.

Many countries also mentioned multi-stakeholder involvement and international cooperation. Armenia, for example, has initiated a transformation strategy that involves the government, the private sector, and civil society organizations. This comprehensive strategy links with several other SDGs to set and meet targets to advance the three pillars of sustainable development. Additionally, Austria and Bulgaria mention multi-stakeholder initiatives being developed in their respective countries, both with the goal to improve access to clean and safe water in the country.

Almost all countries have restated their commitment to future progression of the goals, including SDG 6, with some countries explicitly stating outlined plans for how they will overcome this setback and achieve the targets in the upcoming years (Armenia, Bangladesh, India, Kyrgyz Republic, Zambia). For example, India's 10 Year Rural Sanitation Strategy (2019-2029) focuses on sustaining sanitation behaviour change, ensuring that no one is left behind whilst increasing access to solid and liquid waste management.

Overall, achieving SDG 6 by 2030 was reported to mainly require additional investments in adequate infrastructure, the provision of sanitation facilities, continued encouragement of good hygiene practices, and protecting and restoring water-related ecosystems.



Goal 7

The importance of guaranteeing access to energy for the entire population was underlined in many reports (Bangladesh, Benin, Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Uganda, Zambia). For instance, Kyrgyzstan underlined that improving household access to clean energy for cooking, heating and lighting is essential for the achievement of a number of global priority goals such as improving health, gender equality and equitable economic development. While some countries have made rapid progress, in others access remain low and progress has stagnated. Some countries highlighted the need to address divergence in access between urban and rural areas (Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Gambia, Liberia, Malawi, Niger, Zambia). India reported on a household-focused electrification programme, which has reached nearly all households in all the country's villages. Morocco noted that advances in electrification have significantly improved living conditions of rural and peri-urban populations and diversified the rural economy. Countries also reported on efforts to increase the share

of modern energy for cooking (Bangladesh, India, Niger, among others), noting the harmful effects of indoor air pollution.

Some countries emphasized also the aim of increasing share of renewable energy and improve energy efficiency while ensuring the security of supply and energy security (Bulgaria, Estonia, Kenya, Moldova, Panama, Slovenia, Ukraine). A number of countries highlighted the need to diversify energy sources (Trinidad and Tobago, Zambia), as well as improvements to the enabling environment to attract private sector investment (Malawi). A few countries stressed the need to enhance the local capacity to plan, design, implement, manage, operate and maintain installed energy technologies (Bangladesh, Micronesia). The Russian Federation reported on a programme of large-scale reconstruction and replacement equipment at hydropower plants in Siberia, which will partially replace electricity from coal-fired power plants, leading to reductions in carbon dioxide emissions.

Many countries outlined plans, strategies, and legislative frameworks for the promotion of electricity generation from renewable sources of energy (Argentina, Austria, Bulgaria, Ecuador, India, North Macedonia, Morocco, Niger, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles). India reported that cost of solar photovoltaic (PV) has fallen to below that of the electricity from coal-fired power plants. Samoa noted its pledge to generate 100 per cent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2025. To support increase in the use of renewable energy sources, Georgia has introduced a net metering policy for small-scale power generating units, which allows for the feeding of energy back into the grid. Seychelles is implementing PV project targeting the most vulnerable sector of society, which provides households who are currently receiving government support to pay their utility bills with rooftop PV panels.

Energy efficiency is another priority, with many countries

reporting on the adoption of legislation (Ecuador, Georgia), the implementation of national energy efficiency plans and strategies (Bulgaria, Ecuador, Georgia, Morocco, Seychelles, Trinidad and Tobago), and investments (Moldova). Actions are being taken to improve the efficiency of buildings (Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Estonia), and more energy efficient appliances, including through labelling schemes (India, Seychelles).

Recognizing the importance of international cooperation, or the promotion of SDG 7, some countries have established partnerships in this regard (Estonia, India, Liberia). The International Solar Alliance founded by India and France, aims to bring clean and affordable energy within the reach of all solar resource-rich nations and to enhance international collaboration towards this objective.

Morocco highlighted the impact of research and development in the transition of the Moroccan energy system, which has benefited from scientific platforms dedicated to research in solar energy, in partnership with international centres and the renewable energy sector. Countries have introduced private-public partnership frameworks to attract and support the investment in power generation projects (Georgia, Honduras). Since 2010, Finland, Austria and the Nordic Development Fund have financed the Energy and Environment Partnership operating in 15 Southern and East African countries, with the goal of increasing access to energy for the most vulnerable populations.

Goal 8

Most of the reviews reported on progress made in implementing SDG 8, recognizing the importance of decent work and economic growth in achieving sustainable development. While many countries reported on increasing economic growth in recent years (Estonia, Morocco, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation and Seychelles), several countries

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



also highlighted the impact of COVID-19 thus far in 2020 and how the global pandemic has affected not only the national economy and employment, but also specific sectors. Many countries described their focus on tourism to further economic growth (Bangladesh, Benin, Brunei Darussalam, Burundi, Gambia, Georgia, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Micronesia, Morocco, Nepal, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation, Samoa, Seychelles, and Trinidad and Tobago), with several countries emphasizing their efforts to promote sustainable and eco-friendly tourism as a way to drive economic growth without compromising the environment (Burundi, Brunei Darussalam, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea). Countries also indicated how national plans have developed tourism strategies for different regions, by targeting leisure destinations and destinations for conferences, meetings and exhibitions (Trinidad and Tobago). However, with the on-going global pandemic and the service industry being specifically affected at a global level, countries expressed their concern about the impacts of the virus on global tourism (Gambia, Trinidad and Tobago).

Efforts to promote a green economy and environmentally

sustainable solutions were addressed in a number of reviews, with countries such as Papua New Guinea noting that they have tried to move towards the renewable sector and to build a more climate resilient infrastructure. Efforts to focus on a green economy were also mentioned by other countries in the context of addressing issues with degraded agricultural land (Kyrgyz Republic) and to boost green technologies (Estonia).

Many countries reported on improved employment rates at a global level, yet gender equality was recognized as an issue for many countries not only in terms of employment rates but also in view of income inequality. In addition, many countries reported on the topic of youth unemployment and specifically on young people “not in education, employment or training” (NEET) (Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Honduras, Kyrgyz Republic, Morocco, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Samoa, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda and Uzbekistan). Some countries reported on a positive trend in lowering the NEET percentage, whilst others expressed concern about an increasing percentage of youth unemployment and NEET in particular. A few countries linked the high proportion of young people not being involved in education, employment or training as possibly being due to a mismatch between the education offered by institutions in a given location, as well as the opportunities available in the local job market (North Macedonia, Uzbekistan). To provide more meaningful employment or training opportunities, several entrepreneurial initiatives are targeted toward young people as well as women and persons with disabilities. Malawi is one country which has developed a programme specifically for youth, namely the “Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocation and Training (TEVET)” programme. Liberia, through its micro-finance loans to SMEs has provided over 125 entrepreneurs and local service providers with start-up opportunities, for which

almost 80 per cent were women in four specific counties or regions.

Several countries also referred to how they use artificial intelligence, digitalization, a digital economy and ICT to further productivity, training and development (Armenia, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Honduras, India, Kenya, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Slovenia, and Trinidad and Tobago). Armenia highlighted the development of a “Government Programme and Armenian Transformation Strategy 2020-2050” to increase the presence of high-tech industries in that country. Honduras also recognized efforts to promote youth involvement, as well as technological and social entrepreneurship.

In the context of unemployment, decent work and social security, many countries also stressed that informal sector employment still makes up a large part of the labour force and their national economies (Bangladesh, Benin, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Moldova, Seychelles, Uganda and Uzbekistan). A significant issue related to informal employment is that such employment is often excluded from labour laws and other benefits such as minimum wages. Access to bank credit and unstable income were also recognized as challenges (Mozambique). Within the informal sector, many countries reported that the agriculture sector often makes up the largest portion of the informal economy (Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Papua New Guinea, Uzbekistan and others). While there are efforts to formalize a larger portion of the labour force, some countries also have plans to further develop their agricultural sector. Morocco for instance has developed a new strategy called “Generation Green 2020-2030” which is intended to connect a new generation of entrepreneurs to agriculture. Other forms of informal employment include trade and construction (Republic of Moldova).

A number of countries reported that Micro-, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) are a crucial driver for economic growth, job creation and source of income, especially for women and youth (Benin, Brunei, Bulgaria, Congo, Estonia, India, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, North Macedonia, Nigeria, Seychelles, Trinidad and Tobago, Mozambique). Representing the majority of business entities that engage the largest share of the workforce, MSMEs are reportedly facing challenges, including skill deficiency and lack of access to credit and markets. Recognizing the importance of the private sector to drive growth, several countries have also developed programmes targeting competition, innovation, financial services and improvement of the business environment (India, Liberia, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Seychelles, and Solomon Islands). India has developed a programme called “Startup India” that is intended to drive innovation and facilitate the environment for start-ups to contribute to economic growth and employment opportunities. The Russian Federation has also taken steps to better facilitate access to procurement, as well as credit and other benefits from SMEs.

Several countries addressed the issue of child labour and how efforts have been put in place to address this problem (Bangladesh, Kyrgyz Republic, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Zambia). Child labour is often more prevalent in poor areas, and some countries such as Nigeria recognized that poverty eradicating will very likely have an effect on the issue of child labour. Bangladesh listed several initiatives to target child labour by 2025, and Morocco's VNR also addressed measures to end modern-day slavery and human trafficking.

Goal 9

A large number of countries have advanced comprehensive policies aimed at upgrading, diversifying and greening industrial sectors with a particular focus on fostering

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE



innovation in industries (Austria, Finland, Estonia, India, Gambia, Panama, Mozambique, Slovenia, Samoa, Zambia, Bangladesh, Armenia, Brunei, Bulgaria). Countries' priority areas for infrastructure development have focused on advancing digitalization, including through the expansion and promotion of broadband and 5G (Austria, Brunei, Finland, Estonia, Slovenia, Bulgaria) as well as on the upgrading and development of sustainable and resilient infrastructures such as road networks and energy (Gambia, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Seychelles, Burundi).

Countries have advanced a wide range of institutional measures and policy innovations to upgrade infrastructures: Georgia has introduced the Educational and Scientific Infrastructure Development Agency (ESIDA), tasked with developing infrastructure and introducing new technologies for economic transformation. Samoa has set up a Scientific Research Organisation to provide scientific and technical research, and develop technologies for the country's industrial development. Armenia has established a new Ministry of High-Tech Industry. India has advanced infrastructure development through the Bharatmala

programme, which has scaled up the development of road infrastructure, and the Sagarmala project, which targets reduction in logistics cost for trade through comprehensive development of coastline and navigable waterways. Costa Rica is implementing its National Plan for Development and Public Investments (2019-22), which aims to build climate-resilient and inclusive infrastructures and encourages a multi-stakeholder approach through public consultations. Zambia has constructed multi-facility economic zones and industrial parks, aimed at attracting both local and foreign direct investment, while Panama has established a new business regime for multinational companies related to manufacturing to incentivize foreign investment.

To address inequalities in access to infrastructures, countries have advanced policies to accelerate rural development and strengthen access for the poor. Georgia has focused on the development and modernization of infrastructure that can foster business development in rural areas and increase agricultural productivity. Liberia is streamlining pro-poor policies into infrastructure developments by incorporating livelihood programs into infrastructure strategies. A number of countries (Ukraine, Bangladesh, Comoros) have advanced policies to strengthen innovations and competitiveness of SMEs, including by strengthening access to credit for SMEs.

Despite progress in advancing sustainable and resilient infrastructures significant challenges remain. The availability and access to sustainable public infrastructure continues to be a significant challenge for a number of countries, particularly in rapidly growing urban as well as remote areas (the Gambia, Bangladesh, Liberia, Malawi, Kyrgyzstan). A number of countries (Malawi, Democratic Republic of Congo) have faced acute supply side constraints including challenges of intermittent energy supply, which have had an adverse impact on industrial and manufacturing sectors. Kyrgyzstan noted the challenges

of high external debt burdens in hampering investment in infrastructures.

Improvements in health infrastructures were highlighted as vital against the backdrop of the worsening public health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mozambique). Several countries highlighted water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure improvements as critical for advancing the health and wellbeing of citizens, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as to strengthen resilience to climate change (Liberia, Georgia, Benin). India has launched the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and the International Solar Alliance to leverage global partnerships for climate action and disaster resilience. COVID-19 has posed particular challenges for the further development and investment in tourism sectors, which have been hit hard by the effects of the pandemic (Barbados).



Goal 10

Recognizing the importance of SDG 10 as a cross-cutting goal, several countries chose to address SDG 10 in the context of other SDGs or within larger themes in their

reviews. Most, however, reviewed SDG 10 as a stand-alone goal, albeit with references to other goals, in particular SDG 1 and SDG 8.

Income inequalities were discussed by all countries, with the majority reporting that income inequality has remained largely the same or gotten worse over the past few years (Comoros, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Finland, the Gambia, Georgia, Honduras, Kyrgyz Republic, Micronesia, Nepal, Niger, Papua New Guinea, and Uganda). Slovenia, on the contrary, reported that income inequality remains low in the country due to a progressive tax system that ensures a relatively even distribution of income among households. Several reviews referred to income inequality in the context of gender (Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and others). Geography was also reported to be an influencing factor on income inequality, with the income gap between urban and rural communities increasing (Gambia and Niger). In order to address the issue of income inequality, countries reported on various programmes and initiatives. Nepal mentioned that interventions have been made in that country in order to build skills, public participation, capacity development, resilience, and support to micro enterprises among actions. The Gambia also mentioned that extra efforts are being put in place to address the issue of rising rural poverty in the country, especially as it relates to basic services.

