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ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2021 Voluntary National Reviews Synthesis Report

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Foreword

I am pleased to introduce the Synthesis Report of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) conducted at the United Nations high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) in July 2021. The HLPF discussed political guidance on ensuring a resilient and inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that can advance the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It underscored the value of multilateralism and the critical importance of global solidarity during this pandemic of historical proportions. The 2021 VNRs reflect this backdrop. Countries elaborated on the measures they are taking to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a blueprint for recovering better from COVID-19. Their call for a more equal and just recovery was also loud and clear.

Forty-two countries presented their VNRs at the July 2021 HLPF, out of which eight conducted a VNR for the first time. This brings the total number of countries who have presented their VNRs since 2016, to 176. It is heartening that, despite the many challenges countries were facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative impacts on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, they succeeded in carrying out a VNR and presenting it at the HLPF.

In many cases, the reporting countries showed the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. They highlighted how the crisis has disrupted their development efforts in the short term, but they also affirmed their determination to continue working towards the SDGs as the only way to recover sustainably. Countries described measures they have taken to strengthen their health systems and extend the services and coverage, especially to the most vulnerable. They also elaborated on their efforts in the area of social protection, education and bridging the digital divide as well as on their use of technology. They were open and candid in acknowledging their challenges, so that other countries could 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, including women and children, 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 disbursement of cash transfers or provision of food and healthcare free of charge.

Overall, the 2021 VNRs showed the continued commitment to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. They presented 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 2021 VNR countries incorporated data into their reviews. Over half of all VNRs reports include a Statistical Annex.

The 2021 VNRs show the dramatic impacts of COVID-19, but also identify ways to overcome the pandemic and recover sustainably. We must learn from those lessons as we engage in the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs by 2030, reaffirming our dedication to multilateralism and international cooperation.

Liu Zhenmin
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Executive Summary

Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic impacts have affected all countries in the world. In 2021, as the effects continue to reverberate across multiple sectors and are compounded by other complex threats, 42 governments recognized that this year was a crucial time to conduct a Voluntary National Review (VNR), in order to align their efforts toward a resilient recovery from the pandemic and to overcome setbacks to sustainable development.

This sixth edition of the VNR Synthesis Report delivers an overview of the innovative approaches and actions taken by the 42 VNR countries that presented their progress and findings during the 2021 HLPF, which was held in a hybrid format from 6 to 15 July under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). As in previous years, the synthesis report draws examples from the VNRs and defines some of the key elements that have advanced implementation of the 2030 Agenda, 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. The report includes an analysis of countries in special situations that conducted a VNR this year, and outlines effective policies and actions that have advanced progress toward each of the 17 SDGs. It also features a new section on measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The VNRs continue to evolve, as most countries are now reporting for the second or third time. The emergence of new and interesting best practices, lessons learned, gaps and challenges encountered in working towards the achievement of the SDGs are being analyzed in a deeper context, as well as for their effectiveness in advancing progress toward the SDGs while also guiding a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The synthesis report is not exhaustive; all examples chosen are illustrative, and their selection does not imply that the collection of 2021 VNRs do not also contain other equally valid and useful examples of country practices.

Bringing SDGs into the national context: assessments and strategies

Countries have significantly progressed with the integration and localization of the 2030 Agenda. This is a continuous process, with a number of stages, including elaboration of indicators, integration into plans, sectoral strategies, and local government planning. Many countries have revised or strengthened national SDG implementation frameworks in the context of their broader societal objectives, taking steps necessary to create ownership. Governments are increasingly incorporating the SDGs into national development plans and strategies, with increased engagement of parliaments and independent state institutions, such as supreme audit institutions. Laws, decrees, and other instruments have been enacted to further the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The SDGs are also being anchored among diverse groups of actors in society through a combination of formal and informal arrangements, such as multistakeholder councils, partnerships initiatives, awareness-raising activities and public forums.

Many countries reported that their national development plan or strategy was the main instrument for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, demonstrating a coordinated and integrated approach to sustainable development. Some countries referenced analytical approaches and tools such as the Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA), to prioritize targets and assess the alignment between the national policy framework and the SDGs. There is an emphasis on maximizing benefits through interlinkages among targets and building on the co-benefits of specific policy actions while minimizing trade-offs, including through place-based implementation of the SDGs—also termed localization or territorialization. The VNR reports reflect an increased focus on implementation at the sub-national level, as well as through sectoral plans and strategies. Subnational reviews of SDG implementation, either Voluntary Local Reviews or Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) have become increasingly popular.

Institutions for implementing the 2030 Agenda

The 2021 VNRs revealed a variety of national institutional arrangements suited to countries' particular needs and circumstances, including mechanisms for decision-making and coordination of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at multiple levels of government, including by local governments. Inter-ministerial structures or mechanisms have been created in many countries as a way to mobilize the various parts of the government around the SDGs, work across multiple policy areas and implement whole-of-government approaches implementation. The engagement of the highest level of government can help to advance progress, with some inter-ministerial bodies and integration mechanisms chaired or overseen by the Head of State or Government. Countries often utilize existing institutional structures, entrusting a specific ministry to advance SDG implementation, and may have also created additional coordinating bodies, including inter-ministerial multi-stakeholder committees.

Successful implementation of the SDGs ultimately depends on the concrete application of programmes and policies at the local level. Some countries explicitly identified localization of the SDGs as critical to their successful implementation, stressing that local authorities have a direct impact on the implementation of the majority of the 169 SDG targets. The effective relationship and vertical integration between national and local governments is equally important. The involvement of parliaments, through their oversight and budgetary functions and the passing of national legislation needed to support SDG implementation, can also help to ensure that policies are supportive of the SDGs and integrated with the local level. This year some countries reported challenges in making institutional arrangements as effective as possible due to the setbacks and restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and emphasis on involvement of parliaments and local governments was seen to be slightly more variable than last year.

Leaving no one behind

There is broad recognition of the 2030 Agenda principle of leaving no one behind (LNOB) reflected in the VNRs this year. Countries highlighted priority areas where this principle is being applied, including economic transformation and employment, women's empowerment, climate change and digitalization, and many elaborated on areas where interlinkages are strongest and where the impacts of LNOB may be greatest. Some governments have mainstreamed their commitment to LNOB into national plans and programmes, utilizing both universal and targeted policies and measures to support those most at risk.

They have identified vulnerable groups, communities and individuals, including migrants, persons living in poverty and especially those living in extreme poverty, persons with disabilities, older persons, indigenous peoples, children, youth, women, and LGBTIQ persons. Some VNRs emphasized the need to reach those who are furthest behind. Others also addressed geographical inequalities, stressed the importance of stakeholder inclusion and non-government actors so that all voices are heard, and highlighted the importance of data disaggregation to aid in identifying vulnerable groups. Several countries also reported on how they have incorporated the principle of LNOB into international development cooperation.

Countries in special situations

A majority of the VNR countries reporting this year fall into at least one of the following categories: least developed countries, landlocked developing countries, small island developing States, middle-income countries, African countries, or countries in conflict or post-conflict situations. Each of these categories is characterized by economic, geographic, or political challenges, and these groups of countries have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Coupled with the increasingly devastating effects of climate change, many of these countries are suffering from increased poverty and hunger, the threat of conflict, migration flows, and rising inequalities. The VNRs of countries in special situations reflected this year on the many complex challenges that have slowed or even derailed their progress toward the SDGs. They also outlined solutions for reducing vulnerability, building resilience and getting back on track, including through transformative sustainable development pathways fueled by innovative solutions, public and private investments that demand enhanced access to development finance, scaled-up investments for economic growth and diversification, and debt relief.

SDGs

The VNR exercise is intended to apply to all SDGs every year, yet reporting countries often focus their reviews on specific Goals, depending on their national priorities. Each VNR is unique in the way it approaches the monitoring and review of progress toward the SDGs, and this year's reports reflected a wide variety of both positive and negative trends in assessing progress and providing detailed examples of successes and challenges. They also described actions taken to accelerate change and build resilience in the wake of the pandemic and its effects.

In addressing SDG 1, many countries agreed that poverty must be seen as a multidimensional phenomenon, not limited to income and expenditure but encompassing education, health, housing and other social services as well as gender-related disparities. While extreme poverty is on the rise in many countries as a result of the pandemic, several countries reported success on reductions of poverty levels. The need to strengthen statistical capacity, improve data quality, and fill data gaps remains extremely important even if progress toward poverty reduction has been seen over the past few years.

The VNRs reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged SDG 2 by imposing barriers to the distribution of agricultural production inputs, decreasing the purchasing power of farmers and of people as food consumers, and ultimately reducing the quality of food consumption and nutrition intake, especially among the poor and near poor populations. Many developing economies reported on volatility

in agricultural production, primarily due to adverse weather shocks and fluctuations in the world market, and stressed that the implementation of structural programs for farmers involved in ensuring food security is critical now. Industrialized countries with greater agricultural capacity and production focused their VNRs on sustainable and organic farming. Numerous policy initiatives and measures are being taken to achieve food security through creation of food distribution networks, track and ensure nutritional status of children in vulnerable regions, ensure resilient food production, adapt to climate change, reduce food loss and waste, and actively recognize the role of women in food production.

All countries reported on their progress towards SDG 3, recognizing the need to modernize through innovation and digitalization to combat the ongoing pandemic and address underlying issues in health outcomes. Many countries increased spending to expand or create universal health coverage to combat COVID-19, reported staff shortages as one of the most significant challenges in covering health coverage gaps, and highlighted the importance of developing a system of health care financing to strengthen medical systems and prevent interruptions in care. Countries also reported on the importance of strengthened coordination with global health players in order to better prepare for future health crises and bridge the gap of disparate health outcomes.

Humanitarian crises and COVID-19 have put great pressure on education worldwide, and the VNRs focused on impacts of the pandemic, digitalization, and the need for resources dedicated to ensuring free and quality education to achieve SDG 4. Many countries highlighted the importance of gender equality and the relevance of leaving no one behind, especially during the pandemic and the ensuing digitalization of education. Several reported that the transition to online learning has exacerbated inequalities among and within countries and emphasized the importance of early childhood care and education, reporting on new investments targeting impoverished populations that cannot afford the necessary equipment for remote education.

Most countries reported on progress and challenges related to SDG 5, with gender-based violence frequently mentioned as on the rise everywhere as a result of the pandemic, including domestic violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, emotional violence, and physical violence by a partner. Issues of income inequality, unpaid work or domestic labor, and empowering women through technology use were all addressed, and numerous countries analyzed the number of women represented in government positions.

Many reports addressed SDG 6, highlighting the importance of providing access to safe water, in particular for hand washing to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. While some reported on progress made, many also highlighted challenges from the impact of climate change and inequalities in access to safe drinking water, sanitation services, and hygiene between urban and rural populations, with urban areas generally having better access. Reviews also highlighted the utilization of rainwater as an alternative water source and described efforts to promote Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH).

SDG 7 was mentioned in many reviews, with most underscoring the importance of access to energy for all, energy efficiency, and development of renewable energy sources, with solar energy being the most frequently mentioned. National action plans, including policy frameworks, strategies and domestic goals were highlighted, and the sustainable transportation sector was also addressed.

All VNRs discussed SDG 8 and its targets either directly or indirectly, with reports of progress and developments largely related to the prevalence of informal economies, with the majorities of informal workers being women; the widespread problem of youth unemployment in more than half of the reporting countries; the importance of sustainable tourism as a driver of national economies in some countries; the presence, support and significance of small and medium enterprises (SME) or micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME); and efforts to increase equality within societies, as well as among men and women, through increased access to mobile banking.

With regard to SDG 9, the availability and access to sustainable public infrastructure continues to be a significant challenge for a number of countries, particularly in remote areas and rapidly growing urban areas. Some countries continue to face supply side constraints such as intermittent energy supply and digital connectivity, which have had an adverse impact on industrial and manufacturing sectors. In some cases, high external debt burdens hampered further investments in innovation, industry and infrastructure. Some reported on comprehensive policies to expand industrial sectors, diversify away from the oil sector, and upgrade industrial sectors into more sustainable production methods in industry and manufacturing. Some countries stressed the importance of entrepreneurship and promoting the effective contribution of SMEs in this effort.

SDG 10 on reducing inequalities was widely included in this year's reports, with the focus on equal opportunity and the inclusion of demographics such as race, age, disability, nationality, religion and gender. A majority of countries also noted a clearly visible discrepancy between populations living in urban and rural areas.

Many reviews addressed SDG 11, referencing urban renewal actions and efforts made to develop more sustainable cities and communities, housing quality and affordability, and the importance of sustainable housing solutions. In discussing housing quality and accessibility, many reviews also highlighted the challenges related to informal settlements and urban slums. Sustainable transport solutions were mentioned in many reviews, with countries seeking to improve transportation infrastructure to more climate friendly, less polluting, and more effective transportation in urban areas. Several reviews discussed disaster risk reduction frameworks and strategies to adapt to the changing environment.

The reporting on SDG 12 continued to emphasize the need to decouple economic growth from environmental damage and natural resource exploitation. A salient feature of the VNR reporting this year by many countries was related to analysis of the material intensity per capita. Many reports referred to the 10-year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, and countries reported concerted efforts to reduce consumption at the source, by public awareness raising and providing more detailed consumer information on various products.

In reporting on SDG 13 and climate action, most VNRs focused on reducing emissions. In an effort to adapt to climate change, many countries referred to disaster risk reduction preparedness as a priority. Countries also reported on the impacts of climate change in their respective regions, implementation of specific policies to better adapt to climate change related conditions, national contributions to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris Agreement, and awareness-raising actions to

educate and inform the general public and youth. Some countries mentioned efforts made in halting forest degradation, with strategies and action plans to address the environmental impact of climate change. Several countries expressed commitment to the Green Climate Fund, with both developed countries mentioning continued support and contributions, and with developing countries describing actions taken at the national level through project contributions.

SDG 14 was mentioned in many reviews, with many countries highlighting the importance of the conservation of the marine ecosystem and biodiversity and discussing their commitment to reduce plastic waste and marine litter, and to address the problem of micro-plastics. Several countries noted the importance of strengthening institutional capacity in the areas of marine science and the blue economy. The need to protect fisheries resources was also in focus.

Many reports addressed SDG 15, reiterating the negative impacts of human activity and climate change on biodiversity, land use, forests and wildlife. The VNRs measured progress and highlighted challenges related to the conservation of terrestrial ecosystems, including in the targeted areas of deforestation, desertification, land degradation, halting the loss of biodiversity and protecting threatened species.

VNR reports this year focused extensively on corruption and new measures to prevent it in relation to SDG 16. Countries noted that external events have seriously constrained their ability to strengthen the rule of law and democracy, and some cited critical conditions related to the displacement and migration of a large proportion of their populations. Local violence and high crime rates were also reported to be problematic in some countries. While industrialized and high-income economies are not suffering critically from corruption or high crime rates, significant challenges are still present; countries leading the way in sustainable development have reinforced their commitment to the global agenda of actively promoting peace building, institutional capacity, and human rights.

In reporting on SDG 17, countries recognized the need for a revitalized global partnership and the strengthening of multi-stakeholder partnerships at all levels to ensure a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Low-income countries emphasized that the need for partnerships was apparent before the pandemic, where high debt, increasing poverty, crumbling infrastructure, and increasing crime rates were already threatening sustainable development. Responding to such challenges is proving to be difficult due to inadequate financial resources, lack of multilateral trading systems and trade restrictions, and the lack of availability of crucial data. Most countries reflected on the need to strengthen domestic resource mobilization and address falling government revenue during the pandemic.

Monitoring and Data

The collection, processing, analysis, and release of reliable, timely, high-quality, and disaggregated data on the indicators are fundamental for evidence-based policymaking, and support for national statistical systems in providing comprehensive data remains essential to progress toward the SDGs. To this end, countries have launched a series of measures to inform decision-making and enhance accountability, contributing to more robust follow-up and review in the long term. The 2021 VNRs demonstrate how countries have continued to address data availability and collection issues. Nearly all countries incorporated data into their reviews, and half of all VNRs in 2021 included a Statistical Annex. Some

countries provided additional information regarding the level of data availability and have taken steps to modify and adapt the global indicator framework to fit national contexts, conditions and priorities.