The situation for migrants was addressed in several reviews (Bulgaria, Finland, India, Morocco, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation, Samoa and Trinidad and Tobago). Numerous countries have taken steps to improve the situation for migrants, such as Bulgaria, which has adopted a “National Strategy on Migration, Asylum and Integration”. This new strategy grants migrants social benefits and the right to work, as well as access to elementary education and vocational education. Morocco also reported on national strategies that grant migrants access to public services in the country.

A number of countries addressed the needs for persons with disabilities in their reviews, describing policies, initiatives and steps taken to support persons with disabilities (Brunei Darussalam, Estonia, Niger, Russian Federation, Seychelles, and Trinidad and Tobago). Seychelles mentioned its “National Council for the Disabled” (NCFD), which promotes the rights of persons with disabilities, aiming to equalize and empower persons with disabilities in society at large. Estonia reported on a similar activity, with the “Estonian Chamber of Disabled People” also seeking to improve the situation for persons with disabilities.

Countries reported on issues related to gender inequality (Finland, the Gambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Morocco and Solomon Islands), older persons (Armenia, Brunei Darussalam, India, North Macedonia, Russian Federation, Seychelles and Trinidad and Tobago) and LGBTIQ issues (Estonia, Seychelles, India, Liberia). Finland noted that gender inequality is more prominent amongst women in lower level income groups, while Morocco noted that women participation in economic activities is lower than that of men. Solomon Islands mentioned in their review that the “Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs” and the “Ministry of Public Services” have come together to develop what has been named the “Public Service Gender Equality and Social Inclusion” (GESI) policy. While this programme aims to increase the number of women in public service, it is also seeking to mentor women to take on more high-level positions. In the context of older persons, the Russian Federation has developed a framework to train older persons prior to retirement age, to help individuals who have been part of the labour force for an extended period of time to be trained in new and emerging skills currently in demand. In reference to LGBTIQ issues, India reported on the “Sweekruti Scheme” which has been developed to protect the rights of transgender persons. The scheme seeks to

raise awareness, provide legal aid as well as counselling and other forms of support. The scheme also seeks to aid parents of transgender children.

Informal employment was also recognized in the context of gender inequality. The Democratic Republic of Congo noted that women make up the majority of the informal sector, and men are significantly more represented in the formal economy. Solomon Islands mentioned that women make up the majority of the informal sector also in that country, and that many women are performing unpaid work in their own homes. In the context of reducing overall informal employment, reference was made to the importance of partnerships and local ownership of SMEs to better engage the local population in formal employment opportunities. In Papua New Guinea, efforts are being made to localize SME ownership and to empower the local population with the aim of reducing poverty.

Countries also reported on the importance to address the needs of vulnerable groups, referring to the need to provide more sustainable livelihoods, promote inclusion and participation, and to provide community responses to specific issues (Bangladesh and Kenya). Ukraine noted that its residents in rural areas lack sufficient access to medical, education and other services. Malawi also noted that children in rural areas are considered multi-dimensionally poor compared to their counterparts in urban areas. Malawi noted that targeting the poorest children would help reduce inequalities. The topics of digitalization and digital inclusion was also addressed in other reviews, with Finland noting that a portion of the population is missing out on digital services.

Goal 11

Despite the benefits of urbanization, the rapid growth of cities forces billions of urban dwellers worldwide to confront challenges associated with unplanned urban development, including inadequate housing, infrastructure

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



and services; air pollution and environmental risks; and inequalities, among others. With push factors like climate change and rural poverty expected to continue driving urbanization, VNRs this year put special emphasis on the need for faster action and more effective solutions to address cities' housing quality and affordability and improved infrastructure to reduce pollution.

The steady increase in urban slums remains a problem faced by diverse countries (Bangladesh, Comoros, Liberia, Libya, Malawi). Various factors driving this trend were identified, including insufficient levels of local economic development and weak institutional and regulatory frameworks for sustainable urban development (Zambia). Bangladesh noted that it is difficult for local authorities to keep pace with the demand for housing created by urban population growth. As the urban housing deficit continues to widen, it becomes challenging to fill the gap, and as a result long-term difficulties like affordability and housing poverty become more entrenched. Nevertheless, some positive developments were reported. For example, Benin highlighted moderate improvement in the proportion of its urban population living in slum areas, illegal settlements

or inadequate housing. Zambia has formulated a National Urbanization Policy to address the proliferation of informal settlements. Liberia has committed to piloting sustainable cities in five selected cities with specific emphasis placed on various urban renewal actions, such as in housing, waste management and other key priorities. India's "PMAY" programme targets urban households and slum redevelopment through several components, such as affordable housing through credit-linked subsidies, public-private partnership-driven affordable housing, and beneficiary-led house construction. Austria reported good progress and effective strategies on housing quality and affordability, in a period during which affordability remains a challenge in the cities of many advanced economies.

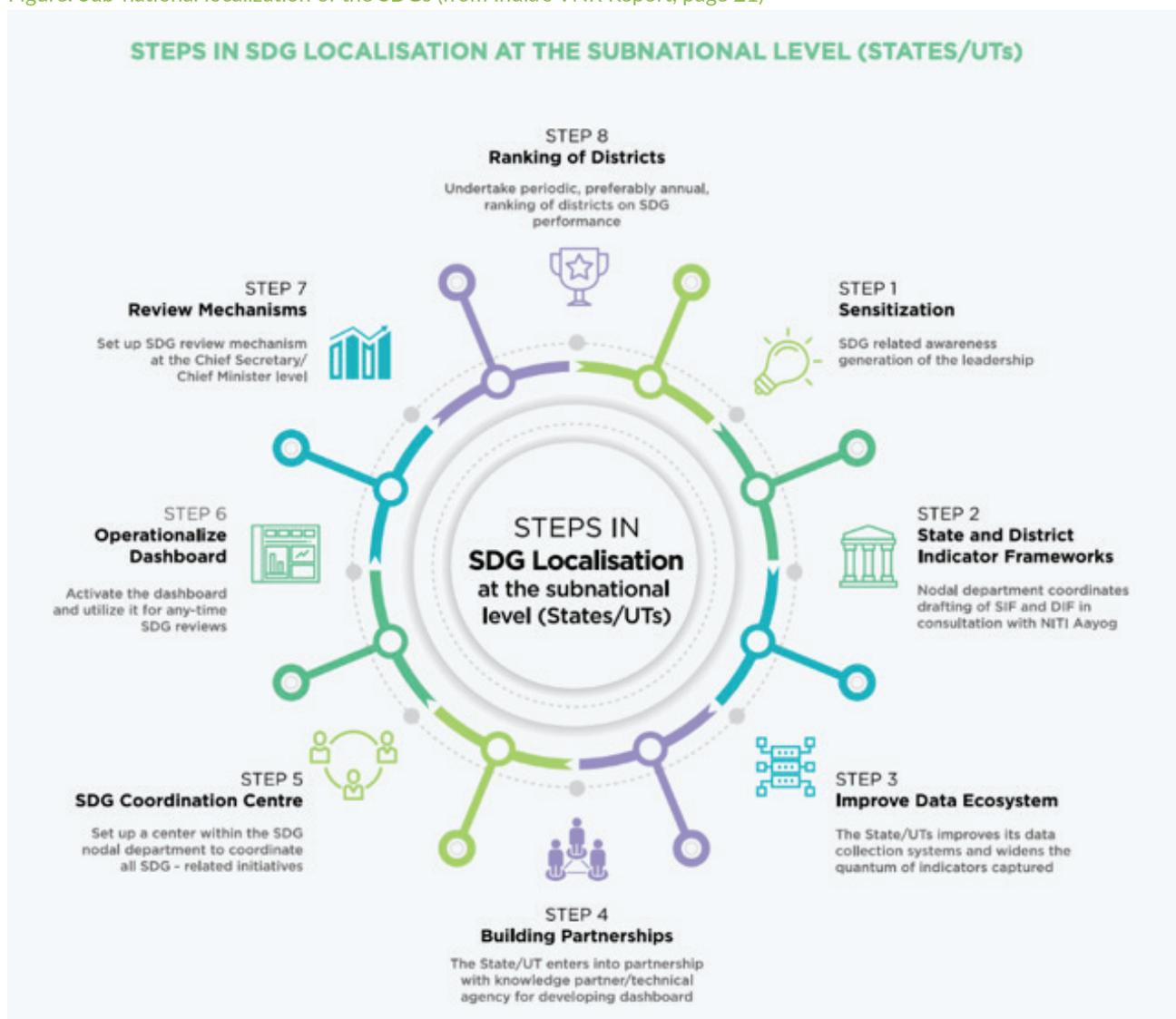
The health and well-being of countries' urban dwellers remains a priority. For countries with specific disaster vulnerabilities, this has translated into planning for climate-resilient housing, services and infrastructure (Samoa). Ecuador's approach to urbanization focuses on the establishment of inclusive cities through the provision of access to adequate housing and services, safety and the reduction of inequalities. Uganda adopted the Safe Cities Free of Violence against Women and Girls Act with the aim of ensuring that women and girls are socially, economically and politically empowered in public spaces that are free from sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence.

Numerous countries struggling with traffic congestion, air pollution, and road safety in rapidly urbanizing contexts emphasized the importance of public transport infrastructure. The Kyrgyz Republic described how increased urbanization had led to increased use of personal vehicles, with subsequent impacts on air quality. The development of low-carbon transportation, and increased access to and affordability of public transit, could help alleviate these environmental pressures and improve urban sustainability. Some countries noted that developing

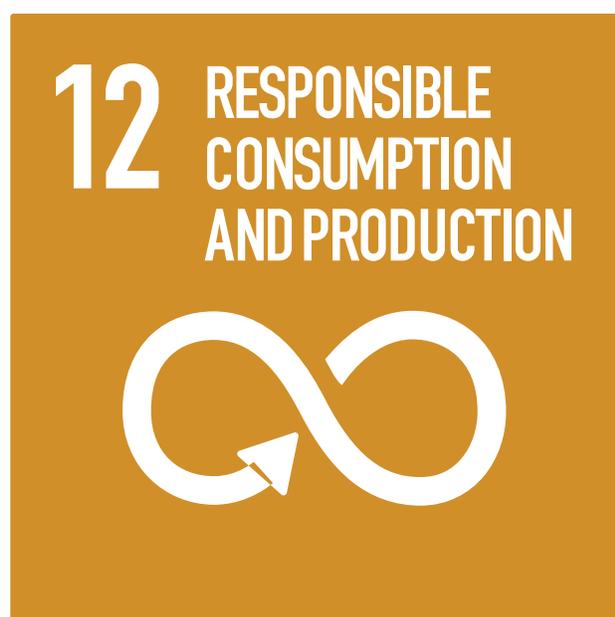
efficient public transport and related infrastructure was a win-win for economic and environmental health of cities (Bangladesh, Slovenia). Large public infrastructure projects that will help to advance progress on certain SDG 11 targets were also highlighted, such as Bangladesh's reference to the Dhaka metro currently under construction. Bulgaria pointed to a new traffic management plan creation of technologically driven intelligent transport systems as key to its urban development plans.

Another important aspect of SDG 11 progress was addressing regional and geographically based imbalances within countries. Comoros, Georgia, India, Kenya and Malawi pointed to the importance of adopting decentralized strategies to implementation of the SDGs and disaster risk reduction plans, which could better align to the needs and realities of regions, cities and local communities. This is especially important given the expansive role many cities increasingly play in their national economy, as well as in the regional and global

Figure: Sub-national localization of the SDGs (from India's VNR Report, page 21)



economy in many cases. Estonia outlined its intentions to continue to strengthen the administrative capacity of local governments to make maximum use of recent reforms that increased their revenue base and autonomy. Countries highlighted the growing importance of deepening urban development and planning in secondary cities to ensure that economic growth and sustainable development were more equitably accessed by residents outside of capitals, as well as improving connectivity among them (Democratic Republic of Congo).



Goal 12

At the Oslo Symposium in 1994, Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) was defined as “the use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations”. SDG 12 aims at decoupling economic growth from environmental damage and natural resource exploitation. Many countries stressed the implementation

of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on SCP, efficient management and use of natural resources, reducing various types of waste, and responsible management of wastes and chemicals, and adoption of sustainable practices in companies/business and public procurement. Countries in their reviews put an emphasis on the six thematic areas of SCP: sustainable food system; sustainable lifestyle; sustainable public procurement; sustainable building and construction; sustainable tourism; and consumer information.

Many countries had initiatives to raise public awareness. Austria launched a responsible shopping initiative “Bewusst kaufen”, which has been supported by a broad variety of stakeholders, providing detailed information on conscious, responsible consumption. Brunei Darussalam introduced the “No Plastic Bag Everyday”, “Plastic Bottle Free”, and “Reduce The Use of Styrofoam” initiatives, and the 3R (Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle) concept. Estonia launched the “Support for Resource Valorization R&D” programme, which is planned to support research and development for the valorization of local resources such as wood, food, and mineral resources. India formulated the “Draft National Resource Efficiency Policy”, which envisions an environmentally sustainable future with resource-secure and equitable economic growth, as well as bio-diverse ecosystems with a focus on sustainable consumption of virgin resources, high material productivity with an emphasis on efficient circular approaches, minimization of waste, and creation of employment opportunities and business models conducive to environmental protection and conservation.

Many countries shared their best practices in implementing SDG 12. Bangladesh undertook different interventions like modernizing the storage facilities and regular repair of dilapidated food storage facilities with a view to reducing the post-harvest losses of food in the storage level in the public sector. Brunei Darussalam engaged stakeholders

such as youth, academic institutions, private companies, and non-governmental organizations in combating plastic pollution in the country through the provision of guidance on good practices and a variety of regulatory measures. Armenia developed rural infrastructure, improved irrigation systems including land amelioration and pasture inundation, introduced diversified hail protection systems, and provided a centralized fight against crop pests. Several countries reported their reduction of hazardous waste generation (India, Austria).

Some countries reported actions toward sustainable tourism (Brunei Darussalam, India, Liberia). Brunei Darussalam's Kampong Ayer was recently awarded the "ASEAN Sustainable Tourism Award" in the Urban ASEAN sustainable tourism category, whereas Bangar Town in the Temburong District was recognized with the "ASEAN Clean City Award." Liberia has developed the "Liberian National Export Strategy on Tourism 2016-2020" as a way of diversifying the Liberian economy.

Challenges were reported, especially by developing countries such as Bangladesh, on lack of data that has prevented them from monitoring progress. The need for intersectoral collaboration and the engagement of the private sector was considered very important. In Kenya, the contaminated waste and materials due to non-sorting of waste at the source have been deemed as a critical challenge to SDG 12. Bangladesh highlighted the need for appropriate policy guidelines to properly manage an increase of electronic waste.

Goal 13

Many countries reported that climate change is already impacting their citizens and natural ecosystems (Comoros, Costa Rica, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Malawi, Micronesia, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, Uganda). Most countries highlighted achievements in the integration of international climate



change policies into national and sectoral plans, and many highlighted strategic policies and projects for climate change (Comoros, Estonia, India, Micronesia). Countries outlined key elements of national climate change plans and strategies. For example, Kenya's National Climate Change Action Plan (2018-2022) provides for low-carbon, climate resilient development that is centred around seven priority areas, including disaster risk management, food and nutrition security, water and blue economy, forest wildlife and tourism, health, sanitation and human settlements, manufacturing, energy and transport.

Countries outlined mitigation actions and commitments, with many references to nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement (Austria, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, India, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Micronesia, Morocco, Nepal, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Samoa, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Uganda). For example, Comoros will maintain its objective to remain a net carbon sink and to contribute the global mitigation effort by reducing its GHG emissions. For its part, Costa Rica has adopted a national decarbonization plan, consisting of a phased approach leading up to 2050. Other

countries reported on ambitious climate neutrality plans (Austria, Estonia, Finland, Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Slovenia). Some countries are implementing strategies for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD), among them Ecuador, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nepal, Panama, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands.

Countries mentioned the impact of climate change on the well-being and livelihoods of humans, especially in relation to key sectors such agriculture, water, and human settlements (Comoros, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Malawi, Morocco). The Federated States of Micronesia reported that the main concern at the community level is sea-level rise with the resulting loss of agricultural capacity and pollution of drinking water. Mozambique noted that the increase in the frequency and severity of climate-related phenomena exceeds the country's capacity to reduce disaster risk and effectively adapt to climate change.

In combination with national adaptation plans, many reviews indicated that disaster risk preparedness is a priority (Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Comoros, Ecuador, India, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Micronesia, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Seychelles, Solomon Islands) and provided information on the updating and implementation of disaster risk reduction and management strategies and legislative frameworks (Costa Rica, Micronesia, Trinidad and Tobago), as well as increased implementation and mainstreaming at the sub-national level (Benin, Ecuador, Kenya, Mozambique, Nepal). Several countries underlined the link between national adaptation planning and resilience and disaster risk reduction at the local level (Honduras, Kenya, Samoa). Malawi has adopted a National Resilience Strategy, with the overall objective of breaking the cycle of food and nutrition insecurity in the country by bridging development and humanitarian interventions. Cooperation across sectors and levels of government, which is necessary so that programmes

and projects effectively contribute to build resilience and adaptive capacities, remains a challenge for many countries (Comoros, North Macedonia, Malawi, Morocco, Niger, Papua New Guinea). Slovenia has created a Local Scoreboard that encourages the exchange of good practices between municipalities and gives insight into the actions of individual municipalities in several areas, such as buildings, transport, and agriculture.

Some countries noted that public knowledge about climate change remains limited (Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia). Numerous countries cited the importance of increasing education and awareness of climate change, with inclusion in school and university curricula (Bangladesh, Burundi, Kyrgyzstan, Samoa, Zambia) and training material for government officials (Kenya). Morocco has established the Climate Change Competence Center of Morocco (4C Maroc), a platform for capacity building for a broad array of actors – public, civil society, academia – from Morocco and Africa.

Several countries reported on their efforts to access climate finance, including from the Green Climate Fund (Armenia, Bangladesh, Benin, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, North Macedonia, Micronesia, Morocco, Nepal, Samoa). Nepal has taken steps to systematically mainstream climate change in the planning and budgeting process through its National Climate Change Financing Framework.

Countries reported challenges in the areas of capacity building, data availability (Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, Democratic Republic of Congo), assessment of risks and vulnerability (North Macedonia), and financing for climate change policies (Democratic Republic of Congo, Panama). For instance, with respect to challenges and next steps, Kyrgyzstan considered that evaluation of climate risks should become an additional element of the decision-making mechanism when determining the allocation of funds in the public and private sectors. Some

countries reported on initiatives for the transfer of climate technologies and knowledge to developing countries (Estonia). India has recently launched the International Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), a joint initiative involving 12 partner countries to generate and exchange knowledge and resources to improve protective infrastructure across the world. Austria has developed a second Master Plan for Environmental Technology and the Export Initiative for Environmental Technologies, which are designed to strengthen its international position as an innovation leader in environmental technologies.



Goal 14

A majority of VNRs dedicated a specific section to SDG 14, including several landlocked countries (Armenia, Austria, Nepal, Uganda). As noted by Austria, even landlocked countries have an impact on oceans and seas, for example through the use of marine resources and pollutant inputs via rivers, while Nepal also highlighted the role of oceans and seas for maritime transport for trade.

The role of oceans and seas for economic well-being

and employment was stressed by many, with several countries reporting on their support and investments in fisheries and aquaculture (Brunei Darussalam, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, Panama, Seychelles) through actions such as investments in infrastructure, tax cuts, additional research, and regulations and legislation. The crucial role of oceans and seas is also well highlighted by Panama, where fishery and aquaculture products constitute the second largest category of exports after the banana. In Papua New Guinea, the fishery sector is a leading revenue earner for the government, while fisheries licenses to foreign fleets are the largest domestic revenue earner for the Federated States of Micronesia.

While countries reported on numerous integrated strategies for ocean management and sustainable fisheries, several (Bangladesh, Comoros, Morocco, Papua New Guinea, Ukraine) also noted the lack of coordination and funding as major challenges towards progress, with Papua New Guinea reporting fragmentation of policies and the immediate need to establish a coordinating National Oceans Office. Regarding enhanced funding, Seychelles reported on its launch of the world's first sovereign blue bond and its Debt for Nature partnership.

Several countries reported on their challenges with and actions against marine pollution. For example, challenges of plastic pollution and microplastics were addressed by many (Austria, Brunei Darussalam, Comoros, Finland, India, Samoa, Seychelles) with actions taken ranging from banning importation and use of use of plastic bags and single use food ware (Seychelles), phasing out microplastics in products (Austria), development of a plastics roadmap (Finland) and a research programme to assess the current situation (India), to increased awareness raising campaigns (Brunei Darussalam) and regional cooperation (Comoros).

Challenges related to marine eutrophication (Bulgaria,

Estonia, Finland, Panama, Samoa, Slovenia), including due to excess loading of phosphorus, nitrogen and organic matter from land-based sources were also reported, with Finland noting quick progress by using new methods such as the spreading of gypsum on farmland to bind phosphorus in the soil.

The importance of management of waste from ships was also stressed, with advocacy for stricter IMO regulation of emissions from shipping (Finland), regular monitoring (India), and actions taken with ports (Estonia, Morocco) to reduce discharges of wastewater. Other highlighted challenges related to marine pollution include oil spills and garbage disposal in the coastal environment (Seychelles), oil and natural gas exploration (Bulgaria), and general marine debris (Panama) and litter (Estonia).

Numerous countries reported declining fish stocks, and reviewed their efforts to curb overfishing and to tackle illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing (Brunei Darussalam, Estonia, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, PNG, Samoa, Slovenia, Russian Federation), for example through updated laws and decrees (Morocco), banning fishing activities during the breeding season of the fish species (India), and electronic catch reporting systems (Estonia). However, Malawi noted that there is high non-compliance of regulations by the fishermen with substandard fleets of vehicles and patrol speedboats resulting in inadequate enforcement of fisheries regulations, with Morocco reporting similar challenges with adequate human resources for efficient control.

Other actions towards more sustainable fishing include banning of trawlers (Brunei Darussalam) and gillnets (Morocco), stricter regulations of fishing gear and extraction of derelict gear (Panama), establishment of fishing quotas (Brunei Darussalam, Seychelles), voluntary certification schemes (India, Russian Federation), bans on catching and landing of endangered species and their

sale (Brunei Darussalam), direct support to ensure fishers livelihood deterring from fishing (Bangladesh) and support for acquisition of environmentally friendlier fishing gear (Estonia).

Many countries also reported on their progress towards establishing marine protected areas (Argentina, India, Brunei Darussalam, Ecuador, Finland, FSM, Samoa, Seychelles, Panama, PNG, Russian Federation), with some countries, such as Brunei Darussalam and Finland noting that they have reached the 10 per cent target. At the same time, Finland noted that even though marine protected areas provide protection for a limited number of species and habitats, many previously common habitats have become endangered and most protected areas lack a management plan. Mozambique reported that management of conservation areas would require a specialized entity and an adjusted legal framework. At the same time, Samoa reported that the 100 villages that have established fish reserves with management plans show positive impacts with improved catch rates, and similar positive results were reported on diversity and quantity of fish in protected areas by the Federated States of Micronesia.

One of the recurring challenges reported by countries (Bangladesh, Comoros, Costa Rica, Estonia, Panama, Samoa) is the lack of monitoring and data. There is a recognized need for enhanced data collection to support decision-making related to, for example, marine protected areas (Costa Rica), impacts of climate change on coastal areas (Morocco), regulating catch (Federated States of Micronesia), and for assessing the economic benefits of fisheries (Federated States of Micronesia) and ocean acidification (Samoa). Several countries, such as Argentina, Bulgaria, Estonia, Federated States of Micronesia, Morocco, Russian Federation, Samoa, and Seychelles reported on their increased activities in ocean research and monitoring. The need to increase awareness of the

importance of ecosystem services as well as to induce behavioural change, including through enhancing public participation, was also stressed (Comoros, Ukraine).

Several references were made to the challenges caused by climate change (Bangladesh, Federated States of Micronesia, Malawi, Mozambique) and ocean acidification (Samoa). Other challenges highlighted include underwater noise (Slovenia), invasive alien species (Comoros, Estonia), insecurity at sea, piracy and gear thefts (Kenya), coastal erosion (Morocco), lack of effective partnership with private sector (Bangladesh) and coral dredging and sand mining (Federated States of Micronesia).

Several countries also referred to the international agreements and conventions they are parties to, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) Conventions for the Protection of the Marine Environment, the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (HELCOM), and others.



Goal 15

Almost all countries reporting on SDG 15 also reported on their actions to safeguard biodiversity, which continues to decline at an alarming rate. Despite active efforts, biodiversity loss is continuing in several countries. Slovenia, for example, noted, that measured by the share of protected area, Slovenia ranks at the top among EU countries with twice the average share. Yet despite numerous measures, biodiversity has continued to decline over the long term, with main pressures coming from loss of habitats, intensive forest management, water management, pollution and climate change. Despite many negative assessments, positive progress was reported on protection of individual species such as European mink (Estonia), tigers (India, Nepal), and rhinos (Nepal). Some of the actions taken include establishment of a biodiversity municipality network (Austria), surveillance systems for wildlife (Morocco), restoration of river habitats and opening of fish migration routes (Estonia), and regional collaboration (North Macedonia).

Progress towards increasing protected areas was reported by numerous countries (Brunei Darussalam, Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Estonia, India, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Morocco, Nepal, North Macedonia, Russian Federation, Morocco, Samoa, Seychelles, Ukraine). However, for example, Kyrgyz Republic noted that despite progress in increasing protected areas, issues such as low security, poor logistics, and lack of skilled staff contribute to the violations of protected areas. Similar management issues were reported by Samoa. At the same time, Nepal reported that its community forestry program has been incredibly successful, and as a result, areas covered by forests have increased and the benefits accrued have been shared by a larger number of the local population.

Countries also reported on their actions to protect wetlands and on new mappings and area classifications

under the Ramsar Convention (Kyrgyz Republic, India, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, North Macedonia, Panama, Russian Federation).

Numerous countries (Argentina, Armenia, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Estonia, Federated States of Micronesia, Kenya, Niger, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation, Samoa, Seychelles, Slovenia) reported on their challenges with and actions to tackle invasive alien species. Some of the actions taken include raising awareness of the importance of native species (Samoa), enhanced laws and regulations and additional studies on prevalence (Armenia), strengthened quarantine services (Brunei Darussalam), and establishment of a national database (Russian Federation).