Data gaps, collection, and disaggregation remain the predominant challenges, and financial and technical support for monitoring and capacity building is still needed in most countries. Measures taken to strengthen national statistical capacity include creation of ownership for data collection and reporting; strengthening national statistical systems; use of new technology to improve data collection, analysis and accessibility; partnerships and other types of support to strengthen national efforts to achieve the SDGs; and use of non-traditional data sources to keep SDGs on the right track.

Coherence among global frameworks and with regional frameworks

Countries have continued to integrate international or regional agreements into national sustainable development plans and indicated coherence with global and regional frameworks through the review of SDGs at the national level, activating communities of practice in the different policy nexuses represented by these SDGs. International cooperation through an inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism remains pivotal to the eventual success of the 2030 Agenda and its interlinked SDGs.

Stakeholder Engagement

Governments continue to recognize the important role of stakeholders from different sectors in SDG implementation and follow up. The VNRs detailed how stakeholders participated in national SDG decision-making and consultative mechanisms and showcased concrete contributions from different sectors to the 2030 Agenda, including the VNR preparatory process. Some countries include stakeholders in SDG coordination and consultative mechanisms and/or working groups. The engagement of stakeholders in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda was featured in numerous reports, and some countries mentioned initiatives to engage children and youth, incorporate academia, involve local and regional governments, and include the private sector.

Many reported on the process of establishing and consolidating stakeholder consultation mechanisms for the SDGs, including the VNR process, and on the role of stakeholders in the broader follow up of the 2030 Agenda. Countries reflected on the challenges and next steps to strengthen stakeholder participation in decision making, governance, consultation and partnerships mechanisms; supporting stakeholders' SDG-related platforms and capacities; improving mechanisms to measure stakeholder contributions to the SDGs; and increasing stakeholders' awareness of the 2030 Agenda.

Awareness-raising

Governments identified the need for continued efforts to raise awareness about the 2030 Agenda with the public and specific sectors of the society. Highlights in this regard include outreach through media and universities, translation of materials into local languages, and inclusion of rural populations and vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities.

Means of implementation

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the ability of many countries to mobilize resources for the pandemic response and recovery and for the achievement of the SDGs, and a large number of countries highlighted this challenge. They reflected on a wide range of financing flows that can support implementation of the SDGs; emphasized the importance of mobilizing financing for infrastructure, including in physical infrastructure and connectivity; shared concrete measures and reforms geared to increase domestic resource mobilization as a key pillar for the financing of the SDGs; highlighted efforts to align domestic financing with the SDGs, including through Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs); noted the importance of domestic resource mobilization to finance social services as well as regional and rural development; and underlined the importance of tackling illicit financial flows.

A number of countries noted the difficulties of middle-income countries in relation to concessional financing and highlighted specific programmes and focus areas for their Official Development Assistance (ODA). Trade was stressed as a critical engine for economic development, and countries made reference to specific initiatives to promote trade and foster inclusion through trade. All countries made reference to efforts to foster partnerships for the achievement of the SDGs, including with local government, civil society organizations, the private sector, academia and other relevant stakeholders. The importance of advancing technological change and innovation as key driver for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and climate goals was highlighted, and many also reported on a range of areas where capacity building was needed and where initiatives had been taken in this regard.

Differences between first and subsequent VNRs

In 2021, the trend of increasing numbers of second and third time VNR reports has continued. The number of second and third time reports increased drastically, with three times more countries presenting a second VNR than in 2019. Out of 42 countries presenting, only eight were first time reporters, while there were 24 second-time reports and 10 third-timers. Many highlighted a paradigm shift in the undertaking of their second VNR or cited major achievements since the year of their previous review's presentation, from a shift in policies to assessment of impacts of strategies, and many were also better able to define progress in SDG implementation since the first or second VNR.

Main measures in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and information on overall impacts

This year the VNR synthesis report includes a new chapter on the profound global impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on reporting countries. Most VNRs detailed the unique challenges the pandemic presented and the measures taken to address them, in areas of health, income and employment, gender and domestic violence, education, technology, innovation, digitalization, economic and fiscal measures, environmental and climate measures, partnerships, and the way forward to a sustainable and resilient recovery. It is clear that international cooperation will be essential to disseminating vaccines, overcoming the pandemic, and building more resilient systems to address future challenges and achieve the 2030 Agenda.

Introduction

In the sixth year of reporting[1], 42 countries prepared a VNR and virtually presented their reports during the 2021 HLPF, which was convened in a hybrid format under the auspices of ECOSOC from 6 to 15 July.

Within this group, 13 VNRs came from the Asia-Pacific region, 11 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 10 from Africa, and eight from Europe. Eight countries conducted their first VNR[2], 24 countries conducted their second VNR[3], and 10 countries conducted their third VNR.[4] All of the VNR presentations were conducted virtually over the course of the HLPF, on 12 July and from 13 to 15 July during the ministerial segment.

This year's VNR synthesis report examines some of the main issues addressed in this round of VNRs, with the socioeconomic impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the worsening effects of climate change, and the struggle to ensure a sustainable and resilient recovery amid many new and emerging challenges at the forefront.

The synthesis report provides highlights of country progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including an overview of how countries addressed each of the SDGs, and examines actions to implement the principle of leaving no one behind. It addresses specific topics including national ownership, stakeholder engagement, institutional mechanisms and incorporation of the SDGs into national development frameworks, means of implementation and partnerships, data and monitoring mechanisms.

As the majority of this year's countries had already conducted at least one previous VNR, this synthesis also reflects progress within the process of planning and preparing a VNR, as institutions can be seen to evolve along with progress made toward integrating the SDGs into national development plans amid the restrictions of the global pandemic. Examples of best practices, effective policies, inclusive approaches, and innovative measures to collaborate in an increasingly digital world are some of the new elements of this year's report. The rising importance of subnational reviews and their relevance to national processes are also examined.

While the synthesis report 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 2021 VNRs do not also contain many other equally valid and useful instances of best country practices, which the reader is

[1] Background information and details concerning the mandate for the VNRs is contained in the 2016 Synthesis Report of Voluntary National Reviews: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/126002016_VNR_Synthesis_Report.pdf.

[2] Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Marshall Islands, Nicaragua, and San Marino.

[3] Afghanistan, Bahamas, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Germany, Iraq, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Malaysia, Namibia, Norway, Paraguay, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe.

[4] Azerbaijan, Colombia, Egypt, Guatemala, Indonesia, Mexico, Niger, Qatar, Sierra Leone, and Uruguay.

invited to explore in greater detail through the individual reports that are all made available through the online VNR database.[5]

Bringing SDGs into the national context: assessments and strategies

This section briefly examines how countries are addressing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in the context of their broad 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 reported their ongoing processes and steps taken to implement the 2030 Agenda and SDGs through national policy frameworks. Several countries have revised or strengthened national SDG implementation frameworks (Colombia, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Japan, Mexico).

For instance, Japan has prepared a revised SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles, which are a medium- to long-term strategy for the promotion of the SDGs, updated with input from stakeholders. Countries continued to report on the engagement of parliaments, including efforts to strengthen their involvement (Bhutan, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Zimbabwe). In Mexico, for example, the Senate Special Commission and the Chamber Task Force of Deputies offered training for all legislators, their advisers, technical secretariats, commissions and governing bodies on the incorporation of 2030 Agenda into legislative processes. It is also apparent that other independent state institutions, such as supreme audit institutions, are increasingly becoming involved in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Czech Republic, Indonesia, Niger). In Norway, the Office of the Audit General in 2020 audited the national implementation of the SDGs, which lead to parliament requesting the government to present a progress report and an action plan on the SDGs.

Recognizing that the 2030 Agenda extends beyond government, many countries reported extensively on actions taken by other societal actors. The SDGs are increasingly anchored among actors in society through a combination of arrangements, such as multistakeholder councils, as well as less formal initiatives and partnerships. Notably, several countries covered initiatives taken to involve the business

[5] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/#VNRDatabase

sector in national implementation efforts (Chad, Czech Republic, Denmark, Indonesia, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Tunisia, Zimbabwe).

In Paraguay, a local UN Global Compact project trains entrepreneurs and enterprises, to advance the implementation of the SDGs in the country.

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 (Denmark, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Norway, Paraguay).

Some countries provided examples of laws, decrees, and other instruments to further the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Colombia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic). In this regard, in Denmark, starting with the 2021-2022 legislative session, all bills must be screened for their impact on the SDGs, and for bills with significant and relevant impact on the SDGs, a separate section must be written into the bill detailing its impact on the SDGs and their targets. In Mexico, the reform to the Planning Law incorporates comprehensive consideration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in national planning, as well as the integration of the 2030 Agenda in the design of national development plans. Spain highlighted a measure requiring reporting on the alignment of the general state budget with the SDGs.

Countries are carrying out a range of activities and projects to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, including festivals and public forums (Bhutan, Czech Republic, Denmark, Malaysia, Mexico). Indonesia reported that 11 universities have appointed SDGs Campus Ambassadors, whose role is to disseminate and promote the Goals on- and off-campus through public outreach activities.

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

Countries recognized that the 2030 Agenda and the 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 (Dominican Republic, Germany, Indonesia, Sweden, Zimbabwe). In this regard, Lao People's Democratic Republic stated that synergies and trade-offs help prepare a cohesive plan for accelerated achievement of many SDGs and noted that gender equality (SDG 5) is a cross-cutting priority of successive development plans. In the process of integration implementation of the SDGs, several countries mapped the alignment of SDGs with national priorities (Cuba, Madagascar, Niger, Zimbabwe). There was a notable emphasis among countries that considered the importance of place-based implementation of the SDGs, also termed localization or territorialization (Cabo Verde, Colombia, Cuba, Germany, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Malaysia, Mexico, Niger, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Zimbabwe).

Some countries made reference to analytical approaches and tools, such as the Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA), to prioritize targets and assess the alignment between the national policy framework

and the SDGs (Chad, Dominican Republic). In this regard, Madagascar reported using a range of criteria, among them Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) not achieved, transformative potential, and links to international conventions and commitments, drawing on the RIA and Institut de la Francophonie pour le Développement Durable (IFDD) methodologies.

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 through sectoral plans and strategies.

Many countries noted that their national development plan or strategy was the main instrument for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs (Angola, Bhutan, China, Cuba, Guatemala, Madagascar, Namibia, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe). For instance, Malaysia noted that each phase of the SDG roadmap is aligned with the country's three national development plans during the period up to 2030, and currently the SDGs-related programmes and projects are funded under each five-year Plan, supplemented through partnerships with the private sector, CSOs, and international agencies. Guatemala has incorporated the SDGs into national planning instruments through the methodology of critical nodes and links, defining its ten National Development Priorities and sixteen strategic development goals, through which the SDGs are implemented at the national level. In Sierra Leone, national development plan results framework integrates the SDGs results framework, thereby ensuring that there is coherence, logic and effectiveness in the implementation of the global agenda through the national plan. Other countries outlined how SDG implementation takes place through government priorities or sectoral plans and strategies (Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Norway, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay).

Integrating SDGs into local plans and the Voluntary Local Reviews

Numerous countries reported in 2021 on the SDG actions taken by local and regional governments, how SDGs are integrated into sub-national plans and strategies and on Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) conducted by local governments. Several countries, such as Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, also included sections in their reports drafted by sub-national governments or their associations.

Regarding SDG localization through strategies and plans, countries reported both on top-down approaches where national government has provided guidance and support for integrating the SDG to lower levels of government and also on top-down actions of frontrunner cities. Governments such as Cabo Verde, Colombia, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe reported on providing mandates or guidance to local governments for localizing the SDGs through their planning. Paraguay, for example, has established a Localization Committee led by the Technical Planning Secretariat, which is tasked with supporting SDG localization aligned with the national development plan, with a first step being discussions on local SDG roadmaps.

In some countries, pilot entities have been chosen to start the work of SDG localization. Thailand chose nine provinces and five local governments as pilot entities that are supported in their awareness raising and integration of the SDGs into provincial and local development plans, with other areas to follow at a later stage. In Germany, some of the federal states have supported their municipalities in adoption of sustainability strategies and plans, but sustainable development is a voluntary task and the degrees of SDG localization are quite diverse. Indonesia has aimed at providing such support through the establishment of SDG Centers in some of its provinces, while Sierra Leone has established District Development Coordination Committees. In Sweden, the national government has established the Council for Sustainable Cities to support SDG 11 efforts. Bhutan noted that such central level guidance would help local governments in their efforts.

In other countries, the VLRs and incorporation of SDGs has started with frontrunner cities and states, often with endorsement by the government. In Japan, several cities published their VLRs already in 2018 and the Government disseminates leading models of SDG actions by nominating SDGs Future Cities. In Mexico, 14 states have aligned their state development plans with the SDGs, and the national Government has developed a guide for integration of the 2030 Agenda in the Municipal Plans. In Norway, frontrunner municipalities, both large and small, are setting an example for the remaining municipalities with integrated SDG strategic plans; however, this is expected to change when all sub-national authorities have updated their plans before the end of the current council period, in compliance with the current national planning expectations.

Sub-national reviews of SDG implementation, either VLRs or Voluntary Sub-national Reviews (VSRs) have become increasingly popular. Cabo Verde, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Thailand, and Zimbabwe all highlighted the VLRs conducted by their local governments, with Indonesia, Norway, Sweden and Zimbabwe drawing on VSRs that brought together analysis from a variety of local governments.

Iraq included an SDG analysis from seven of its governorates in its VNR. Egypt has conducted SDG assessments in 27 of its governorates, with one aim being the need to address geographical inequalities in the country noting that even the governorates that are lagging behind are not similar in terms of their gaps, and highlighting the need for custom-made strategies.

Institutions for implementing the 2030 Agenda

Effective, accountable and inclusive institutions are essential to achieving the SDGs, as recognized by the 2030 Agenda and SDG 16 in particular. One of the first steps countries take to implement the SDGs is to shape the institutional arrangements for advancing SDG implementation. This chapter examines these institutional arrangements, including mechanisms for localization of SDG implementation and the involvement of Parliaments. While there are some commonalities in countries' institutional arrangements, the 2021 VNRs revealed a variety of national institutional arrangements that are suited to countries' particular needs and circumstances.

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

In view of the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda, a number of countries created inter-ministerial structures or inter-ministerial mechanisms as a way to mobilize the various parts of the government around the SDGs, work across multiple policy areas and implement whole-of-government approaches to SDG implementation.

In Antigua and Barbuda, a national SDG Committee has been established to guide the country's implementation of the SDGs. The Government of Azerbaijan set up the National Coordination Council on Sustainable Development with the membership of sectoral ministries. China was among the first to establish an inter-ministerial mechanism to ensure implementation of the 2030 Agenda through coordination among 45 ministries. In Colombia, the High-Level Inter-Institutional Commission for the Preparation and Effective Implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the SDGs brings together the main national government institutions in order to facilitate coordination. In Cuba, the newly established National Group for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda constitutes the institutional mechanism for monitoring the SDGs in the country. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Government has set up the National Task Force for Sustainable Development. In Mexico, the National Council for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development oversees SDG implementation. In Paraguay, the SDG Commission Paraguay coordinates SDG implementation.

Some of these inter-ministerial bodies and integration mechanisms are chaired or overseen by the Head of State or Government. The engagement of the highest level of government can help advance SDG implementation. In Egypt, the launch of the sustainable development strategy was followed by the establishment of the National Committee for Monitoring the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, which falls under the remit of the Prime Minister's office. Japan established the SDGs

Promotion Headquarters in the Cabinet, which is headed by the Prime Minister. In Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Prime Minister chairs the National Steering Committee on SDGs, with members of the Committee drawn from all concerned ministries. In Malaysia, the National SDG Council, which is chaired by the Prime Minister, endorses and monitors SDG implementation and progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

Some countries utilized existing institutional structures for SDG implementation.