Several countries reported on the importance of the forestry sector for their economic growth but also simultaneously highlighted the decline of their forests. Uganda's forests provide 88 per cent of the country's energy and 61 per cent of tourism income. However, studies indicate there will be no forests left in 40 years if current trends continue. Similarly, as for biodiversity loss and land degradation, some of the major threats include changes in land use for agriculture and human settlements, overreliance on biomass for energy, and climate change. Other reported challenges for forests include fires (Bulgaria, Comoros, Gambia, India, North Macedonia, Morocco, Russian Federation, Zambia), illegal logging (Gambia), charcoal (Liberia, Malawi Zambia) and fuel wood (Morocco) production, invasive alien species (Samoa), insect infestations (North Macedonia), mining activity (Liberia, Zambia), weak governance (Liberia) and low budget allocations (Democratic Republic of Congo).

Despite the worrying negative trends in many countries, some countries, such as Austria, Costa Rica, India, Nepal, and Uzbekistan, reported positive changes in forest coverage. Some of the actions aimed at tackling

deforestation include stricter sanctions and liabilities for violations, export bans and electronic system for monitoring (Armenia), increased forest management plans (Georgia, Morocco), cross-border collaboration (Brunei Darussalam), payments for ecosystem services (Ecuador), certification schemes (Russian Federation), ban on logging of timber in public and community forests (Kenya), online licensing of forest imports and exports (Malawi), remote sensing for monitoring (Estonia, Panama), tree planting (Papua New Guinea) and tree plantations (Uganda), and sustainable biomass electricity initiatives (Benin). Countries also reported on their plans and initiatives to increase sustainable agroforestry (Burundi, Honduras).

Desertification and land degradation continue to be a major challenge for many countries (Benin, Bulgaria, Burundi, Ecuador, Gambia, India, Morocco, Nepal, North Macedonia, Niger, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation, Seychelles, Ukraine, Zambia), with countries specifying problems such as coastal erosion (Gambia), acidification and salinization (Bulgaria), overgrazing (Kyrgyz Republic, Panama), depletion of soil fertility and land sliding (North Macedonia), wind and water erosion and dust storms (Ukraine). For example, about 28 per cent of India's land is degraded or facing desertification causing an economic impact of 2.5 per cent of GDP.

Reported actions to combat soil degradation include, among additional laws, plans and strategies, supporting local community farmers with sustainable land management practices (Samoa), drip irrigation, biohumus utilization, and hedgerow planting (Armenia), reestablishment of natural coastal buffers (Federated States of Micronesia), and operationalization of a monitoring system (Morocco). The importance of traditional or indigenous knowledge (Ecuador, Nepal, Kyrgyz Republic) and multi-stakeholder efforts (Mozambique) for sustainable land use were also highlighted.

Many countries stressed the compounding impacts of climate change on the environment (Bulgaria, Gambia, Kenya, North Macedonia, Mozambique, Solomon Islands, Russian Federation, Zambia). The special vulnerabilities of mountainous areas were also highlighted (Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal).

The importance of waste and pollution control was highlighted by many, with countries reporting on their challenges with ineffective waste and pesticide management (Gambia), mining (Papua New Guinea, Zambia), chemical contamination and pollution (India, Zambia), water pollution (Burundi) and waste and single-use plastics due to COVID-19 (Peru). Bans on single-use plastic bags (Georgia, Kenya, Papua New Guinea), closing of illegal and unsafe landfills (Georgia) and new waste management strategies (Burundi, Papua New Guinea) were among the reported initiatives.

Several countries (Bangladesh, Comoros, North Macedonia, Mozambique, Uzbekistan), noted the lack of data and information for effective management of natural resources. It was also noted by Zambia that there is still a vast undervaluation of the contribution of forests to GDP, including through ecotourism, erosion control and sediment retention, pollination and carbon storage. Initiatives such as an ecosystem mapping (Estonia), a forest inventory (Bangladesh), a communication platform for researchers and policy makers (Mozambique) and the establishment of a National Information System for Nature (North Macedonia) are currently planned or underway. Several countries (Austria, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Burundi, Ecuador, Kyrgyz Republic, Niger, Syrian Arab Republic) also noted the continued lack of awareness on the role of natural resources in people's lives and reported on actions to engage different stakeholders.

In relation to combatting illegal poaching and trafficking of protected species, countries reported on severe

penalties for illegal extraction, transportation or sale (Russian Federation), coordinated action between police, prosecutors and community agents (Mozambique), and increased efforts on acquiring baseline data (Bangladesh). However, Kyrgyz Republic noted that despite measures such as an increase in fines, poaching and illegal wildlife trafficking do not always receive sufficient attention from law enforcement agencies. Several countries (Argentina, Russian Federation, Samoa) also referred to their efforts to abide by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

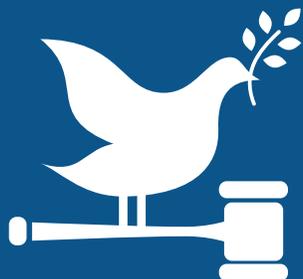
Countries also reported on their aims of preserving genetic diversity (Finland, Georgia, India) and referred to their actions to implement the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization (Austria, Estonia, Kyrgyz Republic, Niger, Seychelles).

While many of the SDG 15 targets show negative trends, several countries (Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Mozambique, Kyrgyz Republic, Niger, Samoa) also reported on dwindling resources allocated to tackle the challenges. Bulgaria noted that since 2014, there has been a steady trend of declining financing for environmental activities measured by share of GDP. Kyrgyz Republic reported that even though strategic documents indicate the importance of preserving the environment, the allocation of funds for such activities is only one per cent of the state budget. At the same time, Morocco and Seychelles reported positive progress in relation to funding, with Seychelles developing a comprehensive Biodiversity Finance Plan. North Macedonia intends to include a separate Government budget line for nature conservation.

Goal 16

Countries underlined that SDG 16 is a vital enabling goal for the entire sustainable development agenda. Without peace, justice, and inclusion, achieving goals

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



such as ending poverty, ensuring education, promoting economic growth will be difficult or impossible to attain. The countries' reports thus addressed some of the targets of SDG 16, which include significantly reducing all forms of violence, ending abuse and violence against children, promoting the rule of law, reducing illicit financial flows and corruption, and developing accountable and transparent institutions.

Many countries (Georgia, India, Kyrgyz Republic, and Malawi) reported significant progress in providing legal identity for all. Malawi reported on its efforts to provide a unique national identity for all Malawians age 16 and above, while Georgia reported on its initiative to issue temporary ID cards for homeless children, and children victims of domestic violence. Countries also reported significant progress on birth registration (Benin, Georgia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Morocco, Nepal, Niger, Samoa, and Uganda) with Gambia also identifying challenges such as low community awareness on the importance of birth certificates, the use of manual systems to track registration, and the non-enforcement of the law.

Several countries (Austria, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Burundi,

Finland, Georgia, India, Kyrgyz Republic, Slovenia and Ukraine) elaborated on initiatives and measures to promote good governance, protection of human rights, and the eradication of violence, especially against women and children. For example, Georgia adopted its first-ever policy document on sexual orientation and gender identity rights, which sets out to combat hate crimes. In turn, to facilitate detection and reporting of violence against children, Bulgaria established the National Helpline of Children, as well as a mapping process for regions with groups vulnerable to human trafficking, including minors.

Many countries highlighted the importance of upholding the rule of law, ensuring universal access to justice and information, building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, and the delivery of public services. With regard to institutional changes and other improvements, countries also reported on institutional structures or reform processes set up to provide better-quality services (Estonia), protect against discrimination (Slovenia), enhance good governance (Gambia) and strengthen the judicial and law enforcement capacity (Armenia, Benin, Bulgaria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kyrgyz Republic, North Macedonia, Solomon Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, and Ukraine). In promoting access to justice, some measures that have been taken include the granting of legal assistance (Bangladesh, Estonia, Republic of Moldova, Trinidad and Tobago, Zambia), and implementing co-operation agreements between different levels of government to build consensus and facilitate the administration of justice (Argentina). Serious challenges to access to justice identified by countries (Bangladesh, Comoros, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, and Uganda) include the shortage of law and justice officers, lack of trust and corruption in the justice system, legal costs and court case backlogs. To remedy the latter, Bangladesh encourages resolving cases through Alternative Dispute Resolution, while Uganda implements expedited court

proceedings and plea-bargains. Many countries noted that the right to access information has been institutionalized in legislation or the national constitution (Argentina, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Gambia, Kenya, Samoa, Seychelles, and Zambia).

Argentina, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Georgia, Honduras, Panama and the Republic of Moldova reported an overall decrease in the rate of intentional homicide. Furthermore, while the proportion of persons held in detention who have not been sentenced yet is overall in decline, this remains a significant challenge for many countries, including Benin, Burundi, Kenya and Zambia. Backlogs of cases in the court system are cited as one of the main obstacles to reduce the number of detainees. In response, some countries have undertaken penitentiary reform initiatives and explored alternative options to imprisonment, such as probation for nonviolent offenders (Benin, Burundi).

Ensuring trust in public officials and institutions also featured as a challenge to achieving SDG 16 for some countries, including Comoros and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Countries further reported on their efforts to combat corruption and bribery (Armenia, Bangladesh, Burundi, Brunei Darussalam, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Estonia, Liberia, Mozambique, North Macedonia, Slovenia and Solomon Islands) enact legislation to fight corruption (Bulgaria, Gambia, India, Solomon Islands) and ensure the protection of whistle-blowers (Solomon Islands, Liberia, Micronesia, India, Papua New Guinea), or implement governance-related initiatives to increase awareness on the issue (Finland) and to ensure more transparent and accountable public institutions (Bangladesh, Estonia). While most countries have experienced overall improvements, some countries reported that they still require heightened efforts to combat corruption (Democratic Republic of Congo, Comoros, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, Panama,

Peru, Republic of Moldova, Trinidad and Tobago, Zambia, and others). Challenges to the elimination of corruption identified by countries include the lack of resources, the unchanged behaviour and mentality of populations, the lack of legislation on whistle-blowers, the lack of statistics, and the low technical and operational capacities of public structures.

Achieving SDG 16 through conflict resolution, peace-building, and regional or international co-operation was emphasized by many reporting countries, including Estonia, Slovenia, Georgia, and Ukraine. The Syrian Arabic Republic and Libya further underlined instability among the biggest obstacles to achieving this goal and development at large. Additionally, terrorism continues to pose a significant threat to the national security and peace of countries. Many countries have adopted national strategies and measures to combat terrorism financing, illicit financial flows and money laundering (Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Estonia, Kyrgyz Republic, Morocco, Mozambique, Russian Federation, Trinidad and Tobago, and Zambia). For example, Kyrgyz Republic adopted an anti-drug programme aimed at curbing the flow of drugs believed to be the main source of financing of many organized crime, extremist and terrorist groups and organizations, while Benin established a functional and dynamic network for collecting and processing of information on illicit drugs trafficking. Mozambique in turn reported on the creation of a Financial Intelligence Office that works directly with various banking entities to collect information on money laundering, terrorist financing and economic crimes.

Finally, a common impediment for countries, including, India, Libya and Bangladesh, attempting to implement Goal 16, was the gaps in availability and reliability of data, making it difficult to measure progress in meeting the goal's targets.



Goal 17

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on countries' sustainable development progress gives new impetus to the pursuit of a revitalized global partnership, as expressed in SDG 17. Some aspects of SDG 17 were already challenged by circumstances to the onset of the pandemic, such as the mobilization of adequate financial resources, the multilateral trading system, and the availability of crucial data. As the world grapples with the global pandemic, countries have highlighted the different levels of access to essential resources that they face, and underscored the need for clear commitments to international cooperation (Barbados, Costa Rica). Advancing sustainable development in the COVID-19 period will require the contributions of all governments, the private sector, civil society and the wider public. Please refer to section XI on means of implementation for a more detailed discussion of the issues below.

With respect to the finance targets, countries broadly reflected on the need to build capacities for domestic resource mobilization and to strengthen efforts to

maintain and increase external public and private investments for sustainable development. Numerous countries pointed to the importance of national capacities for domestic resource mobilization, including through tax administration reforms such as broadening the tax base, modernizing tax systems and aligning tax policy with the SDGs; and the design of incentives that could attract stronger investment (Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Niger). Concerns were raised about the availability of external financing flows, both public and private, and the pandemic's potential impact. In the context of LDC graduation, Bangladesh highlighted the continued importance of official development assistance (ODA) and noted that loans comprised an increasing share of concessional finance relative to grants, which can pose challenges. As a provider of ODA, Bulgaria reported on its efforts to develop a law on international development cooperation, which could support enhanced coordination within Government entities and the overall impact of effective development cooperation. Barbados drew special attention to the target on fostering global coordination in support of developing countries' attainment of long-term debt sustainability, a challenge faced by a growing number of developing countries.

South-South and triangular cooperation are core elements of the global partnership. Participation in sub-regional, regional and international organizations is a key means for numerous countries of advancing their partnerships and strengthening capacities for sustainable development (Brunei, Russian Federation). India referred to its support to developing countries through the US \$150 million India-UN Development Partnership Fund and its contributions to global action to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Uganda stated that South-South cooperation is a critical means for the eradication of poverty and inequalities, but it also requires strong accountability and monitoring mechanisms, which could help to enhance impact. Argentina also put

special emphasis on South-South cooperation and drew attention to its qualitatively important aspects—such as solidarity, reciprocity and learning—which are often not easy to measure.

With respect to data, Panama identified the strengthening of information systems for decision-making and public policy reorientation as a major challenge to be addressed by international cooperation, and experience- and knowledge-sharing. Multi-stakeholder partnerships were

highlighted as key aspects of countries' progress on SDG 17. Zambia underlined its desire to build stronger partnerships in support of green growth and climate action. Slovenia highlighted the role that such partnerships and initiatives play in its pursuit of sustainable development and international cooperation in areas including water diplomacy, green growth, digitalization and the circular economy. Syrian Arab Republic drew attention to the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on its national sustainable development.

MONITORING AND DATA

Support of the national statistical system to provide comprehensive data and statistics are essential to successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. The collection, processing, analysis, and release of reliable, timely, available, high-quality, and disaggregated data on the indicators are fundamental for evidence-based policymaking. To this end, countries have launched a series of measures to increase data availability for policymakers and other users so as to facilitate SDG implementation and follow-up and review.

Data, statistics and indicators

The UN General Assembly adopted the global indicator framework for SDGs developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators with the aim of using internationally comparable and standardized indicators across countries to monitor the progress of the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda. The global SDG indicators database (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/>) offers a transparent platform to access data used for global reporting. Furthermore, the United Nations Open SDG Data Hub promotes the exploration, analysis, and use of authoritative SDG data sources for evidence-based decision-making and advocacy. In response to the ongoing pandemic, the UN COVID-19 Data Hub was established to provide a space for the global statistical community to share guidance, actions, tools, and best practices, to ensure the operational continuity of data programmes by National Statistical Offices.

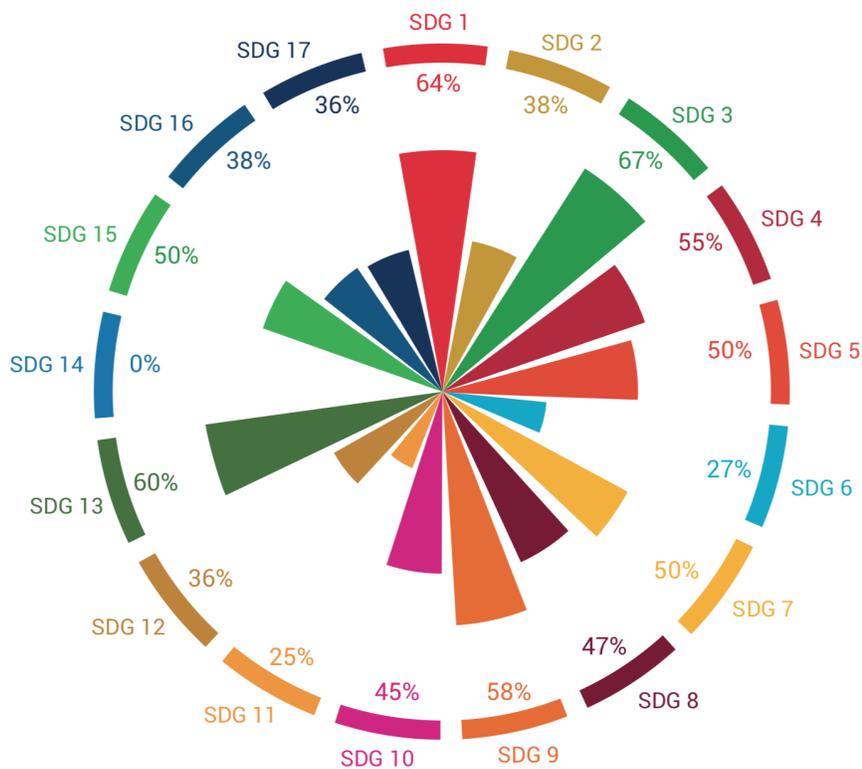
The 2020 VNRs demonstrate that countries are taking important steps to address issues related to data availability, gaps, disaggregation and

collection. They also show that the majority of countries are incorporating data into their reviews, and over half of all VNRs in 2020 include a Statistical Annex (Bangladesh, Barbados, Benin, Bulgaria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Finland, Gambia, Georgia, Honduras, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Federated States of

Micronesia, Panama, Republic of Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia, Russian Federation, Samoa, Seychelles, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda). Furthermore, some countries are providing an extended Statistical Annex or a national indicator report as a separate document to further support their VNRs (Austria, Finland,

Figure: Accessibility analysis of the global SDG indicators in the Kyrgyz Republic (from Kyrgyz Republic's VNR Report, page 138)

Accessibility analysis of the global SDG indicators in the Kyrgyz Republic



Easily accessible:



Least accessible:





Mozambique, Republic of Moldova, Samoa, Trinidad and Tobago, and Ukraine).

Countries shared information on data availability for the global indicators. For example, the Kyrgyz Republic reported that they could report on 102 indicators, or 50 per cent of all applicable global SDG indicators. Out of the 102 available indicators, data for 71 indicators (70 per cent) are compiled by the National Statistical Committee (NSC), data for 28 indicators (27 per cent) are produced by ministries and departments, and data for 3 indicators (3 per cent) are produced by the NSC in cooperation with ministries and departments.

Countries are also taking steps to modify and adapt the global indicator framework to fit national contexts, conditions and priorities. Some reasons cited for modifications and/or adaptations include data availability and relevance to national context. Armenia, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Estonia, Finland, Gambia, India, Kyrgyz Republic, Micronesia, Mozambique, Nepal, Slovenia, Uganda, and Uzbekistan, among others, have launched online SDG data reporting platforms to provide the latest data available and show progress. For example,

in Bangladesh, an online SDGs Tracker, administered by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, with IT support from a2i Programme, connects all the data generating ministries to provide data on the platform. Nepal initiated a National Data Profile portal as an integrated open data platform. Estonia utilized an innovative data visualization tool, a data-driven “statistics Tree” which provides an overall of the state of implementation of the indicators.

Key challenges

Major challenges faced by the VNR countries to monitor the progress of the 2030 Agenda in their reports are as follows:

Data gaps and data collection challenges. Bangladesh, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia, Honduras, India, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Micronesia, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Nepal, Republic of Moldova, Seychelles, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda, among others, cited gaps in data availability and insufficient data as major challenges in monitoring progress toward the SDGs. Kenya described national efforts through the National Statistics Office in conducting surveys to address most of the existing data gaps as well as enhance data disaggregation. Data collection challenges were highlighted in Benin, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Nepal, Niger, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, and Uganda. The Federated States of Micronesia noted that data-related complexities remain a significant challenge.

Data disaggregation. Benin, Comoros, Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, India, Kenya, the Kyrgyz Republic, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Republic of Moldova, Slovenia, and Solomon Islands, among others, expressed challenges in producing disaggregated data. Some countries mentioned the lack of data for special population groups.

Need for financial and technical support for monitoring and capacity building. Benin, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Republic of Moldova, Niger, Papua New Guinea, and Samoa, among others, highlighted the need for increased investment in the national statistical system and its capacity to collect, produce and analyze data.

Measures taken to strengthen national statistical capacity

Creating ownership for data collection and reporting. The national statistical system in many countries had a central role in preparations for the VNRs, and in some countries the national statistical office had a coordinating role related to the data in the VNR. Statistics Finland is in charge of the national compilation of the global SDG indicators. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics was listed as the chair of the Data Technical Working Group, which provides data and statistics for the VNR. In Ukraine, the State Statistics Service coordinates data collection and related development of metadata for monitoring progress toward the SDGs. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the National Statistical Committee led the data mapping, inventory, adaption and collection processes.

Benin, Liberia, Malawi, Papua New Guinea, Seychelles, and Trinidad and Tobago, among others, expressed the need to strengthen their national statistical system to produce more data and statistics to monitor progress. Mozambique stressed the importance of establishing a robust mechanism of national statistics. Kenya and the Kyrgyz Republic highlighted the need to strengthen the administrative data system to produce more disaggregated data.

Armenia, Gambia, Liberia, Kyrgyz Republic, and Morocco, among others, cited updates to their existing statistical legislation, and a few indicated that they have enacted or are in the process of enacting new statistical legislation.

For example, Armenia adopted a Law on Official Statistics in 2018, which is fully based on the fundamental principles of UN official statistics.

The broad scope of the SDGs calls for the use of new technology to improve data collection, analysis and accessibility. Kenya has incorporated small area estimation techniques to improve their poverty data. In India, there is a move toward digitalization of statistical systems and data collection methods, such as the use of tablets, mobile phones, and geospatial data, to improve quality, timeliness, and granularity of data. In Kenya, they moved to a digital census in 2019.

Countries noted the importance of partnerships and other types of support to strengthen their national efforts on SDGs. For example, in Liberia, series of national statistical strengthening initiatives were supported by key development partners including the African Development Bank, the World Bank, UNICEF, UNFPA, and others. In North Macedonia, the UN Resident Coordinator organized a workshop with representatives from government offices and UN agencies in country to define the indicator framework. In Samoa, consultations were held over one-week to validate data, including representatives of government, NGOs, private sector, regional and international organizations, UN agencies based in Samoa, Fiji and headquarters of non-resident agencies in New York.

Non-traditional data sources to keep SDGs on the right track. It is well established that the traditional statistical data sources cannot fully meet the data needs of the SDGs. Kenya is utilizing big data to produce new and policy-relevant ICT statistics. Bangladesh has partnered with the United Nations Statistics Division to implement the Data4Now initiative in collaboration with a2i Programme for more timely data.

COHERENCE AMONG GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS AND WITH REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Countries' strategies to implement the 2030 Agenda continue to be shaped by global and regional policy frameworks. Many countries specified integration with SDG implementation in their VNR report, giving indication to linkages to national priorities. Multilateral agreed frameworks play an important role as they provide established policy space in which countries can seek coherence and complementarities through plans and measures for SDG implementation. Many countries further integrate international or regional agreements into their national sustainable development plans, in turn creating synergies in activating communities of practice around specific (interlinked) SDGs. The most commonly recognized frameworks in conjunction with the 2030 Agenda are: the UNFCCC Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.

In referencing the Decade of Action, some countries reaffirmed their commitment to the principles of the 2030 Agenda, the targets set under the SDG framework, and expressed the urgent need to a strengthened and accelerated implementation of the SDGs over the next ten years (Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia, India, Kyrgyz Republic, Micronesia, Nepal, Solomon Islands, Costa Rica, Bulgaria, Georgia, Ecuador, Trinidad and Tobago, Finland).

Regarding integration of global frameworks for instance in addressing SDG 5 (Gender Equality), several countries (Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Georgia, Nepal, Nigeria, Gambia, Uganda) referred to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms

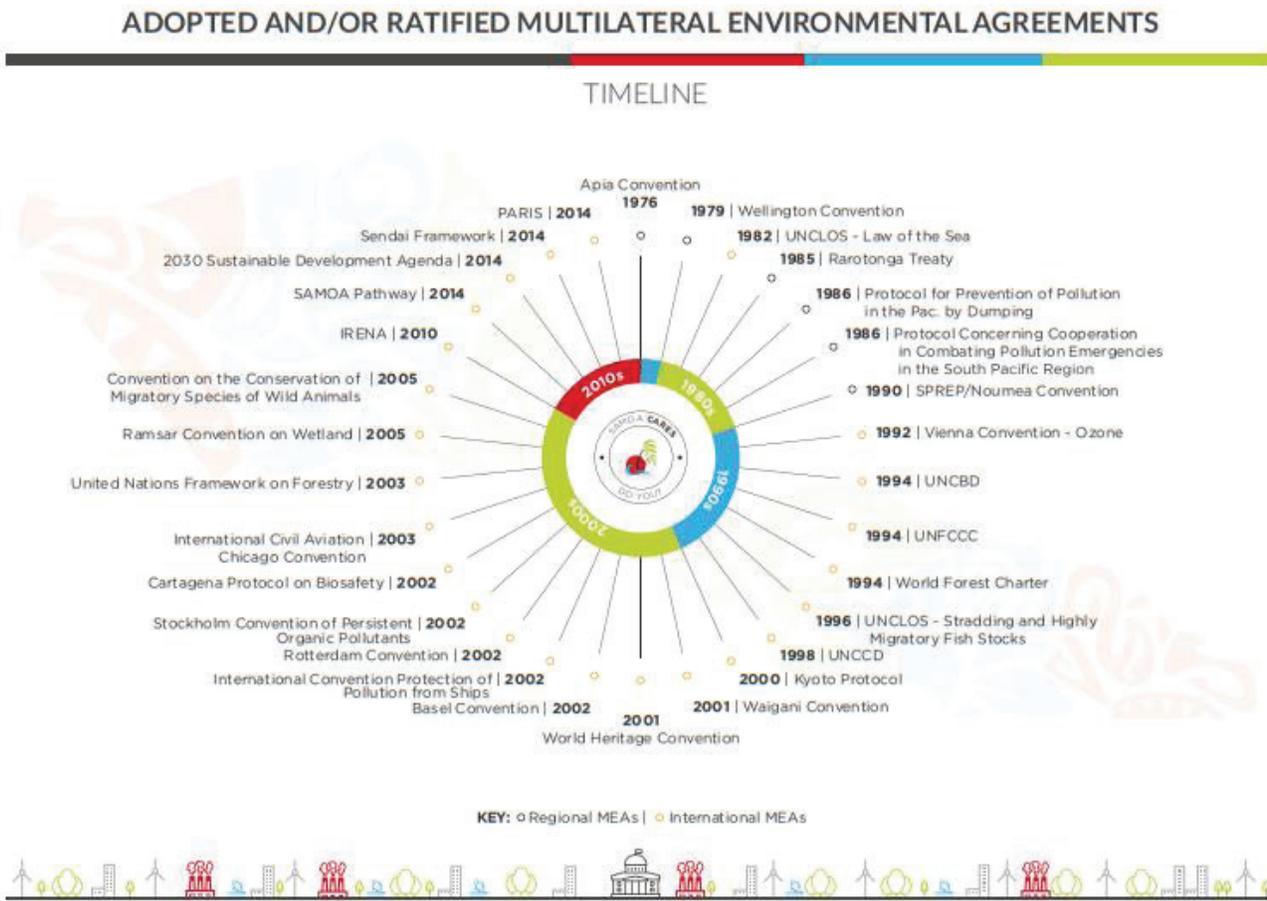
of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), or Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security (Armenia, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Liberia, Kyrgyz Republic, Ukraine, Austria, Bulgaria, Finland), while some (Georgia, North Macedonia, Austria, Finland) also drew attention to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) (Finland, Slovenia, Ukraine), and The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) (Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Uganda).