In Bhutan, the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) functions concurrently as the High-Level SDG Committee, and is chaired by the Prime Minister. In Cabo Verde, in terms of horizontal coordination, the Council of Ministers plays an essential role in the construction of public policies aligned with the 2030 Agenda. Headed by the Federal Chancellery and comprising all the federal ministries, the State Secretaries' Committee on Sustainable Development is the German Government's key steering committee regarding the German Sustainable Development Strategy and SDG implementation. In Niger, the Council of Ministers presided by the President coordinates the SDG implementation.

Some countries that utilized existing institutional structures for SDG implementation have also entrusted a specific ministry to advance SDG implementation.

In Afghanistan, the Ministry of Economy serves as the secretariat for the SDGs Executive Committee and acts as the lead line ministry coordinating SDG-related activities**.** In both Cyprus and Denmark, the Ministry of Finance is responsible for coordinating SDG implementation. In Norway, the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation is a coordinating body for SDG implementation. In Sweden, the Minister for Environment and Climate is responsible for coordinating national implementation of the SDGs. In Tunisia, the Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Investment Support is the lead agency for coordination of the SDG implementation process. In several countries, the ministry or commission of planning coordinates SDG implementation. These include Iraq (Ministry of Planning), Indonesia (Ministry of National Development Planning), Namibia (National Planning Commission), Niger (Ministry of Planning) and Sierra Leone (Ministry of Planning and Economic Development).

In some countries, key coordinating bodies, including inter-ministerial committees, are of the multi-stakeholder type. In the Dominican Republic, some members of the High-Level Inter-institutional Commission for Sustainable Development are from civil society and the private sector, among other stakeholder groups. In Chad, a National Coordination Mechanism for the Monitoring of the SDGs, which was created within the Ministry of the Economy, Planning, Development and International Cooperation, includes representatives of the National Assembly, sectoral ministries and civil society.

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. Local authorities deliver key public services and arguably have a direct impact on the implementation of the majority of the 169 SDG targets. Equally important is the effective relationship and vertical integration between national and local governments.

Some countries explicitly identified localization of the SDGs as central to their successful implementation. Lao People's Democratic Republic reported that engaging local administrations in systematic implementation and monitoring of SDGs is critical, and aims to ensure smooth vertical coordination and linkages across and between central and local governments. For effective localization of the SDGs, countries often find it important to develop SDG indicators for local authorities. Malaysia reports that its Ministry of Housing and Local Government is developing a comprehensive SDG indicator framework for local authorities, whereas Norway reports that SDG indicators are still lacking for regional and local authorities. In some countries, associations of local authorities are active. The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities has conducted a Voluntary Sub-national Review, and in Sweden, the government intends to continue to invite the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions to conduct a dialogue on the ongoing implementation of the 2030 Agenda at local and regional levels.

In terms of multi-level governance, Cabo Verde has installed Local Platforms for the Localization of the 2030 Agenda, which bring together municipalities, State representatives at the local level, civil society organizations, universities and private sector entities to coordinate local sustainable development processes. It is also noteworthy that in Indonesia, governors coordinate monitoring and evaluation of SDG implementation in districts within their provinces and report SDG implementation to the Minister of National Development and the Minister of Home Affairs, and the establishment of a Sub-National Coordination Team strengthens the involvement and role of all stakeholders. There are 29 Teams at the provincial level from a total of 34 provinces in Indonesia, which also involve non-state actors from philanthropy and business, academia and civil society organizations.

Despite recognition of the importance and challenge of localizing the SDGs, the roles of local governments in SDG implementation and coordination mechanisms at the local level received limited consideration in the 2021 VNRs. This contrasts with the 2020 VNRs, where a number of countries reported the creation of new coordination mechanisms for localization of the SDGs while clearly registering the important contribution of local governments to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Involvement of Parliaments

Parliaments have an important role to play in advancing SDG implementation, not only through their oversight and budgetary functions, but also with regard to the passing of national legislation needed to support SDG implementation. Parliaments can help ensure that policies are integrated and supportive of the SDGs, while also reviewing the implementation of the SDGs. It is important to ensure that parliaments play their rightful role in giving political impetus for implementing and monitoring progress toward the SDGs.

The involvement of parliaments in SDG implementation has been variable across countries presenting VNRs in 2021. In Cuba, the permanent commissions of the parliament analyze the progress and challenges in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as part of their monitoring and evaluation work. In Norway, parliamentary committees monitor 2030 Agenda matters through ordinary committee work. The Parliament of Zimbabwe is playing a critical role in monitoring the implementation of the SDGs through its law making, representation and oversight functions.

Parliaments have also taken the initiative to follow up on the 2030 Agenda through new institutional mechanisms. In Chad, the National Assembly created a special commission on SDG implementation. In Denmark, the 2030 Network was established as an All-Party Parliamentary Group for the SDGs. It aims to share knowledge and debate various relevant themes related to implementing the SDGs. The Network is supported by the 2030 Panel, which is an advisory board. Also, parliamentary efforts in support of the SDGs were further bolstered by the appointment of a parliamentary working group under the auspices of the Parliamentary Finance Committee. In the case of Malaysia, the parliament established the All-Party Parliamentary Group on SDGs, which monitors SDGs related policy formulation, funding and implementation effectiveness.

In Zimbabwe, the Thematic Committee on Millennium Development Goals became the Thematic Committee on SDGs and expanded its focus to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The main function of the Expanded SDGs Committee is to examine and ensure implementation of government policies that relate to the SDGs.

Challenges

Some countries are reporting challenges in making these institutional arrangements as effective as possible. Chad reports on the weakness of the institutional framework, and Afghanistan has reportedly been suffering from limited institutional capacity. Lao People's Democratic Republic reports that challenges remain in instituting broad-based and robust consultation mechanisms. In particular, it notes that coordination and partnership structures and processes will need to be made more effective, including through further efforts to widen stakeholder participation to include civil society and the private sector.

In Norway, the Office of the Auditor General has pointed out that the follow-up of the SDGs has not been coordinated effectively enough.

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have shown the importance of focusing on localization and involving local authorities. In this context, Malaysia highlighted the need for greater coordination across government, from the federal level all the way down to the local level, in order to facilitate SDG implementation. Some countries reported on the challenges of SDG localization. Lao People's Democratic Republic reported that coordination between central and local level government agencies should be further harmonized. Zimbabwe

reported that while the broad participation of line ministries through SDG focal persons demonstrates the existence of horizontal coordination, structures to incorporate local authorities and metropolitan councils within the context of devolved mandate required further strengthening of the multilevel governance structures to improve vertical integration.

In many countries, the involvement of parliament in the SDGs has so far been limited. Cyprus reports that although the Parliament is reviewing all strategic documents and therefore dealing with SDG policies in this context during hearings on the government's strategy, sectoral strategies and annual budgets, not much has been undertaken with and within the Parliament specifically on the SDGs. In Sweden, the Committee on Foreign Affairs has criticized the government for failing to more clearly involve the Riksdag in its work on the 2030 Agenda. Civil society would also like to see the Riksdag create a cross-party parliamentary forum on the 2030 Agenda and require the government to regularly report results on national implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Leaving no one behind

Leaving no one behind (LNOB) is one of the central principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. VNR countries shared broad recognition of this principle in their VNRs, elaborating on areas where the interlinkages are strongest and where the impacts of leaving no one behind may be the greatest. Priority areas included economic transformation and employment, women's empowerment, climate change and digitalization.

Countries identified vulnerable groups, communities and individuals that are most at risk of being left behind. Some reviews emphasized that reaching the furthest behind is essential to achieving the LNOB principle. Many countries have mainstreamed their commitment to LNOB into national plans and programmes, and reported utilizing both universal and targeted policies and measures to give effect to this principle. While groups at risk of being left behind vary by country, persons with disabilities, older persons, indigenous peoples, children, youth, women, persons living in poverty and especially extreme poverty, and LGBTIQ persons were commonly highlighted as being most vulnerable.

Addressing geographical inequalities

Countries reported on the importance of ensuring that no nation or region is left behind. The differences between the well-being of urban and rural populations were often highlighted (Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Zimbabwe), with hard-to-reach areas suffering from lack of basic services and poor, rural areas lacking adequate healthcare, nutrition and access to water and sanitation. These countries have been taking action to address this rural-urban divide.

In their reports, several countries including Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Dominican Republic, Namibia and Zimbabwe, noted differences between their national sub-regions. For example, in Czech Republic, the threat of social exclusion fell after 2015, but regional differences persist

or are actually increasing. In Dominican Republic, poverty rates are much lower in the north than in the south of the country. Several initiatives have been taken to help develop the links between the regions. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, actions are being taken to reduce differences between urban and rural areas in the fields of industry, agriculture, public health, education and infrastructure.

Countries have taken steps to address the geographical inequalities.

For example, Namibia is committed to ensure both urban and rural electrification, including through solar and wind systems. In an effort to address the challenges of rural communities, achieve rural industrialisation, and foster innovation, the government has initiated the establishment of Rural Development Centres (RDC) to research and develop appropriate technology and services as per the needs of the community. Zimbabwe has adopted a gender-sensitive sanitation and hygiene policy, which is being implemented in 45 rural districts, in an effort to improve water and sanitation in rural areas. Colombia focuses on malnutrition in the regions most affected to ensure people from these areas are not left behind. Egypt started an initiative to improve living conditions in their poorest villages. Madagascar demonstrates regional action especially by strengthening efforts to combat food insecurity in the south of the country.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) were highlighted as both a divider and as a tool for closing gaps (Niger, Zimbabwe). Niger reported that considerable disparities in access to ICT persist between rural and urban areas. COVID-19 has also exposed the digital divide between rural and urban centers with regard to accessibility to ICT infrastructure for e-learning. At the same time, the country has been rolling out ICT kiosks across provinces.

Hearing everyone's voices

Almost all countries emphasized the importance of including all relevant stakeholders in their SDG implementation. Some countries had established specific policies to ensure that the most vulnerable are heard. Angola, for example, stressed the importance of hearing vulnerable groups, such as through engaging in dialogue with youth in addition to other efforts to empower them, and through promoting gender equality.

Some countries (Cabo Verde, Cuba, Germany, Guatemala, Norway, Uruguay) put a special focus on youth and future generations, emphasizing their role in achieving the SDGs. In Thailand, the youth council organized a youth assembly to discuss LGBTIQ rights, with young stakeholders at the center of dialogue to give them a seat at the table. Japan established a Next-Generation Platform for Promoting SDGs where young people participate in discourses and debates about the SDGs and where action is promoted among the younger generation. Cyprus has an annual meeting of a children's parliament to let young people participate in dialogues on the SDGs and include them in decision-making processes.

Institutional arrangements have been made in some countries to ensure the participation of everyone. For example, the Norwegian government has put a focus on digital participation and inclusion by creating the position of an independent ombud for older people.

Role of non-governmental actors

The crucial role of non-governmental actors was emphasized in many VNRs, not only in terms of supporting implementation of actions that ensure no one is left behind but also in advocating and providing normative support to policy development.

Countries such as Angola, Bolivia, China, Colombia, Denmark, Guatemala, Mexico, and Sierra Leone all emphasized the importance of multi-stakeholder approaches in order to achieve the SDGs. Tunisia established a National Ethnic Committee to coordinate and monitor SDG progress with government representatives, civil society, the private sector, and academia. In Zimbabwe, the Transitional Stabilization Programme was implemented to work together with many stakeholders to overcome economic inequalities. Malaysia provided an example of a multi-stakeholder approach with its All-Party Parliamentary Group on SDGs to include politicians, academia, and civil society in achieving the Goals.

During the pandemic, many countries reported a multi-stakeholder approach to respond to the challenges. Egypt, for example, highlighted multiple stakeholders that were included in the response to COVD-19 and aims to further strengthen global partnerships by organizing multi-stakeholder platforms. Japan emphasized the outstanding work of civil society during the pandemic, including organizing support for women and children's cafeterias to ensure vulnerable groups are not left behind. Guatemala's VNR includes input from the public sector, the private sector, international cooperation agencies, and civil society organizations, among others, who have developed actions that not only contribute directly to the process of implementing the country's sustainable development goals, but have also mitigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple stakeholders also played a role in Namibia's response to COVID-19 in the areas of service delivery, disseminating information and awareness, and developing localized solutions. In Indonesia, various stakeholders such as grassroots women leaders were strengthened in their efforts to raise awareness and fight against gendered violence, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To implement the SDGs and ensure LNOB, some countries also focused on the local level in their VNRs and working with local non-governmental actors. The Norwegian Network of Excellence on SDG City Transition is an example of working together with local communities to achieve the SDGs on a regional level by including citizens, businesses, organizations, and academia into discussions about sustainable development. Thailand monitors progress and fosters dialogue with VLRs of the SDGs that are a joint project of local stakeholders and local government authorities. Sweden started an initiative called Local 2030 Hub to coordinate the implementation of sustainable cities and gender-equal societies on a local level with municipalities, organizations, research, and businesses.

Need for disaggregated data

As noted by some countries, the inclusion of those left behind begins with their identification and analysis of their demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Several countries, such as Egypt and Zimbabwe, stressed the importance of acquiring disaggregated data to support their policies, highlighted the need to utilize disaggregated data to reveal those suffering from multiple deprivations and stressed that the collection of disaggregated data from surveys and administrative sources was critical to inform the planning and the implementation of tailor-made programmes for their populations.

Several countries, including Qatar, Sweden and Zimbabwe, reported on difficulties in acquiring data. Egypt noted that despite improvements, challenges still exist in terms of data gathering, data disaggregation (by different classifications, such as geographic location, gender, income and disabilities), and unifying variables and definitions of indicators. In Qatar, the absence of a database for the social protection system is one of the most important challenges, as the accuracy of the data obtained for international organizations affects international indicators. Zimbabwe' VNR noted that data limitations continue to be a huge constraint on SDG monitoring and evidence-based planning, cited COVID-19-induced restrictions as the reason why a number of 2020 surveys had to be suspended, and further noted that they had not been able to fully satisfy data needs for all monitoring national, regional and international obligations.

San Marino noted that it is essential to include in a structured form the data related to the variation in spending growth rates or per capita household income of the poorest 40 per cent of the population, and that these data are currently not available to them. In many countries, access to high-quality, disaggregated statistics on the situation for persons with disabilities, children, domestic violence, and sexual violence, for example, has proved challenging.

Governments have taken concerted actions to fill the gaps in disaggregated data. In Sierra Leone, the World Bank recently committed a total of US$ 30 million to supporting Statistics Sierra Leone to undertake various projects, including deepening statistical services at district level, implementation of the first electronic mid-term population and housing census.

Several countries have a long tradition of providing disaggregated data. In Denmark, the administrative data is disaggregated in its nature and facilitates disaggregation of statistics in general and particularly to follow up on LNOB. In Norway, the National Population Register, combined with other administrative registers and traditional statistical surveys and georeferenced data, offer the possibility to obtain disaggregated data by statistical variables, such as age, sex, nationality, migratory status and geographical location.

At the same time, issues related to data use and ethics were also referenced. Monitoring the situation of groups that are often marginalized or exposed to vulnerabilities has often been challenging. For ethical reasons, it has not always been possible to access disaggregated, high-quality data.

Upholding the principle of LNOB in international development cooperation

In 2021, a handful of countries reported on how they incorporate the principle of LNOB in their international development cooperation. Norway, for example, included a specific section on this in their report, stressing particularly the mainstreaming of human rights and gender equality, disability inclusion, fight against modern slavery, and support to national human rights institutions and independent judiciaries.

Denmark incorporated assessments of its international actions under each goal reviewed, also reflecting on actions towards supporting vulnerable groups, while Japan highlighted the need to address the humanitarian-development-peace nexus through a LNOB lens, and stressed the importance of financing local civil society organizations.

Sweden noted the need to work on multidimensional poverty reduction, human rights, democracy and the rule of law and gender equality, as well as LGBTIQ rights and enhancing civil and political rights. Germany reported launching a specific LGBTIQ inclusion strategy to guide its foreign policy and development cooperation, including supporting collection of aggregated and anonymized data on the human rights situation of LGBTIQ people to bring existing inequalities to light, improve support for LGBTIQ people and their representatives, and to tailor the support to their specific needs.

Measures targeted at specific groups

Children

Countries reported on their progress towards attainment of numerous SDG targets that specifically address children, as well as on a number of cross-cutting policies and strategies on ensuring that children are not being left behind. Targets addressing health, education, food security and nutrition, to name a few, are presented in separate sections of this synthesis report.

In many cases, countries reported on the challenges that children from minorities or children facing multiple discriminations must tackle, noting children with disabilities, those from ethnic minorities and rural children as some of these groups. Special focus was also given to child poverty and multigenerational poverty. Bhutan, for example, reported that multidimensional poverty is highest for children from infancy to nine years of age. Indonesia noted that children from poor families have 85 to 90 per cent less income in their adulthood compared to those from families who are better off financially.

Countries reported establishment of cross-cutting strategies, committees (Qatar) and commissions (Sierra Leone) to address the issues related to children. In Norway, the government strategy focuses on increased participation for children, young people and parents from low-income families in kindergarten, school, afterschool programmes and leisure activities. Several countries reported on their actions to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence towards children.

Countries also reported on engaging children as active agents of change, and Czech Republic, Indonesia and Sierra Leone reported on including children in their VNR consultation processes. In Cyprus, the

parliament conducts an annual meeting with the Children's Parliament. Sweden highlighted the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into national law and stressed the need to systematically integrate a children's and young peoples' perspective in all relevant policies. Azerbaijan, Japan and Zimbabwe also referred to their actions to align their laws and policies with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Youth

A majority of the VNR countries see young people as critical to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and addressed youth in particular with reference to SDGs 3, 4, 5, 8, 13 and 16. Many countries pointed to the inclusive involvement of young people as crucial to democratic and just societies and several VNRs also addressed Youth in the context of health, including mental, reproductive and sexual health.

Several countries highlighted the intensification of youth and adult literacy and education. The promotion of employability and the inclusion of youth in the labour market was a high priority of many countries (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Cyprus, Cech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Namibia, Norway, Qatar, San Marino).

Several countries, including Bhutan, Indonesia, Egypt, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia and Marshall Islands, have included youth in their strategies to target climate change and promote responsible and sustainable consumption and production. In Denmark, the Youth Climate Council, for instance, has the task to inform and engage Danish youth in climate change efforts. Lao People's Democratic Republic is conducting skills development workshops on climate change along with awareness raising campaigns on environmental issues for youth in many of its communities.

Women and girls

Countries reported gradual progress in achieving gender equality. However, countries also reported significant challenges hindering their efforts to support the most vulnerable women and girls. Angola highlighted the informal sector's role in undermining female employment, and Zimbabwe noted higher rates of underage marriage and domestic violence.

Countries are playing a larger public role in an effort to bridge the income gap among genders. Many VNRs (Angola, Bolivia, Chad, Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Iraq, and others) also focused on the issue of rising violence against women, including domestic, sexual, psychological, emotional, and physical violence. The isolating conditions of COVID-19 were stated to be a cause of the exacerbated rates of violence; for example Iraq experienced a doubling of violence against women during the pandemic, and in an effort to mitigate the effects of such violence, identified eight key factors that show an inextricable link with gender-based violence: harmful traditional practices, early marriage, protracted displacement, poverty, limited financial services, lack of safety and security, the prevalence of imbalanced gender relations, and conditions of political instability.

In Denmark's effort to reduce all facets of violence against women, psychological violence was criminalized to the same level as physical violence in 2019, and efforts have progressed further by working with victims and creating programmes in various public sectors. Germany is investing EUR 140 million in ending violence against women by further developing aid structures in place for women affected by violence and tending to their needs.

Migrants

Both the challenges and benefits of migration were stressed by numerous countries. Despite the potential positive impacts of migration, in many countries migrants have been identified as a group at risk of being left behind, with challenges such as precarious working conditions, discrimination, lack of access to basic services, racism and hate speech. Numerous countries, such as Angola, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Germany, Mexico, Namibia, Paraguay, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe, reported the establishment or development of cross-cutting policies and strategies on migration, often implementing them together with a multi-stakeholder coalition.

Targeted training both for integrating migrants into school systems and the labour force as well as for employers and civil servants have been provided in many places for enhancing the inclusion of migrants. As Thailand's VNR noted, migrant workers are more often employed in less sanitary, more dangerous, or more difficult settings and jobs compared to local workers. Several countries reported on their actions to ensure the rights and inclusion of migrant workers, with key policies on disseminating information about their rights and available services. Numerous countries also reported on the need to ensure the most effective benefits from migrant workers' remittances, and on actions taken in this regard.

Several countries also reported on their actions to stop human trafficking (Antigua and Barbuda, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Nicaragua). Egypt reported on a new campaign aimed at urging citizens to report trafficking by informing authorities and through hotlines.

Countries including Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, China, and Marshall Islands reported on their actions taken to enact targeted policies for mitigating the negative aspects of rural-urban migration and harnessing the potential. Egypt noted its efforts to ensure balanced territorial development through targeted support to the local areas most in need of a boost to local competitiveness.

Persons with disabilities

References to persons with disabilities were made by most VNRs, and measures targeting persons with disabilities have been put in place in many countries, involving programmes, laws, national policies and strategies aimed at removing barriers for persons with disabilities. Policies and strategies address both the provision of social services to ensure the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in social life, to legal frameworks to fight discrimination and ensure their participation in the political arena (Egypt, Japan, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe).

Most reports highlighted the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on exacerbating pre-existing inequalities for individuals with disabilities. Attempts to address the challenges caused by the pandemic

have involved the expansion of social protection. In Indonesia, the government provided social assistance through the Family Hope Program to reduce poverty rates and improve access to health care facilities and centers for education for families in poverty, including those with disabilities. Azerbaijan extended social protection measures for those with disability status beyond March 2020. In many countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia Namibia, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe) strategies to address challenges posed by COVID-19, and more generally to ensure no one is left behind, have resulted in the reinforcement and expansion of social protection programmes targeting persons with disabilities.

Many countries, including Cyprus, Czech Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Japan, Thailand, and Zimbabwe, have scaled up access to quality education for persons with disabilities. Some countries such as Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Denmark, Japan, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, and Thailand have taken actions to address the unemployment of persons with disabilities. Azerbaijan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Indonesia and Norway have adopted specific policies addressing good health, including mental health, of persons with disabilities.

While the importance of disaggregated data as a base for efficient policies has been underlined by most of the VNRs, the ability of countries to collect such data still varies. Norway has been able to break down some of the data according to disability categories, while Lao People's Democratic Republic has no precise data about children and adults with disabilities in all levels of education. International collaboration has in some instances contributed to solving the problem. In Thailand, for example, the collaboration between the National Statistics Office and UNICEF has been extended to the National Disability Survey, allowing better identification of children with disabilities. Increased quality data collection remains important not only for accurate targeted policy interventions, but also to better understand the intersectionality between disability and other socio-economic factors.

Older persons

References to older persons were made by most countries, 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 the 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. Some countries raised the issue of discrimination faced by the elderly.

In most countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the vulnerabilities of society, in particular of the elderly. In Sweden, for example, a higher proportion of people on low incomes, people with underlying illnesses, people with low levels of education and the elderly have died during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Denmark, age-based discrimination is widespread, and the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed failures in society's ability to protect the most frail within its elderly population.

The need for better inclusion across generational boundaries of older persons and young people has been underlined in some countries. Statistical follow-up work needs to be developed further, especially to better capture groups who have fallen outside the statistical records.

Other sectors that were analyzed by some of the VNRs in the context of older persons include access to healthcare, promotion of employment among older workers, pensions, long-term care, prevention of violence and age-based discrimination, nutrition, transport and access to public spaces and digital services. In Cabo Verde, the social pension is intended for people aged 60 or above, with an annual income below the threshold of poverty. Niger has strengthened its strategic, legal and institutional framework related to social protection and assistance to the elderly.

Indigenous peoples

Several VNRs pointed to the high rate of poverty and extreme poverty among indigenous peoples (Bolivia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Paraguay) and noted that progress made in recent years had been reversed by the pandemic (Bolivia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia). To address this issue, some governments have undertaken specific socio-economic policy frameworks and social protection strategies targeting indigenous families (Bolivia, Chad, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia). Malaysia has implemented a Community Feeding Programme aimed at children under five from indigenous communities, to rehabilitate or prevent undernutrition.

Several countries have undertaken public policy initiatives to address cultural and linguistic barriers hindering access to health services for indigenous peoples. Columbia's Ministry of Health, for instance, has addressed the high maternal mortality rates among indigenous peoples by creating a guidance document for the socio-cultural suitability of maternal perinatal health services for indigenous peoples.

Quality education is still a challenge for many indigenous communities. Initiatives to address these barriers have included the translation and adaptation of teaching material to indigenous languages in Norway, and the appointment of indigenous representatives to the Council of the Indigenous School Education Sector in Paraguay. Mexico prioritizes indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples up to age 29 in a scholarship programme for higher education.

Indigenous communities in several countries (Chad, Colombia and Malaysia) face challenges regarding land and property rights, as well as access and benefit sharing. The VNRs of Malaysia, Norway and Sweden expressed concerns about the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on indigenous peoples; representatives from indigenous communities in Norway are also involved in creating and implementing strategies to address these issues; for example, the Barents Action Plan on Climate Change , includes a focus on indigenous peoples and youth. Malaysia has implemented a policy towards community forestry and involvement of indigenous and local communities to joint forest management initiatives.

LGBTIQ

People identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex (LGBTI) are often included in the groups at risk of being left behind. Some countries also include the identification of persons who identify as queer or questioning in this category (LGBTIQ).

Several countries reported tackling potential discrimination and providing focused support through various initiatives, such as updated legal frameworks, comprehensive education and training schemes. Bhutan, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Norway and Sweden all reported updating their laws or strategies addressing LGBTIQ rights. For example, as part of its efforts against hate crimes, the Danish Government indicated that it will propose a bill that aims to strengthen protection of LGBTI people against discrimination, hate crimes and hate speech, and also includes a proposal to make explicit the protection of transgender and intersex people. In Sweden, existing strategies are complemented by a new action plan that adds focus to the work life, older LGBTIQ people and the needs of intersex people, and the Government has also appointed an inquiry to investigate how parental legislation could be made more gender neutral.

Education and training at all levels can contribute to inclusion of LGBTIQ communities. In Denmark, the government has developed training materials for primary and secondary education that focus on challenges that LGBTI students may encounter and ways to support their well-being and openness and understanding among classmates. In the Dominican Republic, public servants have received training on LGBTI human rights.

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, and African countries. Middle-income countries and countries in conflict or post-conflict situations are also considered.

Out of the 42 countries presenting VNRs this year, 22 of these are considered to be countries in special situations, falling into at least one of the following categories: least developed countries (LDC), landlocked developing countries (LLDC), small island developing States (SIDS), or African countries. Each of these categories is characterized by economic, geographic, or political challenges that merit special attention to enable their development in a sustainable and resilient way.

The consequences of the pandemic have impeded progress for nearly all countries in one way or another, but the countries that fall into one or more of these special categories have been especially hard hit by related social and economic setbacks. Coupled with the increasingly devastating effects of climate change, the VNRs of many countries in special situations have noted that these and challenges have slowed or completely derailed their progress toward the SDGs (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Bhutan, Cabo Verde,

Cuba, Dominican Republic, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Marshall Islands, Namibia, Niger, Paraguay and Zimbabwe).

Table: 2021 VNR Countries in Special Situations					
2021 VNR Countries	LDC	LLDC	SIDS	Africa	MIC
Afghanistan	X				
Angola	X			X	
Antigua and Barbuda			X		
Azerbaijan		X			X
Bahamas			X		
Bhutan	X	X			
Bolivia		X			X
Cabo Verde			X	X	
Chad	X	X		X	
China					X
Colombia					X
Cuba			X		X
Cyprus					
Czech Republic					
Democratic People's Republic of Korea					
Denmark					
Dominican Republic			X		X
Egypt				X	X
Germany					
Guatemala					X
Indonesia					X
Iraq					X
Japan					
Lao People's Democratic Republic	X	X			
Madagascar	X			X	
Malaysia					X
Marshall Islands			X		X
Mexico					X
Namibia				X	X
Nicaragua					X
Niger	X	X		X	
Norway					
Paraguay		X			X
Qatar					
San Marino					
Sierra Leone	X			X	
Spain					
Sweden					
Thailand					X
Tunisia				X	X
Uruguay					
Zimbabwe		X		X	X

LDCs, LLDCs, and African countries

Both LDCs and LLDCs are characterized by undiversified economies, weak public health services, low productive capacities, inadequate digital connectivity, and limited resources to mitigate the spread and impact of COVID-19. Eight of the VNR countries in 2021 were considered to be LDCs (Afghanistan, Angola, Bhutan, Chad, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Niger, Sierra Leone), and eight were considered to be LLDCs (Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Bolivia, Chad, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Niger, Paraguay, and Zimbabwe). Bhutan, Chad, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Niger currently fall into both the LDC and LLDC category.

With the exception of one LDC (Angola) and one LLDC (Bolivia), all other LDC and/or LLDC countries reporting this year were conducting their second of third VNR. Some countries reported progress in analyzing and identifying gaps and areas needing support and enabling progress through interlinked strategies to achieve the Goals. Sierra Leone, a third time reporter, now prioritizes certain SDGs as "accelerator Goals" that could advance multiple agendas and address COVID-19 recovery, including SDG 4 and SDG 16, which they stated have the highest potential for socio-economic transformation. Chad noted in their second VNR that the process enabled deeper reflection on progress achieved since the previous report, the challenges of sustainable development, and possible opportunities and actions needed for the future.

Several LDCs noted in their VNRs that they have met the criteria necessary to graduate from LDC status in the coming years. Bhutan is expected to graduate from its LDC status in 2023, followed by Angola and Lao People's Democratic Republic in 2024. However, due to the setbacks caused by the pandemic and existing challenges, these countries have been granted a longer preparatory period of transition.

Ten of the 42 reporting countries this year were from the Africa region (Angola, Cabo Verde, Chad, Egypt, Madagascar, Namibia, Niger, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe). Africa includes 33 of the world's 46 countries classified as LDCs, and 16 of the 32 countries that are considered LLDCs, thereby meriting special consideration for concerted efforts toward regional progress through development partnerships that aim to increase stability, productive capacity, and connectivity. The VNRs of the LDCs, LLDCs and African countries in 2021 often also highlighted national efforts to integrate the SDGs with other frameworks, such as the Istanbul Programme of Action (IPOA), the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries (VPOA), and Africa's Agenda 2063.

SIDS

Six SIDS presented their VNRs this year (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Cabo Verde, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Marshall Islands). This year for the first time the reporting SIDS also decided to work together to develop a common section in their respective VNRs, making explicit reference to the S.A.M.O.A. Pathway, underlining SIDS' common challenges and vulnerabilities, and highlighting common opportunities and the need for regional cooperation, including SIDS-to-SIDS cooperation.

SIDS come from different regions of the world, are from different income groups, have different national priorities and sustainable development paths specific to national contexts yet in line with the 2030

Agenda and the SDGs. The principle of national ownership is central to their common pursuit of sustainable development. While each VNR is country specific, all SIDS face unique structural and exogenous vulnerabilities specific to them.

These countries remain a special case for sustainable development in view of their shared unique vulnerabilities. Well documented, SIDS-specific common development challenges include: small landmass; small populations; geographical isolation and spatial dispersion; high cost of transport, communication and energy; low-lying areas and extreme vulnerability to climate change and natural hazards; fragility of island ecosystems and high level of endemism; narrow resource-based and undiversified economies; remoteness from markets and strong dependence on trade, travel and remittances; high sensitivity to international fluctuations and narrow trade partners; and lack of access to concessional financing.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic fallout has amplified the endemic SIDS vulnerabilities linked to their unique characteristics and sensitivity to external shocks and natural hazards. These complex, exogenous and underlying conditions have undermined SIDS' sustainable development gains and their progress towards the 2030 Agenda. The unique and specific challenges are underlined not only in the 2030 Agenda and in the S.A.M.O.A Pathway, but also in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and the Paris Agreement.