Noting implementation efforts in addressing SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), some countries

specified their subscription to a number of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) such as the Bamako Convention, the Stockholm Convention, or the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal (Liberia, Gambia, Brunei Darussalam, Kyrgyz Republic, Samoa). Uganda is party to multiple MEAs including the Convention on Biological Diversity, Minamata Convention, and the Vienna Convention/Montreal Protocol. The MEAs are mainstreamed/integrated into the Government's medium-term and annual development plans, and are implemented through Key Performance Areas.

Countries noted that national plans and strategies were being aligned also with regional frameworks, for instance

Figure: Timeline adopted and/or ratified multilateral environmental agreements (from Samoa's VNR report, page 101)



the African Union Agenda 2063 shapes the formulation and implementation of the SDGs (Benin, Burundi, Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia). Countries seek to ensure policy coherence such as through the decisions taken to implement European Union policies and laws (Finland, Bulgaria, Austria, Estonia, Slovenia). Other regional and sub-regional policy frameworks for sustainable development referred to include the Vision 2050 of the East African Community that seeks to achieve socio-economic development (Kenya), or the regional ECOWAS Vision 2020 (Nigeria, Liberia, Gambia).

Countries also specified the significance that status has on identifying SDG priorities and long-term concerns for sustainable development. SIDS highlighted increased vulnerability against the implications the ongoing global crises such as the global pandemic, and climate change (Solomon Islands, Micronesia, Samoa), due to their unique nature, and limited financial resources. The SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (S.A.M.O.A.) Pathway is intrinsically linked to the 2030 Agenda and calls for urgent and concrete actions to address these particular

vulnerabilities of SIDS in a concerted manner.

Countries also highlighted other avenues for integrated approaches such as: The Convention on Biological Diversity (India, Uganda, Bangladesh, Kyrgyz Republic, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Finland, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago), the International conference on Population and Development ICPD (Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Papua New Guinea), BDPfA Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on Women's Rights (Nigeria), the New Urban Agenda proposed under Habitat III (Nepal, Ecuador), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Kenya, Bangladesh), the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (Papua New Guinea), the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Costa Rica, Liberia), the AU Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa (Nigeria, Uganda), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) (India, Trinidad and Tobago), the Vienna Programme of Action for LDCs (Gambia), the United Nations Anti- Corruption Action Plan (Istanbul Action Plan) (Kyrgyz Republic, Georgia), and the Addis Tax Initiative (Finland).

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

This section outlines how VNRs reflect on the engagement of stakeholders from different sectors in the support to SDG implementation and follow up. This has occurred through institutionalizing mechanisms for stakeholder participation, involving and consulting with stakeholders during decision-making processes, providing an enabling environment for stakeholders to contribute to SDG implementation, and engaging stakeholders in monitoring and reporting activities, including VNRs preparation. As in previous synthesis reports, the involvement of parliaments is covered in section III on institutions for implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Institutions for stakeholder engagement

Many countries (Armenia, Benin, Estonia, Finland, Gambia, Panama, Uganda) underlined the importance of a whole-of-society approach and described how stakeholders were included in the main SDG coordination mechanism tasked to guide the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda. In Uganda, the institutional delivery of the SDGs is guided by a multi-stakeholder National SDG Coordination Framework, which was established in 2016 under the leadership of the Office of the Prime Minister.

Kenya, Malawi, North Macedonia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Panama, the Republic of Moldova, Liberia, Nepal and Russian Federation engage stakeholders from different sectors in technical committees or working groups coordinating SDG implementation. In Kenya, the Inter-Agency Technical Working Committee (IATWC) is co-chaired by the Government, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the private sector. Panama set up an Inter-institutional and

Civil Society commission to support participation and ownership of the SDGs in all sectors of society.

Countries (Argentina, Austria, Comoros, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Estonia, Finland, Kenya, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Panama, Republic of Moldova, Samoa, Seychelles, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda) also shared examples of engagement with stakeholder platforms and networks in support to SDG implementation. PAMPA2030, the multi-sectorial Argentinian Platform to Monitor the 2030 Agenda, is comprised of more than 20 social organizations, trade unions and academic institutions. In Austria, civil society organizations joined in 2017 to establish 'SDG Watch Austria' which has grown to more than 180 members from a variety of sectors.

Stakeholder participation in SDG-related decision-making processes

The engagement of stakeholders in SDG-related decision-making processes was reported in different ways.

Several countries (Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Estonia, Gambia, Liberia, Syrian Arab Republic, Malawi, Micronesia, Morocco, Panama, Samoa, Seychelles, Trinidad and Tobago) consulted with stakeholders from different sectors on SDG-related plans. Burundi organized technical workshops on the integration of SDGs in the Common Plans for Community Development. In Democratic Republic of Congo and Morocco, surveys were organized to assess the population's perception on the SDGs. Bangladesh organized several consultations on stakeholders' engagement on SDGs implementation while in Trinidad and Tobago, the Vision 2030 plan was built through a consultative process that foresees periodic inclusive reviews. Armenia's Transformation Strategy 2020-2050 involved the private sector, civil society and all Armenian people, including the Diaspora.

In addition, countries have also set up multi-stakeholder mechanisms to coordinate around specific issues, such as health, gender equality, climate, disaster risk reduction, water and others.

Argentina, Georgia, Panama, Peru, the Republic of Moldova, Slovenia and Uganda established web-based portals allowing access from all stakeholders to a broad range of information on SDG implementation. Austria and North Macedonia set up "labs" that support cross-organizational and multi-stakeholder approaches while integrating relevant stakeholders in open and interdisciplinary spaces supporting policymaking.

Argentina, Costa Rica, Estonia, Georgia and Liberia established systems to maintain stakeholders informed about SDG implementation.

Stakeholder engagement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

VNR reports acknowledged the importance of engaging stakeholders from different sectors for the 2030 Agenda implementation. With regard to civil society organizations, Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Estonia, Kenya, Micronesia, Nepal, Panama, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Trinidad and Tobago and Uganda listed examples of the provision of direct services to vulnerable populations, capacity building and training, policy advocacy and awareness raising, among others. In Bangladesh, the NGO Affairs Bureau set up an SDG Implementation Sub-Committee to make CSO contributions visible and accountable, which led to the development of an NGO's SDG Action Plan.

Many countries (Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Bulgaria, Comoros, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Estonia, Finland, Honduras, India, Kenya, Micronesia, Nepal, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Samoa, Seychelles,



Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, Uzbekistan) reported on the contribution of the private sector to SDG implementation. In Uganda, the Private Sector SDG Platform was established in partnership with the government and development partners while in Papua New Guinea, the Business Council of Papua New Guinea (BCPNG) is leading and championing the private sector's engagement on SDGs. Finland registered that most of the biggest companies have mapped and studied their actions against the SDGs, and many have started integrating the SDGs into their strategies.

Bulgaria's national survey on corporate social responsibility identified that nearly two-thirds of its biggest companies were aware of the SDGs and more than one-third had organized more than one event related to the SDGs in 2018.

Thirty-four countries (Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Bulgaria, Burundi, Brunei, Comoros, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of Congo, Estonia, Finland, Gambia, Georgia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, India, Malawi, Micronesia, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Moldova, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, Seychelles, Trinidad and Tobago, Ukraine, Zambia) reported the engagement of Micro-, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) in SDG implementation. Representing the majority of enterprises, MSMEs are reported as the backbone of economic growth, providing employment opportunities,

reducing disparities and incentivizing innovations for achieving SDGs.

Academic and Scientific Institutions were also identified as partners in SDG implementation in Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Benin, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Estonia, Finland, Kenya, Micronesia, North Macedonia, Panama, the Russian Federation and Trinidad and Tobago. In North Macedonia, a call was launched in January 2020 for academia to submit SDG-related publications and research projects. In Austria, the inter-university cooperation project "UniNETZ" mobilizes 16 Austrian universities to strengthen cooperation, intensify transdisciplinary science-society-policy dialogue and make long-term contributions to sustainable development.

Many countries flagged the contribution of youth to SDG implementation (Austria, Bangladesh, Estonia, Finland, the Gambia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, North Macedonia, Panama, Seychelles, Uganda, Ukraine, Zambia). In the Kyrgyz Republic, the government, jointly with the UN, has been implementing the "SDG Youth Ambassadors" Program, aimed at increasing the participation of youth in the national adaptation of the SDGs.

Benin, Estonia, Kenya, Malawi and the Russian Federation were among the countries that flagged the role of volunteers in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The government of Benin, with the support of UN Volunteers and UNDP has set up the "Corps National des Jeunes Volontaires pour le Developpement" and a national platform to coordinate their contributions towards SDG implementation.

Countries registered the contribution of a broad range of stakeholders and sectors to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. For instance, Kenya referred to the Kenya Philanthropy Forum, which mobilizes over 40 philanthropic organizations with the objective of bringing coherence and championing alignment to national development priorities

and providing support towards the implementation of the SDGs. In Costa Rica, the National Faith-Based Organizations Platform is a space for dialogue, proposition, collective construction, and dialogue to contribute to the SDGs. Bangladesh has been in constant dialogue with the media through seminars and workshops while in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an Association of Journalists for Sustainable Development was established to track and report on SDG implementation.

Stakeholder engagement in monitoring and reporting, including VNRs

The majority of reporting countries (Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Burundi, Comoros, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Estonia, Gambia, Georgia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Micronesia, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Moldova, Samoa, Seychelles, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago, Ukraine, Zambia) organized consultations with stakeholders from different sectors for the preparation of their VNRs.

Slovenia consulted with stakeholders on the review process and on methods of enhancing stakeholder participation. Burundi has submitted the draft report to the review of governmental entities, universities and research centers, NGOs, the private sector and United Nations entities. Estonia compiled contributions from NGOs, the private sector and local governments and the most significant examples were featured in the VNR report while Trinidad and Tobago held an online SDG Survey open to all stakeholders.

Armenia, Bangladesh, Benin, Costa Rica, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Micronesia, Nepal, Panama, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda and Zambia referred to the impact of COVID-19 in stakeholder mobilization and the need for adjustments to guarantee inclusive participation at the

VNR process. Zambia's VNR was validated by stakeholders through virtual conferencing. Bangladesh, the Gambia, Malawi, Niger, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Uganda and Trinidad and Tobago noted special efforts to reach out to marginalized groups in the preparation of their VNRs. In Slovenia, representatives of organizations of vulnerable and marginalized populations were invited to participate, including representatives of language minorities, persons with disabilities, Roma, the LGBTIQ community and representatives of the older population, women, children and youth.

Stakeholders in Austria, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Kenya, the Kyrgyz Republic, Micronesia, the Republic of Moldova, Samoa, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Uzbekistan contributed to drafting their countries' VNRs. In Costa Rica, Liberia and Samoa, a draft version of the VNR document was distributed for stakeholder revision. The first draft of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's VNR was shared with a broad range of stakeholders for technical validation and virtual workshops were held. In Micronesia, representatives of the private sector, CSOs and other development partners were identified to draft sections of the VNR report.

Contributions from stakeholders were featured in different ways in the 2020 VNR reports. For instance, Argentina and Morocco included excerpts from stakeholders' networks while Kenya included civil society reports as an Annex. In Finland, stakeholders were invited to write some parts of the report. North Macedonia and Panama shared outcomes from online stakeholder consultations.

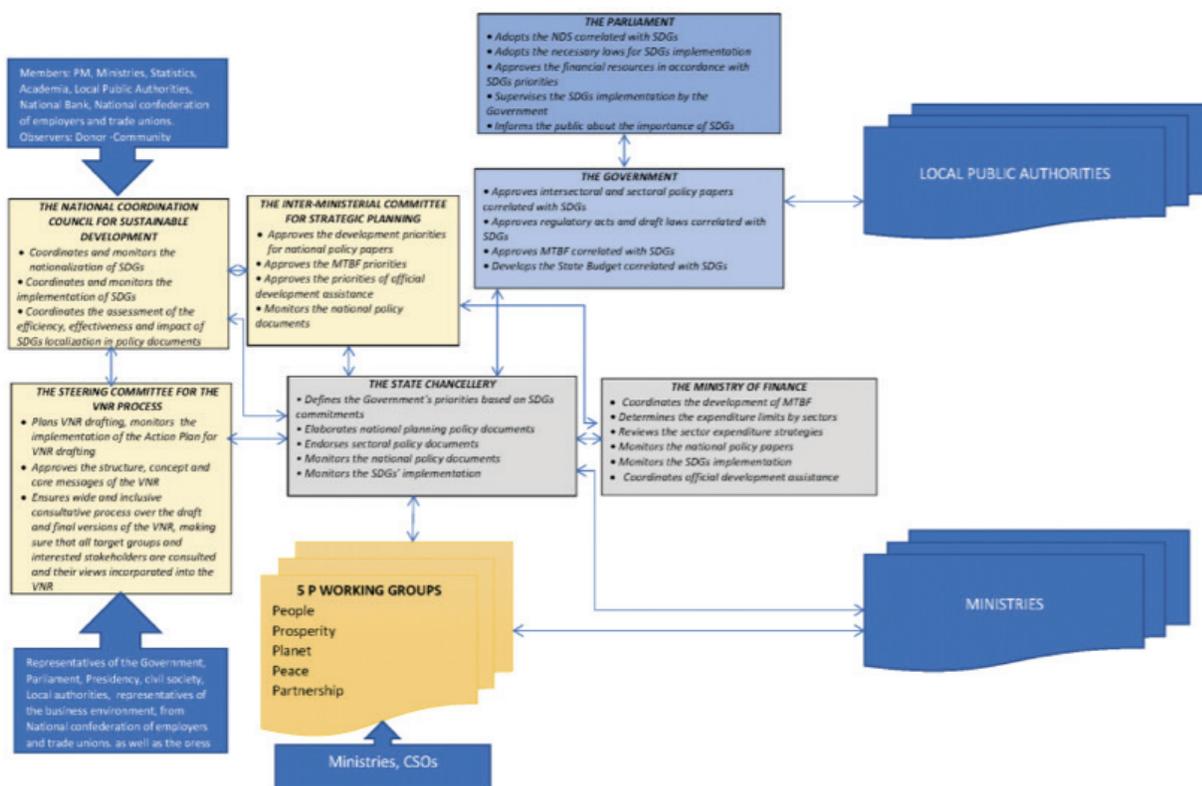
Many countries (Burundi, Ecuador, Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Micronesia, North Macedonia, Panama, Republic of Moldova, Samoa, Uganda, Ukraine) registered the contribution of United Nations entities to the VNR process.

Challenges/Next Steps

Several countries reflected on challenges and next steps related to the engagement of stakeholders in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including Costa Rica, India, Micronesia and Trinidad and Tobago. Costa Rica mentioned the challenges faced by its CSO Platform including in uniting members under a shared agenda, mobilizing funds to expand the scope of activities and

facilitating the exchange of good practices and lessons learned for an interdisciplinary implementation of the SDG. Morocco referred to the challenge of expanding engagement processes to the sub-national level while Trinidad and Tobago highlighted the critical need of building capacity of civil society and the private sector to collect SDG-related data.

Figure: Institutional Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals in Moldova (Moldova's VNR Report, page 24)



AWARENESS- RAISING

There is recognition that it is critical to foster awareness raising on the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs among all stakeholders and that this should be a continuous process. The section below briefly outlines some of the initiatives that countries reported to this end.

Some countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, Gambia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Malawi, Micronesia, Mozambique, Niger, Seychelles, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda) highlighted the importance of raising awareness about the SDGs as part of their implementation efforts. Kenya undertook a countrywide assessment of SDG awareness levels with a broad range of stakeholders to better inform policy decisions. Comoros, Malawi and India organized national and sub-national SDG awareness capacity building workshops.

Community radio stations were used in the Gambia, Liberia, Trinidad and Tobago and Uganda to promote a deeper understanding of the Agenda 2030 and the VNR process. Argentina, Bulgaria and Finland flagged the role of community centers and libraries in raising awareness about the SDGs.

Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Brunei Darussalam, Honduras, Kenya and Uganda reported on efforts to disseminate information on how the SDGs are being implemented. Austria, Armenia and Honduras informed about the creation of online platforms to register activities related to the 2030 Agenda while Finland, Kenya, Liberia and Malawi translated SDG materials into national languages.

Some countries described their efforts toward raising awareness about the SDGs with specific



groups (Argentina, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Finland, India, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, Panama, Seychelles and Zambia). As an example, a national “Youth for Sustainable Development Goals” campaign was organized by the National Youth Council of Moldova, which resulted in a complementary report presenting the views of youth on SDG implementation and the award to 17 SDG Ambassadors.

MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION

This section outlines how countries' voluntary national reviews addressed the means of implementation for the 2030 Agenda, including financial and non-financial resources as well as partnerships, science, technology and innovation and capacity building.

Due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous countries highlighted an urgent need for access to international financing to scale up the health response and address the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 adds a new layer of vulnerability to pre-existing macro-economic and financial challenges. Depending on the country context, these challenges include, among others, a steep decline in industrial activity; high unemployment; elevated levels of household debt among vulnerable groups; increased inflation; capital flight and record public debt levels. There was a strong emphasis on the need for international solutions to address debt vulnerabilities, including rules and regulations and global partnerships with developing countries to help attain long-term debt sustainability (Argentina, Barbados). Debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring, were mentioned as measures to address the external debt of highly indebted developing countries.

Resources and financing

Public and private financing both play essential roles in fostering sustainable development and achieving the 2030 Agenda (Bulgaria, Costa Rica, the Gambia, Malawi, Mozambique, North Macedonia, Samoa, Ukraine, Zambia). Countries stressed the importance of strengthening the internal control of public finance, including budget transparency and streamlined disbursement processes and guidelines.



Some countries have outlined strategic investments in a national investment plan, linking sustainable development objectives to financing plans and budgets. Costa Rica's national investment plan prioritizes: (i) a roadmap/timeline for investment; (ii) greater coherence across different implementing entities; (iii) accountability between domestic and international actors; (iv) sustainability of financing by requiring budget allocation early in the project planning cycle; and (v) monitoring and evaluation. Federal and state budgets also have distinctive roles in financing the SDGs (Austria, Bulgaria). In Bulgaria many of the main financing activities related to the SDGs, such as health, education, and social care, are carried out based on state-delegated budgets with clear standards. Comoros stressed the need for adequate absorptive capacity of public investment, highlighting challenges in programming, budgeting and monitoring and evaluation of projects. Slovenia uses public procurement procedures to promote sustainability through its Decree on Green Public Procurement.

To strengthen the SDG financing architecture and align resources with national objectives, many countries have undertaken a Development Finance Assessment with UN support. This has helped countries to better understand their financing challenges and provided an opportunity to develop a broader, more holistic vision for SDG financing (Costa Rica, the Gambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal). Their participation has provided insights into

the development of an Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) to strengthen the linkages between planning, budgeting and financing, with Nigeria and Papua New Guinea reporting specifically on advances in INFF design and implementation.

Private investments (domestic and international) are necessary for achieving the SDGs. Severe shortcomings in attracting sufficient foreign direct investment remain (Armenia, Bangladesh, Comoros, Samoa, Ukraine, Zambia). To address low levels of FDI and attract private investment, countries have implemented diverse strategies. Samoa created a Foreign Investment Advisory Committee that advises the government on FDI, guided by the National Investment Policy. Comoros set up a National Agency for the Promotion of Investments that facilitates business registration. Bangladesh highlighted the lack of information on its economic potential and investment opportunities as a major obstacle; it prioritizes improved international auditing and accounting standards and progress on the Doing Business Index. Ukraine stated that insufficient protection of creditors' rights and the persistence of non-performing loans had limited lending activities.

To address the challenges posed by narrow fiscal space, declining FDI and ODA, public-private partnerships are another means of implementation (Ukraine, Zambia). Benin emphasized the need to go beyond traditional partners by approaching philanthropic actors and sources of innovative finance. Armenia joined the Beneficial Ownership Leadership Group, and has established an action plan to return property and financial resources taken from the state, accompanied by an exercise to identify beneficiary owners and the implementation of reforms based on accountable, transparent, participatory principles.

Remittances continue to be an important source of capital for economic growth and development (Benin, Burundi,

Comoros, Uganda, Ukraine), although they remain below desired levels in some countries. Many predicted a drop because of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic fallout.

Domestic resources

Countries are undertaking reforms to strengthen domestic resource mobilization and improve domestic capacity for revenue collection (Bangladesh, Benin, Burundi, India, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Seychelles, Uganda, Zambia). Most reforms focus on the expansion of the tax base, including tax rate increases, prevention of tax evasion, the introduction of new tax measures and management of tax exemptions. Bangladesh called on development partners to provide technical assistance to build the necessary capacities for these efforts, including support for decentralized revenue collection. Illicit financial flows are a major challenge to taxation efforts and require collaboration between developing and developed countries to stem them (India).

Beyond tax measures, fiscal and administrative reforms can enhance resource mobilization (the Gambia, Honduras, Liberia). This includes implementing digital information systems for public financial management and improving dialogue between public enterprises and financial control and supervision entities (Benin, Samoa). Russia improved national tax collection through the digitalization of the tax administration. Samoa is currently rolling out an electronic Tax Invoice Monitoring System to improve tax compliance and revenues. Estonia and Finland have instrumentalized tax reform to make progress on development priorities like reducing inequality and promoting carbon neutrality.

Countries also underlined the importance of fiscal policy planning to extend the horizon for fiscal policymaking and improve public financial management. Papua New Guinea has implemented a Medium-Term Fiscal Strategy through 2022, which serves as the main financing strategy and aims to strengthen revenue collection and public

debt management. Papua New Guinea and the Seychelles have also put in place a Medium-Term Revenue Strategy to increase the efficiency of government spending and enhance the governance of public enterprises.

The challenging macroeconomic environment in some countries complicated the generation and collection of tax revenues, hindering government spending on national priorities (Argentina, Barbados, Liberia, Ukraine). Barbados described its Barbados Economic Recovery and Transformation Plan, which emphasizes macroeconomic stability through strong, sustainable and inclusive growth, while safeguarding the financial and social sectors. Ukraine pursued macro-financial stability through changes in inflation targeting and a floating exchange rate, paired with fiscal consolidation and structural reforms supported by the IMF and other international partners.

International development cooperation

Official development assistance (ODA) is an essential source of external finance and is essential to achieving national sustainable strategies. Many countries called for the global commitment of 0.7 per cent GNI to ODA to be met and emphasized the need for increased concessional resources and better alignment of development cooperation with country needs. Bangladesh noted that the changing composition of ODA disbursements created challenges given the larger share of loans than grants and the increased borrowing costs. Liberia outlined challenges relating to delays in financing flows, including approval and processing formalities at the ODA source and capacities of the sector implementing agencies to deliver on certain pre-conditions for the release of funds.

Developed countries emphasized their commitment to meeting ODA commitments, while acknowledging varying levels of progress. Many countries prioritized ODA to countries in special situations including LDCs, LLDCs, SIDS and African countries. Finland intends to increase

ODA and formulate a roadmap to reach the 0.7 per cent GNI target; it will also double ODA in support of domestic resource mobilization in low-income countries by 2021. Austria and Slovenia committed to increasing its ODA as a percentage of GNI. Bulgaria noted the importance of having broad public support to meet ODA commitments.

Steps are also being taken to improve the enablers of development cooperation to enhance the quality and impact of resources. Samoa has created a National Development Cooperation Policy that establishes clear expectations for government leadership, long-term partnerships, mutual accountability for joint results and use of country systems. Benin has implemented an aid information system that supports monitoring and analysis with partners. The Gambia has created a biennial National Development Cooperation Forum to enhance policy dialogue with development partners. Liberia intends to reach an agreement on a mutual framework to maximize the impact of ODA, while Malawi has created a development cooperation strategy and sector-specific MOUs with partners.

Countries highlighted the challenges of accessing concessional resources. Bangladesh described how LDC graduation raised concerns about limited access to concessional finance. The transition to middle-income status diminished a country's access to concessional loans, with external financing becoming expensive and

sometimes prohibitive (Costa Rica, Kenya). Development partners should consider the diverse, unique development needs of middle-income countries, with greater links between concessionality and countries' poverty eradication efforts.

Niger mentioned that it sought to scale up blended finance as a catalyst for investment in sustainable development. Kenya emphasized the need to ensure that public, private and blended finance complement each other, which proved difficult in Africa due to the small private sector.

South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) remains an important means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, distinct, dynamic and steeped in the principal of solidarity. India has extended more than 300 Lines of Credit totaling USD 30.66 billion to 64 countries. Kenya plans to increase allocation of human, technical and financial resources to support South-South initiatives, while Honduras noted its efforts to increase SSTC to achieve its national development objectives.

Strengthened capacities are needed to mobilize the right type of financing for different development needs. Bangladesh underscored the need for building data and information capacities and systems for ODA. Honduras noted the importance of strengthening capacities on science and technology, water and sanitation, and sustainable consumption and production patterns. Kenya called for strengthening capacities of countries on the aid delivery architecture, mobilizing domestic revenue and innovative financing modalities, and illicit financial flows.

Participation in sub-regional and regional organizations is a vehicle for numerous countries to advance partnerships, share good practices and strengthen capacities (Argentina, Comoros). During its 2021 chairmanship of ASEAN, Brunei Darussalam will emphasize improved well-being and livelihoods of the ASEAN peoples and building resilience.

Numerous countries have committed to increasing climate



Panama

finance. Estonia will annually allocate one million euros to developing countries to support activities related to climate change. Finland will scale up climate finance as a part of its development finance, taking due account of its contribution based on the Paris Agreement. Bangladesh called for climate finance to be in addition to existing ODA commitments, emphasizing the need for streamlined access to resources.

Trade

Countries stressed the critical importance of global and regional trade agreements and the international trading system. Russia highlighted the need to develop and preserve a multilateral, fair and non-discriminatory trading system, considering, among other things, countries' level of development. Preferential market access for LDCs is also critical (Bangladesh, Finland). The Seychelles highlighted the importance of regional trade agreements like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTA) and the Southern African Development Community Free Trade Area in promoting sustained economic growth and achieving the SDGs.

Diverse policy actions have been taken to facilitate trade and leverage the impact of trade as an engine for economic growth. Zambia and India have implemented initiatives to improve the efficiency of cross-border trade. Liberia has introduced Special Economic Zones (SEZ). Estonia has advanced the development of cross-border e-commerce and e-services and improved availability of cross-border public e-services.