Despite these vulnerabilities, SIDS lead by example in several areas. As featured in the respective VNRs, each of the six reporting countries this year has achieved, in their own way and through their own paths, noteworthy results in progresses toward the SDGs, despite the parallel health, economic, climate and environmental crises they continue to experience in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

As reflected in the six 2021 VNRs, SIDS are dealing with competing priorities in front of the crisis induced by the pandemic, climate change, and other exogenous factors. A wide range of local, national and regional actors from SIDS countries joined forces to deliver significant sustainable development outcomes, as underlined in their VNRs.

COVID-19 has amplified the need for an unprecedented collaboration for building back better, greener and bluer. The 2021 SIDS VNRs recognized that recovery represents a unique opportunity to catalyze transformative sustainable development.

Echoing the 2019 S.A.M.O.A. Pathway mid-term Review, SIDS called for "the scaling-up and development of genuine and durable partnerships with all stakeholders at national, regional and international levels". They called for innovative solutions and transformative sustainable development pathways fueled by public and private investments that demand enhanced access to development finance, the scaling up of investments for economic growth and diversification, including in ocean-based economies and creative and cultural industries, to reduce vulnerability and build resilience.

At a time when challenges become more and more inter-connected and exacerbated by several crises happening in parallel, shared SIDS multifaceted vulnerabilities can be transformed into shared integrated solutions and opportunities. The six SIDS VNRs pledged to improve interregional and intraregional

cooperation and collaboration to boost, at scale, sustainable development and accelerate the achievements of the SDGs.

The common sections in the 2021 VNRs spotlight the SIDS' commitment and willingness to recognize their shared unique challenges, and to join forces to address them. To the extent possible, this dynamic and approach may be replicated in future VNR reporting.

Countries in conflict and post-conflict situations

In some countries, the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic and climate change have been further exacerbated by the impacts of recent or ongoing conflict and political instability, including the potential threat of conflict due to proximity to conflict-affected areas (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Chad, Iraq, Niger, Zimbabwe). The negative impacts on the economy have hindered government efforts to avoid setbacks, and exposed populations who were already in fragile situations in these countries to increased poverty and vulnerability.

Afghanistan has been suffering from conflict, insecurity, and limited institutional capacity and access to justice for decades, and their VNR emphasized that these challenges remain an impediment to sustainable growth and development, with conflict having undermined progress by reducing productive capacity, constraining market opportunities, and weakening governance and its outreach across the country. More than half of Afghanistan's population has been forcibly displaced in their lifetime, with 25 per cent of internally displaced persons having been displaced due to natural disasters, and the remaining 75 per cent displaced due to conflict. In 2020, more than 800,000 undocumented returnees were forced to return to Afghanistan from Iran due to COVID-19 and related restrictions. With the continuation of conflict associated with high civilian and military causalities increased security burdens on the government put pressure on limited government resources that could otherwise be used for development.

The rehabilitation, reconstruction and reintegration of the liberated and conflict-affected areas was identified by Azerbaijan as one of the main directions of its development priorities in the coming years, with a strategic phase of a post-pandemic and post-conflict era from 2021 to 2030 that could enable the country's long-term sustainable development.

Chad's history has been marked by armed conflicts and violence that have hampered its chances of development. Although the government reports having regained political and security stability since 2009, the rise of terrorism in neighboring countries continues to constitute a security threat in Chad and is reportedly "compounded by the recurring risks of sporadic inter-community conflicts that have given rise to the need to establish frameworks for dialogue and consultation between religious denominations and between communities". Their VNR also highlights that the persistence of security risks caused by the incursions of the Boko Haram sect has further weakened the budgetary situation and prospects for short-term growth, as financial costs of military engagement and related care for refugees are straining public finances. Neighboring Niger also highlighted the persistence and amplification of threats from armed terrorist groups in the Sahel, noting kidnappings in the east and sporadic deadly attacks often targeted against civilian populations in the border areas.

Countries in conflict or post-conflict situations require forward-thinking strategies that go beyond monitoring and evaluation, and can enable progress to happen where possible. Zimbabwe reported progress in reducing all forms of violence and related deaths as a result of awareness-raising campaigns on exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against vulnerable groups; enhanced law enforcement visibility; and establishment of crime prevention and peace committees. Governments must remain cognizant of emerging risks and growing threats and take practical measures to address them. These countries often strive to integrate multiple complex threats into their national development plans, policies and programmes, along with SDGs and other development frameworks. Iraq's VNR outlined the importance of flexibility measures that acknowledge the interdependence of complex global threats such as terrorism, organized crime, pandemics, economic instability, cybercrime, natural disasters, and climate change; and advocate for investing in opportunities and mitigating such threats through flexible structural development that protects against new hazards while minimizing existing risks.

Middle-income countries

Nineteen of the 42 reporting countries in 2021 were considered to be middle-income countries (Azerbaijan, Bolivia, China, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iraq, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Namibia, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Thailand, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe).

The pandemic is projected to have a profound and long-lasting effect on middle-income countries, especially on the livelihoods of the most vulnerable, and has stimulated a through debate among middle-income countries regarding the advantages of working toward strengthened and comprehensive social protection systems that will be able to ensure sustainability and increase resilience over the long term to various economic, environmental, and social shocks that seriously undermine the achievement of the SDGs.

The capacity to respond to the pandemic has varied dramatically among middle-income countries according to their respective levels of income. According to IMF estimates, middle-income countries were able to spend around two per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on fiscal stimulus packages, while high-income countries spent more than 20 per cent.

Despite limitations some countries faced regarding the lack of technology to track individuals in the labor force, and having very scarce resources to stimulate spending, middle-income economies were nevertheless able to design their own welfare plans to address financial hardship from COVID-19. For example, countries such as Angola, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Namibia, Paraguay, and Zimbabwe reported distribution of unconditional cash transfers, wage subsidies, and provision of food baskets to the most vulnerable throughout the pandemic, even when resources were mostly limited or highly dependent on foreign aid.

Accelerating multistakeholder action to deliver the SDGs

VNR reports from middle-income economies have emphasized a new approach from governments to address SDG challenges by inviting all the different actors in civil society to be part of the transition toward

a sustainable future. The aim is focused on engaging with different national actors in the construction of development plans that focus on sustainability targets and the SDGs, while at the same time increasing local participation and strengthening the role of women in societies. Similarly, these measures taken to improve multi-sectoral and inter-sectoral coordination, integration, and collaboration are aimed at creating a holistic intervention to ensure the achievement of the SDGs and recover from the enormous setbacks to sustainable development progress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Financing

In the light of the current shrinking of fiscal capacity, along with continued pressures to redirect additional public funds to healthcare and social spending due to COVID-19, middle-income countries may need to perform new financial requirement assessments to adjust projections and explore diverse revenue sources for financing sustainable development, while also ensuring favorable debt sustainability positions. Several middle-income economies have already announced agreements with international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, to tackle these critical concerns.

Angola reported that at the end of 2018, an agreement was reached with the IMF for an Extended Financing Program for the period 2018 to 2021 for US$ 3.7 billion, which was later increased in the year 2020 by an additional US$ 765 million, reaching a total of about US$ 4.5 billion. Similarly, Zimbabwe announced that the United Nations provided financial and technical support to its National Development Strategy in a tripartite support structure, working with the World Bank and the African Development Bank. Collaboration between the United Nations Country Team and the Government of Zimbabwe resulted in improved dialogue and joint planning in sustainable development policies between central and sub-national governments. Such financing mechanisms and strategies between international bodies and middle-income economies will prove to be vital in order to spur sustainable growth prospects for the developing world in the post-pandemic era.

Sustainable Development Goals and targets

This chapter provides an overview of the progress reported by the VNR countries on the various SDGs and targets. Most countries reported on the SDGs individually; however, in a few cases not all SDGs applied to the specific country situation. The VNRs all contained a very diverse and complex set of examples, and five or six main features of the reporting are highlighted here. In addition, specific innovative actions undertaken by individual countries were included as examples for potential replication by other countries.

As was the case in 2020, many reports indicated how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their reporting; the pandemic has clearly made data collection more difficult. Additionally, many countries expressed uncertainty about how deeply the impacts of the pandemic would persist. Many countries were also not able to report to what extent the socio-economic measures taken in response to the pandemic would have an impact on attaining individual SDGs.

SDG 1

In 2017, according to World Bank estimates, 689 million people in the world were living in extreme poverty, that is to say on less than US$ 1.90 a day. The World Bank estimates that the COVID-19 pandemic will reverse the worldwide reduction in extreme poverty that occurred between 1990 and 2017. By 2020, between 88 and 115 million people worldwide may have fallen into poverty as a result of the effects of COVID-19. In this regard, the global goal of reducing the proportion of people living below the international poverty line by three per cent by 2030 appears to be difficult to achieve. The pandemic is expected to have a deep and lasting impact on the economy, and especially on the livelihoods of the vulnerable. As such, it has stimulated discussion on the benefits of working towards a strengthened and comprehensive social protection system—to ensure sustainability and increase resilience over the long term to various economic, environmental, and social shocks.

The capacity to respond to the pandemic shock varies dramatically by country. According to IMF estimates, the poorest countries spent around two per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on fiscal stimulus packages, while the richest countries spent more than 20 per cent of their GDPs. Several industrialized economies reported to have the principle of the welfare state enshrined in their economic policies, including Denmark, Germany, Japan, Norway, Qatar, and Sweden. These high-income economies were able to tackle the disruptions by the COVID-19 pandemic, given their largely welfare state approach even prior to the beginning of the pandemic. Some of these policies vary from targeted poverty intervention programs and unconditional cash transfers to the support of small, medium, and large businesses through their grant programs, which have remained accessible thus far throughout the pandemic.

Despite limitations some countries faced regarding the lack of technology to track individuals in the labor force, and having very scarce resources to stimulate spending, lower- and middle-income economies were nevertheless able to design their own welfare plans to address financial hardship from COVID-19. For example, countries such as Afghanistan, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bhutan, Bolivia, Chad, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Madagascar, Namibia, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe reported to have distributed unconditional cash transfers, wage subsidies, and provided food baskets to the most vulnerable throughout the pandemic, even when resources were mostly limited or highly dependent on foreign aid. Such a situation occurred in Sierra Leone, where financial relief packages were distributed to vulnerable households thanks to foreign aid from the European Union and the World Bank. Other lower-income economies, such as Chad, have highlighted that their financial relief packages would have been considerably larger if it wasn't for the world petroleum market. The fall in crude oil prices constraint spending plans for many developing economies that are still highly dependent on exports from natural resources.

Most developed economies that reported VNRs this year emphasized that expanding financing mechanisms to developing countries, as well the adoption of new technologies that facilitate the creation of reporting systems to support of social protection schemes, should be considered vital in order to spur sustainable growth prospects for the developing world in the post-pandemic era.

It is noteworthy that despite disruptions caused by COVID-19, several countries reported the achievement of eradicating extreme poverty. China, Czech Republic, Denmark, Norway, Qatar, and Sweden have

reported zero extreme poverty in their VNRs, and many of them emphasized their global responsibility and commitment to end extreme poverty in the developing world. China, for example, reported that the implementation of diverse programs to advance poverty reduction in developing countries is underway, including 100 different poverty reduction initiatives, the Ten Cooperation Programs for poverty reduction and livelihood improvement in Africa, a South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, and a China-United Nations Peace and Development Fund. Furthermore, Germany has also committed itself to raising its official development assistance (ODA) expenditure to 0.7 per cent of its gross national income (GNI) by 2030, and has become the world's second-largest bilateral donor.

Finally, reporting countries agreed that poverty must be seen as a multidimensional phenomenon, and not just limited to income and expenditure. Education, health, access to housing and other social services as well as gender-related disparities also count. Angola also announced the creation of a new multidimensional poverty index that evaluates indicators of household deprivation related to health, education, employment, and quality of life.

Bhutan and Qatar also emphasized that developmental policies directed at addressing poverty require the adoption of new multidimensional methods for measuring vulnerability, as well as data that could allow analysts to classify survey samples by gender, place of residence, age, disability, immigration status, ethnicity, and other characteristics. Therefore, the need to strengthen statistical capacity, have a more regular collection of essential socioeconomic data, improve data quality, and fill data gaps remains extremely important, even if improvements in poverty reduction have been made over the last few years. In addition, it has been suggested that the official poverty line must be updated for some countries, especially those that experience sudden macroeconomic shocks (positive or negative), in order to accurately understand poverty levels.

SDG 2

In 2019, according to estimates from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), more than two billion people worldwide suffered from the lack of essential vitamins and minerals (malnutrition). Some 690 million people were affected by chronic undernourishment (hunger). Some 98 per cent of the people suffering from hunger live in developing countries. According to estimates from FAO in 2020, an additional 80 to 130 million people may be suffering from chronic hunger as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic poses challenges in achieving SDG 2 by imposing barriers to the distribution of agricultural production inputs, decreasing the purchasing power of farmers in meeting the needs of agricultural production inputs, decreasing purchasing power of people as food consumers, and ultimately reducing the quality of food consumption and nutrition intake, especially among the poor and near poor populations.

Many VNR developing economies have reported their exposure to volatility in agricultural production, primarily due to adverse weather shocks and fluctuations in the world market. Most of these countries

have also reported that a self-sustainability position in terms of agricultural production would be ideal (i.e., satisfying local demand with local supply), but current circumstances impede it, causing imports of agricultural goods to grow in order to meet national demand. For example, Cabo Verde has reported that over 90 per cent of consumed grains in the country come from abroad, either in the form of food aid or commercial imports.

Under this scenario, countries such as Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Bolivia, Colombia, Cyprus, Egypt, Mexico, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe have reported the implementation of structural programs for farmers that are involved in ensuring food security. The strategies consist of providing subsidies for fuel and motor oils, wheat and rice cultivation, together with permits for purchasing mineral fertilizers, bio-humus, and pesticides at discounted prices. These initiatives also include the facilitation of technology related to upgrades on irrigation, drainage, and road infrastructure to support the agricultural sector as a whole.

For industrialized economies with greater agricultural capacity and production, the focus is on a different challenge: sustainable and organic farming. This type of production is a resource-saving form of farming that has wide-ranging beneficial effects on the climate, the environment, and nature. Norway reported that maintaining the good status of animal and plant conditions is a priority, but also a challenge given that climate change is a risk factor. Germany also reported that, over the past few years, despite the steady increases in the organically farmed area, the rate of increase has not been fast enough. If this trend were to continue, the target of organic farming on 20 per cent of the country's agricultural land by 2030 would not be achieved.

Countries also announced the implementation of monitoring and technical assistance programs to track and ensure an adequate nutritional status for children in vulnerable regions. Colombia, Malaysia, and Paraguay reported ambitious programs that provide monthly medical controls and nutritional diagnostics to children under the age of five and pregnant women that live below poverty levels. Nutritional components are also provided cost-free to participants.

Other policy initiatives by countries focused broadly on food security and consisted of creating food distribution networks that covered regions and municipalities where poverty is high. For example, Azerbaijan's State Committee for Affairs of Refugees and IDPs (SCARI) provided food aid to low-income families with the support of local and international organizations.

Bahamas also launched a similar program called the National Food Distribution Taskforce, which consisted of a public-private social care initiative that delivered emergency food assistance to vulnerable populations. Countries such as Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Cuba, Iraq, Japan, and Namibia also followed the implementation of similar plans.

Finally, developed countries have reiterated their commitment to aiding the global South reach a self-sustainability position in agricultural production and achieve zero hunger.

China reported that it will continue to play a critical role in global food and agriculture governance by promoting positive outcomes of the United Nations Food Systems Summit and the International Conferences on Food Loss and Waste. Similarly, Norway presented its Action Plan for Sustainable Food Systems, which is designed to assist low-income countries in feeding their own population by focusing on increased sustainable climate-resilient food production, higher sustainable value-creation and improved markets, healthier nutrition and diets, and better policy and governance. Denmark reported its contribution of funds to climate financing (in addition to its ordinary development aid) and attached great importance to adaptation so that developing countries could have real possibilities to adapt to climate change and ensure resilient food production, while also recognizing the role played by women in food production and the need to strengthen their leadership in this area through reliable data and studies on how and why women are particularly vulnerable.

Regarding South-South cooperation, China also stipulated that it will deepen the South-South agricultural cooperation, promote the making of international trade rules for agriculture, and achieve high-quality development and strengthen health systems.

SDG 3

All countries reported on their progress towards SDG 3. Countries recognized the need to modernize through innovation and digitalization to combat the ongoing pandemic and address underlying issues in health outcomes.

Many countries increased spending towards universal health coverage to combat COVID-19 (Afghanistan, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Cyprus). Egypt allocated a 100 per cent budget increase for the Ministry of Health and Population for the 2020-21 fiscal year. Cyprus implemented its General Health System in July 2020 to create a comprehensive and financially sustainable national healthcare system.

Some countries reported an increased maternal mortality rate (Azerbaijan, Cabo Verde) while other countries saw significant declines (Bhutan, Egypt, Lao People's Democratic Republic). Declines were attributed to increased universal healthcare coverage, more qualified health personnel, and improvements in neonatal facilities. Increased mortality rates were most heavily linked with shortages in healthcare workers exacerbated by COVID-19. The

mortality rate of children under the age of five has continued to decline for many countries due to better universal coverage and the creation of more obstetric and neonatal clinics.

Most countries reported a decline for most communicable diseases, including tuberculosis, malaria, hepatitis B, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), usually attributed to closely monitored infection data collection and increased prevention measures. However, some countries had significant increases in certain diseases with varying causes. Cyprus reported increased tuberculosis cases due to the arrival of asylum seekers coming from highly infected areas. The Czech Republic reported an increase in the number of men newly infected with HIV by 30 per cent. Egypt launched the “100 Million Health Initiative” with the sole target of eliminating the hepatitis C epidemic that has led to one of the highest infection rates in the world.

Non-communicable diseases remain a significant obstacle in the implementation of SDG 3. Cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancer are the highest causes of all deaths for most countries. Countries expressed concern that increasingly sedentary lifestyles exacerbated by drug and alcohol use would hinder the implementation of SDG 3 (Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Chad, Columbia, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Iraq, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Mexico, Niger, Uruguay). Countries reported a variety of measures to address these challenges, including enhanced food security, taxes on alcohol and harmful drugs, promotion of healthy lifestyles starting at youth, and expansion of mental healthcare.

Mental health was also highlighted as a significant cause for concern by some countries (Bhutan, Denmark, Japan, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Sweden, Tunisia). Japan highlighted its suicide rate, showing that mental health is as much of an issue as physical health. Based on the 2016 revision of the Basic Law on Suicide Prevention and the actual situation of suicide in Japan, the Cabinet approved the "Outline of Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Measures: Aiming to Realize a Society in which No One is Driven to Suicide", which made strides in decreasing the suicide rate until 2020.

In light of COVID-19, countries reported staff shortages as one of the most significant challenges in covering health coverage gaps (Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Columbia, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Thailand, Zimbabwe). Countries highlighted the importance of further developing a system of health care financing to strengthen medical systems and prevent interruptions in care.

Countries also reported on the importance of strengthened coordination with global health players in order to better prepare for future health crises and bridge the gap of disparate health outcomes (Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, Norway). More efficient health systems are the outcome of strengthened multilateral health organizations, particularly the World Health Organization; Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance; and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. This approach also extends to vaccine equity, an issue most countries view as crucial in recovering from COVID-19 and achieving SDG 3. The Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator is a global platform for the development of COVID-19 vaccines, therapies, and diagnostics and COVAX is a multilateral initiative that aims to obtain reasonable prices through bulk ordering and distribute equitably. There is a need for more dovetailing of multilateral and bilateral activities as well as for an extension of cooperation among all key players in the health system– the public sector, the private sector, and the academic community.

SDG 4

In reporting on SDG 4, countries most focused on the impact of COVID-19, digitalization, and resources dedicated to ensuring free and quality education.

Countries reported that humanitarian crises and COVID-19 have put great pressure on education worldwide with even the current levels of insufficient financing at risk of disappearing (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Columbia, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Mexico, Niger, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). During the school closures of 2020, more than 1.6 billion children and young people were sent home, with the poorest and most marginalized of them, including refugees and displaced persons, often left without access to distance learning. Lower income countries also reported that girls are at particular risk due to an increase in the number of teenage pregnancies and child marriages and due to an inadequate level of access to sexual and reproductive health services (Niger, Zimbabwe). Countries reported on the need for foreign aid and increased public budgets in order to ensure the survival of public education systems and preserve the progress made over the past decade (Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Japan, Norway) and several also expressed concern that in far too many places, students and teachers have been excluded from the decision-making processes for school openings and closures.

New plans and initiatives towards SDG 4 were reported in many countries. In Japan, the Child Care and Child Support Law was amended in order to make kindergartens and daycare centers free of charge for all children. Japan also revised its national curriculum in order to ensure that children foster competencies necessary to develop the future, including technological skills, an attitude of proactive learning, and gender equality.

In Germany, an investment programme to accelerate the development of the infrastructure of all-day care facilities for primary school pupils was launched at the end of 2020. Indonesia launched the Smart Indonesia Program which provides education cash assistance to school-age children (aged 6 to 21 years) from impoverished poor families.

Countries emphasized the need to digitalize and innovate certain aspects of education, which has been made even more apparent by the COVID-19 pandemic (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Cyprus, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Spain, Sweden, Uruguay). Countries reported that the transition to online learning has exacerbated inequalities among and within countries. Emphasizing the importance of early childhood care and education, countries reported new investments targeting impoverished populations that cannot afford the necessary equipment for remote school (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Cyprus, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Spain, Sweden, Uruguay).

Many countries also offered free education for all (Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Czech Republic, Denmark Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Uruguay). Some curriculums include features like critical social skills (Japan) or acquisition of technological skills and vocational training (Denmark, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Zimbabwe).

Countries highlighted the importance of gender equality and the guiding principle of leaving no one behind, especially made relevant during the pandemic and the ensuing digitalization of education. 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 to education for men and women (Denmark, Germany, Japan, Norway, Sweden). Japan recently approved "The Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality", which continues to promote measures for the formation of a gender-equal society. From the perspective of developing education and other measures to promote understanding of gender equality while deepening cooperation with educational institutions and local governments, as well as strengthening the promotion system, Japan is expanding the participation of women in policy-making processes in the field of school education. Efforts are also being made in elementary, middle, and high schools to provide appropriate guidance on gender equality, mutual understanding, and cooperation according to the developmental stages of students. Denmark reported that funding has been allocated for a talent development programme that aims to improve the gender balance in research. Funding has also been allocated to strengthen the recruitment of women by science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) educational programmes.

Challenges reported in the implementation of SDG 4 included urban-rural educational gaps (Egypt, Indonesia, Zimbabwe); lack of teachers and professional personnel (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Zimbabwe); capacity building for teachers (Egypt); high classroom density (Zambia), the decline of national Gross Enrollment Rate (Japan), specific groups of children facing greater constraints to access such as working children, indigenous children, and children living in remote areas (Angola, Indonesia).

SDG 5

The majority of countries reported on SDG 5 this year, with the exception of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Malaysia, Qatar and Dominican Republic. Among the subpoints addressed in SDG 5, the importance of highlighting the number of women represented in government positions was prevalent (Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Mexico, Namibia, Norway, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Zimbabwe). Of these 22 countries, only a handful achieved representation at a level of 50 per cent or higher in at least one body of government (Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Madagascar, and Zimbabwe). The highest proportion is attributed to Bolivia with 55.5 per cent of the Senate represented by women.

A handful of countries also addressed unpaid work or domestic labor with a contrast between male and female output (Cuba, Denmark, Germany, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Namibia, Paraguay, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Uruguay presented among the highest numbers and gender discrepancy, with women attributing 65 per cent of their time to unpaid labor while men dedicated 32 per cent. Sweden reported the lowest number of weekly, unpaid domestic labor at 5.25 hours, or 45 minutes per day more than men. Not all countries were able to measure and quantify this accurately but some are working to implement an adequate tool (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan).

Gender based violence was mentioned in the following forms among others: domestic violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, emotional violence, and physical violence by a partner and were addressed frequently by countries (Angola, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Chad, Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Namibia, Nicaragua, Niger, Norway, Paraguay, San Marino, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Countries stated that rates reported were exacerbated as a byproduct of the new living social standard present due to COVID-19 (Czech Republic, Denmark, Iraq, Japan, Madagascar, Norway, Thailand, Uruguay). The Czech Republic saw a 60 per cent increase due to the pandemic alone. Iraq also saw rates more than double, and identified eight key factors that show an inextricable link between gender-based violence: harmful traditional practices, early marriage, protracted displacement, poverty, limited financial services, lack of safety and security, the prevalence of imbalanced gender relations, and conditions of political instability. In Denmark's effort to reduce all facets of violence against women and combat rising numbers, they have criminalized psychological violence to the same level as physical violence, are working with the victims and creating programs in the integration, health and social systems. Germany is investing EUR 140 million in ending violence against women, and further developing the aid structures in place for women affected by violence.

In an effort to discuss income inequality among genders, the Gini Coefficient/Index was used to represent statistics reflecting any financial disparities between women and men in wealth inequality (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Niger, Paraguay, Spain, Tunisia, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). A statistical measure of 0.4 or less represents a visible measure of equality, which thus far has been successfully achieved by some countries (Bhutan, Czech Republic, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Niger, Spain, Uruguay).

Countries in Asia had a focus on the use and widespread access of technology in an effort to empower women (China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand). China has consistently ranked first in number of Internet users and Thailand has seen a 14.9 per cent increase of women and girls having access to the Internet in a two-year span (2017 to 2019). Lao People's Democratic Republic noted room for improvement as only around 13 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 reported having used a computer in the last three months, albeit with the numbers also indicating that around 76 per cent of young women own a mobile phone.

SDG 6

Many reports addressed SDG 6, highlighting the importance of providing access to safe water, in particular for hand washing to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. While some reported on progress, many also highlighted challenges, including the impact of climate change. Angola reported that its Community Water Management Model project had successfully improved water governance in rural and peri-urban communities. Qatar noted that it had established the first integrated household solid waste treatment facility in the Middle East that produces organic fertilizer and generates electricity and biogas. Afghanistan reported that weaker domestic water resources management and investment and significant overlapping and lack of coordination among institutions hampered progress. Norway noted that a significant part of its pipeline network is old and the low rate of replacement of deteriorating pipelines is a challenge.

The utilization of rainwater as an alternative water source was mentioned in some reviews (Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Marshall Islands). Antigua and Barbuda noted that groundwater resources are increasingly being threatened by population growth, pollution, unsustainable development patterns, climate change, deforestation, land degradation, pollution of coastal water and underground water sources and waste management. The country is increasingly dependent on desalination to produce freshwater for consumption and an initiative that has been promoted to households is rainwater harvesting. By law, all new houses are fitted and equipped with rainwater collection and storage systems. Bolivia reported new public infrastructure investments in urban and rural areas that aim to increase universal access to potable water. The collection of rainwater has been used as a solution to rural areas where infrastructure for potable water is not yet available. The Marshall Islands described a reservoir project that will help expand rainwater storage capacity, especially in extreme droughts. Norway reported that it is supporting a programme in Somalia to assess the potential for deep ground water, to help to alleviate the long-term water crisis. Cyprus mentioned that non-conventional water resources, including desalination units and water reuse, are being promoted to address and improve the reliability of the water sources. Egypt noted that it had designed a national plan to rationalize water and optimize the use of available resources through 2037 to provide alternative water sources, through desalination in coastal areas, the establishment of groundwater extraction stations and the reuse of treated water.

A number of reviews noted that relevant new legislation was adopted (Chad, Denmark, Germany, Mexico, Thailand).

Chad mentioned that it had adopted the 2017 national sanitation policy and strategy and the National Water and Sanitation Investment Plan 2016-2030. Denmark noted that in March 2019, EU member states adopted a resolution to revise the Drinking Water Directive that sets limits on the concentration of chemicals released from taps and water pipes that are in contact with drinking water. The water utility companies must also inform citizens about the quality and price of drinking water. With the revisions of fertilizer application legislation in 2017 and 2020, Germany noted that it has made a major contribution to protecting groundwater, surface water and coastal waters from the damaging effects of nutrient inputs. The legal provisions on fracking that have been in force since 2017 restrict the use of fracking technology.

Mexico also described its Sectorial Program of Environment and Natural Resources 2020-2024 that aims to build and provide maintenance to new and existing treatment plants in order to extend the provision of potable water in vulnerable sectors.

Several reviews reported inequalities in access to safe drinking water, sanitation services and hygiene between urban and rural populations, with urban areas generally having better access (Afghanistan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Madagascar, Paraguay). Madagascar noted that a quarter of the population in rural areas do not have access to basic drinking water and 36 per cent do not have access to basic hygiene facilities. Some reviews referred to access to safe drinking water as a human right (Japan and Nicaragua). Japan reported that it has been working internationally on ensuring a stable supply of safe water, improvement of sanitary environment such as toilets and sustainable water resource management.

Some reviews described initiatives to better manage drought and its impacts on vulnerable groups (Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan). Antigua and Barbuda mentioned its project to restore a reservoir with the help of skilled community members. The Antigua and Barbuda Skills Training Enterprise program placed young women at the project site to build their vocational and life skills. Bhutan reported that through efforts to ensure safe and reliable drinking water and adequate water for farming, youth are being trained with skills in essential areas.

A number of reviews reported efforts to promote Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). Lao People's Democratic Republic noted that the WASH policy has recently been approved and the Ministry of Health is finalizing the rural WASH Strategy. Climate change, gender and accessibility are well reflected in this WASH Strategy. Standard Operating Procedures are being developed for Community WASH Committees to enhance community ownership of the facilities. Norway reported that it has provided WASH services for over 1,440,000 women, men, boys and girls affected by crises in 12 countries. Sweden mentioned that it has taken steps to integrate WASH as an important tool to ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights.

While some reviews identified industrial wastewater as the main source of pollution and decline in water quality (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, San Marino, Thailand), Indonesia reported that the source of pollutants from domestic activities remains the dominant cause of the decline in water quality. Democratic People's Republic of Korea noted that special attention should be paid to improve the water quality, as industrial and household wastewater are disposed in the rivers and streams and drained to soil without full treatment in some regions, due to the technical conditions of the sewage disposal plants and lack of equipment and reagents. Germany noted that it is promoting the integrated approach of SDG 6 with its nexus of water, energy and food security.

SDG 7

SDG 7 was mentioned in many reviews, with most reports underscoring the importance of access to energy for all. While many countries reported on progress made (Cabo Verde, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, Indonesia, Norway, Thailand, Uruguay), some also pointed to energy related challenges impacting parts of the population (Afghanistan, Angola, Namibia, Tunisia). Cabo Verde noted significant progress towards access to energy for all, stating that those without sufficient access were mostly located in remote areas. China also mentioned that due to large power grids, rural areas in that country do now have access to stable and reliable power supply. Tunisia referenced that sufficient energy access for low- and middle-income populations is a challenge due to domestic energy prices, which combined with an increase in general poverty, has affected many.

Several countries also addressed the importance of energy efficiency in the reviews (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Nicaragua, Norway, Qatar, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia). Countries reported on progress made, with Thailand noting its Smart Grid Masterplan that aims to use electricity more efficiently through better managing usage within private homes, commercial, and industrial establishments. The initiative also includes an electricity forecasting system tied to renewable energy consumption.