Countries also highlighted challenges in achieving greater integration into the global trading system. Various factors, including vulnerabilities to climate change, the effects of non-tariff measures, a lack of productive and trading capacity and trade-related infrastructure gaps have hampered the development of countries' trade potential (Nepal, Samoa).

Partnerships

Strengthened partnerships are a cornerstone of successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The partnership efforts reported cover a wide range of sustainable development topics: poverty eradication (Benin, Costa Rica, Nigeria), agriculture (Argentina, Austria, Costa Rica, Honduras, Morocco, Samoa), nutrition and food security (Armenia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Solomon Islands), health (Estonia, Mozambique, Republic of Moldova, Solomon Islands), non-communicable diseases (Georgia, Russian Federation, Solomon Islands), education (Brunei Darussalam, Honduras, Russian Federation, Samoa, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago, Uzbekistan), empowering women and girls (Kenya, Finland, India, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Uzbekistan), water (Costa Rica, Mozambique, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Uzbekistan), energy (Finland, India, Morocco, Republic of Moldova, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago), social protection (Mozambique, Bangladesh), rural and vulnerable communities (North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea), persons with disabilities (Finland, Samoa), children (Kenya, Slovenia), youth (Brunei Darussalam, Honduras, North Macedonia), sustainable waste management (Bangladesh, Benin, Bulgaria, Liberia, Samoa, Zambia), sustainable transport (Bulgaria, Papua New Guinea), climate action (Costa Rica, Samoa, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago, Russian Federation), forestry (Solomon Islands, Trinidad and Tobago), biodiversity (Samoa, Seychelles, Slovenia), governance and public service delivery (Armenia, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Finland, Gambia, Uganda), science, technology and innovation (Bulgaria, Finland, Morocco, Panama, Slovenia), ICT (Bangladesh, Kenya, Zambia). Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Gambia, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Micronesia, Republic of Moldova and Samoa reported on various partnership efforts in response to the immediate threats and socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many countries highlighted concrete partnerships as part of their development cooperation, with an emphasis on accountability. The Energy and Environment Partnership, financed by Finland, Austria and the Nordic Development Fund, has increased access to energy for the most vulnerable populations in 15 Southern and East-African countries: over 5 million people have gained access to cleaner energy, 10,000 jobs have been created and climate change mitigated by reducing 1.6 million tons of carbon emissions. Estonia referred specifically to its long-term partnership in support the development of the health insurance system in Moldova. Countries affected by conflict reported limited partnership activities as the result of their circumstances (Syrian Arab Republic and Libya).

Partnerships with the private sector and civil society are indispensable, based on the valuable knowledge, expertise, innovation capacity, financial and human resources mobilized. Georgia described its partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and biopharmaceutical company Gilead on the elimination of hepatitis C, a national health priority. Bulgaria shared how Burgas Municipality was building smart transportation systems with a national telecommunications operator as a technology partner.

Countries discussed partnership-related laws, policy frameworks, and institutions, particularly related to Public-Private Partnerships (Bulgaria, Ecuador, Gambia, Liberia, Morocco, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan). In Bulgaria, the Law on Public-Private Partnerships was updated in line with the proposal for a new Law on Concessions, upholding private investment in infrastructure activities and in support of activities of public interest. In Samoa, the Ministry of Public Enterprise regulates and manages the implementation of the Public Private Partnership Framework governed by a Steering Committee. In Liberia, the government will establish a PPP unit and build capacity for PPP negotiation, contracting,

and management to ensure that it benefits from these arrangements.

Many also reported on partnerships involving other actors, such as academia and think tanks (Argentina, Austria, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, India, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Moldova), philanthropy (Gambia, Honduras, Kenya, Malawi, Micronesia, Mozambique, North Macedonia, Solomon Islands), local authorities (Benin, Kenya, Micronesia), parliament (Kenya), trade unions (Bulgaria), churches (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands), creative community (Brunei Darussalam), and volunteers (Kenya, Russian Federation). Many countries also referred to the importance of strong partnerships involving UN System entities.

There are diverse measures for fostering partnerships, such as events and conferences (Comoros, Seychelles), networks (Austria, Bulgaria), or partnership platforms (Costa Rica, Finland, Kenya). Finland referred to “Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development” as a key instrument for implementing the 2030 Agenda, with all commitments publicly accessible through the Sitoumus2050.fi website. Armenia referred to the Open Government Partnership Initiative as part of its SDG 16 toolkit. Kenya’s Partnering for Green Growth and Global Goals National Platform catalyzes innovative PPPs for the SDGs and green growth.

Some countries underscored the need to further enhance partnership coordination and collaboration (Bangladesh, Kyrgyz Republic, Micronesia, Samoa, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda). Samoa warned that uncoordinated SDG partnership efforts could lead to duplication and waste of resources, straining the limited capacity in recipient countries. It has introduced Joint Policy Action Matrices, a high-level policy results matrix for multi-development partner dialogue, joint results monitoring and evaluation in return for budget support; it is considered a best practice

in the Pacific region. Bangladesh has created a framework of collaboration concerning initiatives of the UN system, development partners, NGOs and the private sector, which will be implemented through different projects and programmes.

Science, technology and innovation

Digital transformation has the potential to contribute to sustainable development and help countries make progress on the SDGs (Armenia, Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Morocco, Samoa, Seychelles, Uganda, Zambia). Seychelles described the role of digital technology in its economic transformation and highlighted reforms to its infrastructure and regulatory and policy frameworks. Kenya underlined that ICT can be used to accelerate poverty eradication, prioritizing STI in its Vision 2030 Agenda. The Gambia is leveraging on ICT improvements to enhance access to services, including e-Government.

Expansion of digital financial services has been notable in many countries, fostering greater financial inclusion (Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Uganda, Russia, Samoa, Zambia). Bangladesh has around 60 million such accounts, which has enabled banking access for the poorest and most remotely located people, as well as facilitating payment of social benefits to families. To encourage the adoption of new technologies for mobile communications, Ukraine decreased mobile operators' fees for new licenses for the implementation of LTE networks.



Countries also highlighted the role of public investment in young scientists and local knowledge generation. Slovenia has proposed legislation to increase budgetary resources to research by at least 1% of GDP (with an annual growth at 0.1% of GDP) and strengthened investment in innovation. Ukraine stressed the need to increase financing in support of young scientists through grants and scholarships.

Capacity building for STI is crucial for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, with countries noting a lack of sufficient financing for research and development (Armenia, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador and Kyrgyz Republic). Countries emphasized the need to enhance international cooperation on STI, highlighting the role of technology transfer and enhanced scientific cooperation to reduce the technology gap between developed and developing countries. This includes institutional cooperation to effectively enforce essential regulations and standards for digital technologies. India underlined the need for urgent attention to fulfill the ambition of the Technology Facilitation Mechanism. Finland underlined its support to international digital cooperation; strengthened rules-based governance; and leadership in advanced digital areas like artificial intelligence and digital public goods. To improve the availability of ICT and ensure more universal, affordable access to the Internet in developing countries, Estonia's e-Governance Academy Foundation has introduced a secure data exchange environment in several countries.

Capacity building

Many countries, including Burundi, the Gambia, India and Samoa noted the crucial role of capacity development for effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda, with limited capacity being one of the challenges hindering SDG achievement (Kenya, Nepal). Nepal called for targeted, effective and transformative capacity building



for all countries, and Samoa called for it to be built into all project planning and programming. Bangladesh noted the importance of capacity development in the process of fulfilling the LDC graduating criteria for the second tri-annual reviews. Countries described the initiatives that they had taken to increase capacity, analyzed their capacity-building needs and outlined strategies that could be adopted to enhance capacity in their national contexts.

Developed countries outlined their support for capacity development, including through collaboration with international agencies. Brunei Darussalam delivers technical assistance with the Commonwealth Secretariat on the Brunei Darussalam Third Country Training Programme (BDTCTP). Austria supports developing countries to increase their capacity to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime, while Finland has prioritized enhancing security and stability as well as strengthening capabilities and capacity of conflict-affected countries. Finland also promotes the participation of women and youth in peace processes, taxation and statistical capacity building. Countries also highlighted their activities as part of South-South and triangular cooperation (India, Morocco, Moldova).

Many countries outlined the capacity-building activities they had conducted, including with UN entities such as DESA, the Economic and Social Commissions, and others

(Armenia, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Gambia, Honduras, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Moldova, Morocco, Panama, Seychelles, Trinidad and Tobago, Zambia). Costa Rica outlined the challenges, opportunities, and next steps in their cooperation with the UN system, and North Macedonia called for the UN to support national efforts in the COVID-19 recovery.

Capacity building for public and civil servants and strengthening of national institutional frameworks is needed (Bangladesh, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Gambia, India, Malawi, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Moldova, Uzbekistan). Countries also outlined needs concerning specific issues: gender equality (Bangladesh, Comoros, the Gambia, Liberia, Malawi), climate change (Comoros, India, Malawi, Morocco, Federated States of Micronesia, North Macedonia, Seychelles, Slovenia) and judicial training (Burundi, Niger, North Macedonia). Strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems was also considered a priority (Malawi, Seychelles, Benin). Countries noted the pivotal role of non-state actors and the importance of capacity development for civil society (Georgia, Liberia, India, Kenya, Niger, North Macedonia, Panama, Samoa).

As countries continue to devolve power to local authorities to implement the 2030 Agenda, weak institutional capacity in sub-national and local governments was highlighted as an impediment. The VNRs highlighted the need for more capacity development for local government (Comoros, Honduras, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, North Macedonia, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Zambia). Solomon Islands highlighted its Provincial Governance Strengthening Programme, which has strengthened the institutional capacities of provincial governments. Estonia highlighted its plans to promote the administrative capacity of local governments as part of their capacity-building support to developing countries. Virtually all developing countries



highlighted the challenges in the collection, analysis, disaggregation, and dissemination of data.

Countries called for several strategies to build capacity including the sharing of good practices and peer learning among countries, and collaboration at bilateral, regional and global levels for capacity-building (Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, the Gambia). Samoa reported that it had hosted senior Pacific government officials from seven Pacific Island Countries for South-South and peer-to-peer learning, including for institution building. Kenya, Niger and Brunei Darussalam called for increased support and scaling up of international cooperation to strengthen national capacities.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND AND SUBSEQUENT VNRS

In 2020, the number of second and third timers increased drastically with three times more countries presenting a second report than in 2019. All second and third-time presenters except three, mentioned their first voluntary national review, but a degree to which the first-time reviews were taken into account for the subsequent VNRs varies. Half of the countries conducting their second VNR mention their first review only indirectly or very briefly. Others highlight a shift of paradigm in the second VNR or cite major achievements since the year of their review's presentation: from economic growth to the increase of enrolments in the schooling systems and the establishment of national frameworks for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda or adapting local indicators to fit the SDG requirements (Armenia, Estonia). Some refer to what has changed in their institutional structure or how it has been further reinforced (Argentina, Ecuador, India, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda). Others talked about increased engagement of stakeholders both from government and outside government in their second VNRs (Bangladesh, Ecuador, Honduras, India, Kenya). A few also elaborated on better collection of data and refinement of indicators and monitoring and review of SDGs and progress made since their first VNR as well as financing strategies (Bangladesh, Finland, Georgia, Honduras, Nepal, Panama, Samoa, Slovenia) There are also some who talked about concrete measures that have been undertaken as announced in the first VNR (Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Uganda).

CONCLUSION

Since 2016, a total of 168 countries have now presented at least one VNR. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, commitment to the 2030 Agenda remains strong, and this was evident in the 47 countries that carried out a VNR despite the pandemic. Many countries have clearly stated that a multilateral response to COVID-19 must include implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and recovery from the pandemic provides an opportunity to implement the transformative changes that will lead to realizing the SDGs in the Decade of Action and delivery for sustainable development.

The impacts of the pandemic on countries' achievement of the SDGs were prominent throughout this year's VNRs. Multiple pathways of interlinked policies and strategies have been outlined in response to the pandemic, and in pursuit of achievement of the SDGs, including in areas of health, social protection, economic stimulus packages, coordinated approaches between governments and stakeholders, and a priority to address those who are most vulnerable and to leave no one behind.

In the fifth year of reporting it is evident from the current collection of VNRs that the SDGs are being more progressively integrated into national development plans and strategies than ever before. Countries have been realigning their institutions and, with varying degrees, budgets to support the SDGs and devise interlinked approaches to achieving them. However, the pandemic has caused setbacks in poverty eradication, restricted access to quality education, exacerbated social inequalities and disrupted trade markets. Many countries are struggling with the overwhelming challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, overfishing and vulnerability to natural disasters;

gender inequality and gender-based violence; ineffective monitoring and evaluation systems; lack of data, especially for identifying those being left behind; and limited technical and financial capacities.

An increase in sub-national reviews is also a highlight this year, where local authorities and their communities are conducting voluntary local reviews that are helping to spread awareness about the SDGs and monitor their implementation at the grassroots level, where accelerated actions can often have the most positive impacts. The high number of VNR countries from the Africa region this year has provided a more focused picture of these countries, as well as other countries in special situations, including LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS. The engagement of stakeholders

in the VNR development process as well as in the presentations and discussions at the HLPF this year was the highest yet, and this continues to lend credence to the work of all involved actors.

The VNR process is thus the central engine driving the follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and the collection of VNRs now constitutes a wealth of data, information, policy examples, best practices, and methods of collaboration and partnership to achieve the SDGs. The VNRs exercise this year has the potential to generate momentum for eventual universal reporting; to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the sub-national, national, regional and global levels; and to ensure a sustainable and green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