Among renewable energy sources, solar energy was most frequently mentioned, with many countries reporting on solar solutions. Antigua and Barbuda referenced a project which was implemented by the Government in 2018, retrofitting government buildings, hospitals, schools and parking garages with solar and wind systems. This effort is estimated to provide 10 per cent of the island's energy needs. In addition, Antigua and Barbuda has turned to solar energy in response to the recovery from Hurricane Irma in 2017, with the establishment of a solar plant as an effort to build back better. The review from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea also noted the encouragement by the government to introduce solar technology.

As per Spain's review, the Balearic Islands region will install solar technology as a source of renewable energy to power both public and private establishments. In Zimbabwe, more than 1,200 solar streetlights have been installed in urban areas, with most located in the capital.

The importance of developing renewable energy sources was addressed by many countries in the reviews, not only in the context of energy efficiency but also as an effort to lesson dependency on fossil fuels (Cuba). Germany described efforts to increase its share of electricity generated from renewable energy sources to 65 per cent by 2030. It also noted that greenhouse gases are to be cut by 88 per cent by 2040, with a goal of greenhouse gas neutrality by 2045. Japan noted that the country still has a way to go in increasing the use of renewable energy, especially in view of the national goal of reducing emissions to net-zero by 2050. Lao People's Democratic Republic

stressed their potential for renewable energy development, especially related to hydropower resources. Angola stated that renewable energy production represented 89 per cent of total energy generation in 2020.

To make progress with respect to SDG 7, national action plans, including policy frameworks, strategies and domestic goals were highlighted by countries in their reviews (Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Germany, Iraq, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mexico, Paraguay, San Marino, Tunisia, Zimbabwe). Egypt referenced their Integrated Sustainable Energy Strategy 2035 aimed at increasing energy production and renewable energy output. Malaysia has developed a Power Sector Development Plan 2020-2038 with a target of renewable energy capacity at 31 per cent of total installed capacity by 2025, and 40 per cent by 2035, with an added focus on capping coal power plant capacity. Mexico has developed The Energy Sector Program 2020-2024, which aims to achieve self-reliance on sustainable energy, in addition to other targets. Paraguay has established energy policy through a law aimed at furthering sustainable use of natural resources.

The transportation sector was mentioned in many reviews (Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, China, Germany, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Norway, Paraguay, San Marino). Given that transportation traditionally has been a significant contributor to pollution and fossil fuel consumption, conversion to electric vehicle adoption and increased use of public transport was mentioned by numerous countries. Lao People's Democratic Republic aims to increase the use of biofuels for transportation as an effort to reduce fossil fuel imports. Norway noted that more than 50 per cent of all new cars are currently electric in that country, and that only electric cars will be sold from 2025, along with an increase in the carbon dioxide tax in 2030. Mexico also referenced tax laws to encourage adoption of electric vehicles.

SDG 8

SDG 8 was specifically discussed by all of the countries either directly or indirectly, and numerous targets of the goal were addressed. The challenges related to an informal economy were among the most frequently reported (Afghanistan, Angola, Antigua, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, Namibia, Paraguay, Qatar, Spain, Thailand, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Some highlighted a female majority occupying such work (Angola, Egypt, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Paraguay). Some countries indicated informal work constituted the majority of the labor market (Angola, Cabo Verde, Egypt, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Mexico, Namibia), with the highest percentages being 83 per cent (Lao People's Democratic Republic), 80 per cent (Madagascar) and 74.5 per cent economic majority (Angola). The lowest majority percentage belongs to Cabo Verde with a 51.6 per cent informal economy majority. Others highlighted informal work as being noticeably prevalent in rural communities (Angola, Cabo Verde, Indonesia). Afghanistan highlighted the discrepancy created by the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of informal work, as well as those who are self-employed and daily wage earners.

Youth unemployment was mentioned by well over half of the reporting countries (Afghanistan, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Chad, Colombia, Cuba, Czech Republic,

Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Niger, Norway, Paraguay, Qatar, San Marino, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe). Many noted a youth unemployment rate of more than ten per cent (Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Niger, and Thailand). Qatar reported the lowest youth unemployment rate of 0.3 per cent. Paraguay expressed concern that youth unemployment was negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic alongside Indonesia's observation that formal employment openings decreased by almost 17 per cent, affecting a youth majority (16 to 18 years old). Although Sweden has a youth unemployment rate under 10 per cent, they have a program in place called the *90 Day Guarantee* to continue combatting their current rate of 6.5 per cent. The 90 days refers to the maximum duration that a young person would remain unemployed before being offered a job, training or any measure conducive to a path of work or study.

The third most highly addressed subtopic was that of sustainable tourism (Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, Colombia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Namibia, Niger, Paraguay, Qatar, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Of those, some addressed their reliance on tourism as a major sector of their economy (Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Cabo Verde, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, Namibia, Qatar, Spain). Other countries noted that COVID-19 severely impacted their tourist economy (Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Dominican Republic, Malaysia, Namibia, Qatar, Thailand, Uruguay). Bhutan has implemented the Tourism Economic Contingency Plan, which aims to make the country a green, sustainable, inclusive and high-volume tourism destination by engaging displaced employees from this sector and making an effort to build it back better.

The presence, support and significance of SMEs or micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) were mentioned often (Chad, China, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Namibia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay). Some of the highest rates mentioned of SMEs or MSMEs making up the country's economic majority were Colombia at 53.5 per cent, Thailand standing at 43.2 per cent and Egypt with 37 per cent.

Malaysia introduced Budget 2020, which allocates 4.3 billion Malaysian Ringgit toward assisting entrepreneurs and SMEs.

The last frequented subject was that of mobile or online banking access (Afghanistan, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Thailand, Tunisia) in an effort to create widespread equality through increased access to mobile banking. Afghanistan noted accessibility discrepancies among several factors, with a level of access in urban areas of 7.8 per cent that decreases to less than half that in rural areas at 3.5 per cent, and an ever-decreasing negligible rate of 0.2 per cent among the Kuchis. Furthermore, men have much higher access to banking than women, with rates recorded at 7.9 per cent and 1.1 per cent respectively.

SDG 9

A number of challenges in reaching the goals and targets of SDG 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure were highlighted in the VNRs. The availability and access to sustainable public infrastructure continues to be a significant challenge for a number of countries, particularly in remote areas and for some countries also in rapidly growing urban areas. Some countries have continued to face supply side constraints such as intermittent energy supply and digital connectivity, which have had an adverse impact on industrial and manufacturing sectors. In some cases, high external debt burdens hampered further investments in innovation, industry and infrastructure.

In the 2021 VNRs a number of countries have reported comprehensive policies that focus on expanding their industrial sectors, as the contribution of manufacturing and industry to GDP has traditionally been modest (Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Chad, Namibia). Other countries have indicated efforts to diversify the industrial base away from the oil sector, such as Egypt and Iraq. Some countries have reported the very important contribution of labor-intensive industry to the economy, creating jobs and income and fostering economic growth (China, Czech Republic, Indonesia).

Many countries expressed interest in upgrading their industrial sectors into more sustainable production methods of manufacturing. Some countries stressed the importance of entrepreneurship and promoting the effective contribution of SMEs in this effort. Crucially, countries reported the intention to address the high contribution of industry and manufacturing to the overall carbon footprint of the country (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark). Germany highlighted the importance of the manufacturing sector in addressing the impacts of climate change and adaptation, health, noise air quality control, and protection of natural resources when making investments.

In infrastructure development, many countries cited sustainable transport systems as a priority area for renewed investment (Angola, China, Sweden). Denmark underlined their intention to develop sustainable mobility plans for the conversion of the transport sector into a public transportation system, to be reinforced through a modernization of railways with coherent timetables and transport routes, and by improving conditions for pedestrians and cyclists. Cuba reported continued investment into expanding its rail infrastructure.

Countries have advanced a wide range of institutional measures and policy innovations to upgrade infrastructure. China reported long-term investments in digital and physical infrastructure as the key to economic success. Many countries reported infrastructure development as an opportunity for the future, and expressed interest to attract foreign investment in these areas. Related to addressing inequalities in access to infrastructure, countries have also advanced public investments to accelerate rural development and strengthen access for the poor. Other countries prone to climate-related natural disasters reported on the need to invest in resilient infrastructure (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Madagascar, Mexico), to mitigate the long-term effects of climate change and its impact on their populations. These countries also invest heavily in early warning systems to boost resilience. These investments would in turn benefit the tourism sector, which were hit hard by the effects of the both hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic and are crucial sectors in the economy of a number of reporting countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Mexico).

Some countries reported continuing low availability of the Internet to its populations, highlighting another important area for infrastructure development in the ongoing effort to advance digitalization, including through the expansion and promotion of broadband and 5G connections (Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe).

In Indonesia, a large-scale project on Infrastructure for Connectivity has been undertaken to increase the number of households connected to the Internet.

On innovation, many countries emphasized that innovation and technology would provide crucial paths to combat climate change, as well as increase global competitiveness. A number of countries referred to their ranking in global competitiveness indices, such as the World Intellectual Property Organization's Creative Output Index (Egypt, Japan).

Nicaragua and Colombia reported efforts to boost the creative economy in their reports. Other countries included indicators on how national spending on research and development had evolved (Germany, Dominican Republic, Norway). Colombia and San Marino reported efforts to promote a new entrepreneurial culture devoted to innovation, boosting employment in key sectors for economic development. Lao People's Democratic Republic highlighted the important linkages among innovation, technical and vocational education and training, and job creation.

Finally, as the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the health sector worldwide, a special mention was made by numerous countries on the need to make improvements in their health infrastructures. Additionally, several countries highlighted water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure improvements as critical for advancing the health and wellbeing of citizens, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

SDG 10

SDG 10 was mentioned by the vast majority of countries. The subject of incorporating or enhancing equal opportunity and the inclusion of a vast demographic including, but not limited to, race, age, disability, nationality, religion and gender was addressed most frequently (Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Cabo Verde, Chad, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Namibia, Niger, Norway, Qatar, San Marino, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay). Bhutan reported significant improvements in this regard, as they have updated their legal framework to include more of the marginalized and disadvantaged communities, including the addition of the National Gender Equality

Project, National Housing Policy, the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, and advanced improvements to sections of the Penal Code that discriminate against the LGBTIQ community. Azerbaijan launched a project in 2018 on Creating Inclusive and Decent Jobs for Socially Vulnerable Groups that works to strengthen the social protection of persons with disabilities, and enhances the capacity of unemployed job seekers among the less fortunate segments of society, which allows them to be introduced to greater opportunities within segment of the formal labor market and coincides with the principle of LNOB.

The LNOB principle was cited as instrumental in countries' efforts to achieve SDG 10 (Chad, Colombia, Cuba, Madagascar, Mexico, Namibia, Nicaragua, Niger, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, Uruguay).

Afghanistan noted efforts toward a growing and broader economy in order to improve the participation of lower income individuals. Sweden is working toward multidimensional poverty reduction, human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and gender equality. Tunisia described the importance of this principle on the basis of human dignity being fundamental and therefore the most disadvantaged persons will be the assisted first, not only for the benefit of their country, but also to inherently benefit all countries.

Inequality as identified in society was a common thread among the VNRs (Afghanistan, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Chad, Denmark, Madagascar, Namibia, Nicaragua, Niger, Norway, Paraguay, San Marino, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Of those, there were some that expressed a concern of inequality being on the rise or as an increasing concern (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Bolivia, Namibia, Paraguay, Sweden, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Others addressed a favorable decrease in inequality (Cabo Verde, Nicaragua, Norway, Thailand). Namibia identified persistent inequality as a major challenge and is strengthening resilience in order to combat it. Angola identified inequality as being rooted in environmental challenges and the lack of equal access to natural resources throughout the country.

Another frequently addressed topic was wage or income equality (Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Indonesia, Malaysia, Niger, Norway, Paraguay, San Marino, Spain, Sweden, Thailand). The Czech Republic has one of the lowest rates of income inequality among other European Member States.

A majority of countries also noted persistent inequalities between urban and rural areas (Angola, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Niger, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, Zimbabwe). The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is focusing on educational, industrial, agricultural, public health and infrastructure areas to strengthen the support

of the State to rural areas, and to have urban factories and enterprises work to assist rural cooperative farms and units. Increasing the standard of living by ensuring access to energy, improving the environment through material and fuel supply, and increasing agricultural production is vital. Cabo Verde highlighted the divide between urban areas, where 76 per cent of people have access to mobile phones, and rural areas where only 62 per cent have access. Absolute poverty is more acute in rural areas, with 24 per cent of the population classified as poor, while urban areas have a poverty rate of eight per cent.

SDG 11

Many reviews addressed SDG 11, referencing urban renewal actions and efforts made to develop more sustainable cities and communities (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Cuba, Cyprus, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Iraq, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Namibia, Nicaragua, Paraguay, San Marino, Spain, Thailand, Tunisia, Zimbabwe). Cyprus has developed an urban planning initiative called "Smart Cyprus", coordinated by the newly created Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy. Countries also mentioned the New Urban Agenda in their reviews with Angola specifically stating that the Agenda has been a guide for promoting sustainable cities and communities within the country. Cuba has developed a national action plan to implement the New Urban Agenda in Cuba from 2017 to 2036. Norway also stressed support to the New Urban Agenda, referencing the importance of capacity building and natural and cultural heritage. Countries referenced the Paris Agreement also in the context of SDG 11 (China, Dominican Republic).

Housing quality and affordability was mentioned by several countries, and many reviews highlighted the importance of sustainable housing solutions as crucial to achieve SDG 11 (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Bolivia, Chad, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Indonesia, Namibia, Nicaragua, Norway, Paraguay, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Bhutan has developed their National Housing Policy 2020 to provide safe, affordable, and energy-efficient housing. Sweden noted that housing shortage has been an increasing problem in that country. In Egypt, the government has launched a National Housing Strategy in collaboration with UN Habitat. Bolivia's review referenced a programme that targets construction, improvement, and expansion of housing solutions.

In discussing housing quality and accessibility, many reviews also highlighted the challenges related to informal settlements and urban slums (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Chad, Cuba, Egypt, Namibia, Tunisia, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Egypt mentioned a project aimed at eradicating unsafe and unplanned settlements whose goal is to provide clean water, sanitation and electricity in target areas, or move the population to another planned housing project. Chad noted a slight decrease in urban populations living in informal settlements, although the proportion of urban populations living in urban slums is still very high. Angola also noted a positive trend with a decreasing percentage of the population living in informal settlements, noting that the government's efforts have begun to succeed in providing more affordable housing to its population.

Sustainable transport solutions were mentioned in many reviews, with countries seeking to improve transportation infrastructure to more climate friendly, less polluting, and more effective transportation in urban areas (Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, China, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Norway, Qatar, Sweden, Thailand,

Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Japan noted the challenge of adjusting to changing demographics with an aging population, which has led to a downward trend in the use of regional railroads and commercial buses, which in turn has created challenges managing operating costs for these services. Mexico referenced a new railway infrastructure project that will link regions in the southeast part of the country, providing fast and safe public transportation. Qatar noted the launch of an electric vehicle project that aims to reduce air pollution related to transportation in Doha. In Malaysia, efforts are being made to develop low-carbon mobility through the expansion of urban rail-based public transport that has already seen a positive trend in the reduction of emissions.

In view of the shifting trend towards electric vehicles and electric mobility, countries mentioned in their VNRs that efforts are being made toward developing electric vehicle charging infrastructure (Cyprus, Spain, Tunisia). Many countries also mentioned air pollution as an area of focus (Bolivia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Norway, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia).

Tunisia and Cyprus noted that urgent measures must be taken in those countries, and that high levels of pollution have an impact on people with certain medical conditions (Tunisia). Reports mentioned that local pollution was temporarily reduced due the COVID-19 pandemic (Bolivia, Czech Republic). Some countries also referenced cautiously positive signs overall in reducing pollution (Norway, Sweden).

With the ongoing impact of climate change through more extreme weather conditions such as hurricanes, flooding, extreme heat and drought, several reviews discussed risk reduction frameworks and strategies to adapt to the changing environment (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Cabo Verde, Cuba, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Japan, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Zimbabwe). Japan noted that a Basic Disaster Prevent Plan from 1963 still serves as a foundation, but is reviewed every year and was revised in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Zimbabwe noted its endorsement of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and its launch of several relevant government programmes in response.

SDG 12

The reporting on SDG 12 in the 2021 VNR reports continues to emphasize the need to decouple economic growth from environmental damage and natural resource exploitation, with reporting by many countries on the material intensity per capita.

Addressing the target on food loss and waste, Japan noted that while one in nine people in the world—mainly in developing countries—are malnourished, the amount of food loss and waste in Japan was six million tons per year in 2018, or about 47 kilograms per person per year. This is 1.4 times the amount of food aid provided by the United Nations World Food Programme. In another example, Namibia reported that according to its Namibia Zero Hunger Strategic Review Report (2016-2017), it was estimated that

about 24 per cent of all food calories grown per year were lost or wasted along the food value chain of smallholder producers. For commercial smallholder farmers, losses are estimated at 14 per cent, while for communal farmers the losses are more than 40 per cent for perishable products and 20 per cent for grain such as maize, sorghum and wheat.

The promotion of sustainable lifestyles continues to be a challenge for many countries. Norway's VNR described their calculation of an annual "overshoot day" - an illustrative calendar date measuring resource consumption. Egypt reported that a large population increase made it difficult to offset growth in overall material use.

On policy making for Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP), some reports referred to the 10-year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production (10YFP), including Bhutan, Cyprus, and Qatar. Qatar reported that it aimed for higher self-sufficiency in food production, reducing the need for ecologically unsustainable imports of food items. Sustainable food systems were crucial to feed populations in an ecologically sound manner, while at the same time providing for many countries' basic food needs. Countries with large export-oriented agricultural sectors emphasized their efforts towards more sustainable production methods, notably including Malaysia's palm oil production. Afghanistan, Bhutan, Iraq, and Namibia stressed the need for efficient management and use of natural resources, most notably for energy production.

The Dominican Republic noted the adoption of sustainable practices in the business sector and in public procurement for renewable energy.

Countries reported concerted efforts to reduce consumption at the source, by public awareness raising and providing more detailed consumer information on various products. Antigua and Barbuda, as well as other countries, highlighted policies aimed at reducing waste in all productive sectors of society. At the same time, better managing the various types of waste was mentioned as an ongoing challenge by many countries, and their reports highlighted programmes aimed at better waste collection systems, notably for recycled materials.

Cuba highlighted measures for the responsible management of wastes and chemicals. In this area, many efforts were reported to reduce the proliferation of plastic. Plastic pollution presents many challenges for small countries with large bodies of water such as rivers and oceans (Bahamas, Cyprus, Indonesia).

Other elements of the 10YFP were mentioned in the reports, such as sustainable use of materials in building and construction by Germany. Partnerships with the private sector were deemed crucial to seek leverage in sustainable production methods by Egypt. The reports by

Denmark and Norway highlighted that high material use in their countries carried large global consequences and thus global responsibilities as well.

There were a large number of countries that reported on the promotion of sustainable tourism, such as Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and Madagascar. In some reports, it was highlighted that domestic tourism had shown potential, also in view of travel restrictions imposed after the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly only temporarily reducing international miles of air travel for 2020. Qatar reported its determination to host the FIFA World Cup 2022 in a way that guarantees sustainable production and consumption through the efficient use of natural resources, and the use of sustainable solutions and technologies in the fields of energy, water, food and waste, to leave a legacy and practical experience that would stimulate environmental sustainability globally.

SDG 13

In reporting on SDG 13 and climate action, focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions was most frequently mentioned (Afghanistan, Angola, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, Japan, Madagascar, Marshall Islands, Namibia, Nicaragua, Norway, Qatar, Spain, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Japan noted that through the Japan Business Federation, in cooperation with the government, a "Challenge Zero" programme has been set up to encourage companies and organizations to focus on reducing emissions and make more sustainable investments. Several countries also reported on the challenges of reducing emissions (Bhutan, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Thailand). Malaysia noted that due to rapid development, is has seen an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. Norway underscored that to succeed in cutting emissions, an action plan is needed for phasing out the oil and gas industry while keeping jobs, pensions and the welfare state protected.

Madagascar noted that it has developed measures to adapt to the effects of climate change and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Namibia has also set a similar target with the same time frame. In Bhutan, new national vehicle emissions standards have been established to further low-emission sustainable transport solutions. San Marino highlighted its regulatory framework, which also sets out to improve energy efficiency, including developing and disseminating renewable energy sources to protect the environment.

Countries also reported on the impacts of climate change in their respective regions (Afghanistan, Chad, Cuba, Mexico, Tunisia). Afghanistan pointed to an annually recorded temperature increase that has impacted several parts of the country. Chad mentioned that disturbances such as drought, floods, epidemics, fires, and other climate-related occurrences continue to cause material and human loss, including periodic displacement of populations. Cuba noted that due to being a small island developing State in a tropical region, the Cuban archipelago is very vulnerable to climate change.

In an effort to adapt to climate change, many countries referred to disaster risk reduction preparedness as a priority. Indonesia reported on its effort to build community disaster preparedness and resilience through the Foundation for the Study and Protection of Children programme, which aims to make schools better prepared for future natural disasters.

Niger also described having established strategies, national policies, and operational tools to cope with recurrent disasters. The Marshall Islands highlighted a Coastal Vulnerability Assessment initiative conducted in urban centres, focusing on the risk related to rising sea levels and frequent coastal flooding. Several reports also referred to focus on climate change policies to both adapt to and mitigate climate change (China, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Paraguay, Qatar, San Marino, Thailand, Zimbabwe). Thailand mentioned its efforts to combat climate change and its impacts by integrating the climate change agenda into the national framework for climate change, including their National Strategy on Climate Change (2017-2037).

Countries also reported on implementation of specific policies to better adapt to, and cope with, climate change related conditions (Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bhutan, Cuba, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Niger, Norway, Qatar, San Marino, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Azerbaijan described its action plan, which includes draft laws and regulatory documents in the field of energy efficiency and renewable energy sources, aiming to reduce carbon emissions while also adopting to the impact of climate change.

Many countries discussed awareness-raising actions in the reviews, seeking to educate the public and the younger generations on subjects related to climate change. Sierra Leone's VNR noted increased public awareness of environmental challenges, including deforestation, climate change and bush fires, and mentioned that work is being conducted with development partners to facilitate a sector-specific dialogue related to the blue economy, infrastructure, tourism, energy, fishery, agriculture, and transportation.

Several countries mentioned efforts made in reference to forest degradation (REDD), with strategies and action plans to address the environmental impact of climate change (Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Czech Republic, Indonesia, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Nicaragua, San Marino). In Nicaragua, a strategy has been set in place to reduce emissions and deforestation by 50 per cent by 2040. Malaysia also referenced a framework developed to protect forests and to incentivise activities through carbon credits and non-carbon benefits.

A large portion of the reviews highlighted national contributions under the Paris Agreement. Germany noted that it relies on a broad toolkit consisting of legal provisions, economic instruments, and support programmes to contribute to keeping the global average temperature well below 2°C and pursue efforts to limit the raise to 1.5°C. Lao People's Democratic Republic noted that it has passed a law intended to set a national contribution under the country's ratification of the Paris Agreement.

Several countries expressed commitment to the Green Climate Fund, with both developed countries mentioning continued support and contributions to the fund, and with developing countries describing actions taken at the national level through project contributions (Antigua and Barbuda, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Japan, Namibia, Norway, Sweden, Tunisia, Zimbabwe).

SDG 14

SDG 14 was mentioned in many reviews, with many countries highlighting the importance of the conservation of the marine ecosystem and biodiversity. Many reviews mentioned their commitment to reduce plastic waste and marine litter (Angola, Denmark, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Japan, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Norway, Sweden and Thailand). In 2020, as part of the Environment Ministry's "Go Green Initiative", Egypt noted that the Ministry launched an expanded underwater cleaning campaign for the Red Sea through the Red Sea Reserves, in cooperation with the Red Sea Governorate, the Chamber for Diving and Marine Activities and a non-governmental organization. Japan noted that the "Act on Promotion of Coastal Debris Disposal", revised in June 2018, stipulates that business operators are required to make efforts to reduce plastic waste in order to reduce the discharge of microplastics into the sea. In May 2019, the National Action Plan for Marine Plastic Litter was formulated, the Basic Policy for Comprehensive and Effective Promotion of Coastal Debris Countermeasures based on the Coastal Debris Disposal Promotion Act was revised, and the Resource Circulation Strategy for Plastics was developed, outlining the government's overall policy for tackling marine plastic litter issues. Malaysia mentioned its Roadmap Towards Zero Single-Use Plastics by 2030 that includes stakeholder engagement and communication, education and public awareness programmes and local production of biodegradable and compostable products. The Marshall Islands has passed the Container Deposit Legislation that prohibits the importation of single use shopping plastic bags, plastic cups and plastic plates, and promotes the recycling of aluminum cans and glass bottles. This has contributed to the reduction of plastic waste in the environment and contributed to livelihoods through the recycling program. Sweden mentioned that it has adopted a comprehensive approach in 2018 to enable efforts to clean up beaches, reduce litter, reduce and prevent discharge of microplastics, promote recycling and reuse of plastics, and strengthen global work on plastics and microplastics to reduce the negative environmental impacts of plastic in the sea.

The importance of strengthening institutional capacity in the areas of marine science and the blue economy was mentioned by several countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Namibia). Cabo Verde reported on promotion of entrepreneurship in the blue economy, noting implementation of the "Ocean Campus", an initiative aimed at strengthening maritime education that includes higher education, research and technical or professional training.

Some reviews reported on amendments to existing legislation. Germany reported that the Fertilizer Application Ordinance, revised in 2017 and amended again in 2020, is intended to reduce inputs of nutrients generated by agricultural fertilization into inland waters and seas.

The pandemic has significantly increased plastic waste due to the heightened demand for food delivery and disposable surgical masks (Cabo Verde, Cyprus, Thailand).

Thailand mentioned that advocacy campaigns reiterating the importance of waste sorting and proper disposal of waste to reduce residual waste in the environment were launched and the private sector assisted in installing floating litter traps. They further noted that although the COVID-19 pandemic halted many activities and has delayed the achievement of some targets, the pause has allowed for the revival of environmental habitats and the return of rare wildlife. Nicaragua reported that it used "Nica Bardas", an innovative tool made with recycled bottles and mesh, to efficiently collect solid waste.

Some reviews mentioned participation in several international conventions and legislative frameworks as well as regional frameworks (Angola, Czech Republic, Denmark). Angola participates in the MARISMA project on marine spatial planning and governance of the Benguela current, together with Namibia and South Africa; the project includes the "Angola without Plastic Project". Norway reported that in 2018, it had established a development aid fund to combat marine litter and microplastics that will run for six years. Together with France and the Netherlands, Denmark has also taken the initiative for the European Plastics Pact, which aims to stop unnecessary use and increase recycling of plastic.

The need to protect fisheries resources was mentioned in some reviews. Angola noted that the empowerment of women fish processors is one of the priorities of the strategy of the sub-sector of fishing and aquaculture, promoting the generation of income and creating the conditions for the participation and management of the protection of marine life. Antigua and Barbuda mentioned their engagement in the ongoing negotiations at the World Trade Organization on eliminating subsidies for illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and to prohibit certain fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing. These negotiations were to be completed in 2020 but have faced setbacks, including as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

SDG 15

Many reports addressed SDG 15, reiterating the negative impacts of human activity and climate change (Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Chad, Czech Republic, Germany, Indonesia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Norway, San Marino). Many reviews also mentioned initiatives related to the implementation of the Nagoya Protocol (Cuba, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Germany, Japan, Marshall Islands, Thailand, Zimbabwe). Cuba noted that it had incorporated explicitly defined policy regarding the use of genetic resources and their conservation in the governing documents its economic model. In its National Program on Biological Diversity 2016-2020, it safeguarded the genetic diversity of indigenous species and those of socio-economic value and ensured adequate access to genetic resources and distribution of benefits. Germany mentioned that it assists countries in Africa, Oceania and Latin America in implementing the Nagoya Protocol; 450 projects in 40 countries and regions have been implemented, including the development of jam and wine products in Uganda using fruits unique to the region. In Japan, the International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative was established at the 10th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP10) to realize societies in harmony with nature.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea reported that it had signed the Cartagena Protocol on Biodiversity and established an institutional structure for its implementation.

Deforestation was mentioned in some reviews as a threat to terrestrial ecosystems (Angola, Chad, Madagascar), while other reviews noted forest recovery efforts (Bhutan, Bolivia, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Namibia, Norway, Paraguay, San Marino, Thailand, Zimbabwe). Angola and Chad noted that deforestation for subsistence shifting agriculture led to decreases in forest areas. The Czech Republic reported that it had prioritized increasing water retention in the forests. Egypt noted that it was working with other African nations on the Great Green Wall, an effort at afforestation and combating desertification across the Sahel. Germany reported that it has provided more than EUR 1 billion for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) since 2008. Malaysia also noted the framework it had developed to protect forests and to incentivise activities through carbon credits and non-carbon benefits. Namibia described its first carbon offset programme "Clean Travel", which aims to reduce the environmental impacts of travel while providing poor urban communities and schools with gardens and trees that can improve their lives. Paraguay mentioned its many public-private partnerships with major supermarket chains to replant trees in damaged ecosystems. The initiative consists of planting a tree for every item private companies sell within the country. Thailand noted its initiative to promote healthy forest ecosystems through its Forest Protecting Operation Centres that organize reforestation projects, reclaim forests and manage national parks. Some reviews also noted successful efforts to halt or reverse desertification (Antigua and Barbuda, China, Egypt).

A number of reviews mentioned initiatives to combat land degradation caused by improper disposal of wastewater and residue from inorganic fertilizers and pesticides in an effort to protect biodiversity and promote the economic productivity of land used for crops and pasture (Antigua and Barbuda, China). Antigua and Barbuda reported that it had developed a National Action Plan to Combat Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought. Several reviews highlighted the challenges in reversing degradation, halting the loss of biodiversity and protecting threatened species (Cabo Verde, Denmark, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Indonesia).

Some reviews noted a strong commitment to promoting green development and the establishment of a sound, low carbon and circular economic system (China, Cyprus, Denmark, Egypt, Japan, San Marino).

San Marino mentioned that its new General Town Planning Scheme "2030 Garden of Europe - Microcosm of Biodiversity" focuses on enhancing indigenous ecosystems and natural resources. Some reviews noted that countries have been assisted to comprehensively incorporate biodiversity into their national development planning and financial strategies through the Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN) (Bhutan, Norway, Thailand). Thailand also reported that it had established the National Biobank of Thailand to preserve biomaterial, including that of plants and microorganisms and biodata.

A number of reviews noted that relevant new legislation was adopted; Germany mentioned that its 2020 Forest Strategy is being recast to incorporate the ethos of biodiversity in a 2050 Forest Strategy, and has also adopted the 2019 City Nature Master Plan to support local authorities in protecting and creating high-quality natural spaces in urban areas.

SDG 16

VNR reports this year focused extensively on corruption and how to tackle this phenomenon, with several countries taking new measures to prevent it.

For example, Angola created new anti-corruption laws that facilitate the repatriation of illicitly acquired assets, Antigua and Barbuda is now requiring all public officials to declare all their assets to an investigative commission, Mexico's federal government is partnering with the National Institute of Transparency in order to better understand how corrupt practices occur in the country, Namibia signed a Whistle Blowers Act that aims to encourage people to come forward and denounce corrupt practices, and Sierra Leone established a new Special Court within the High Court of Sierra Leone to speed up and improve the efficiency of trials that relate to corrupt offences.

Countries have also noted that external events have seriously constrained their ability to strengthen the rule of law and democracy and advance towards the SDGs. Afghanistan and Iraq have individually reported the suffering from conflict, insecurity, and limited institutional capacity. Reports also cite critical conditions related to the killing, displacement, and migration of a large proportion of their populations. Since hurricane Dorian made landfall on the island

in 2019, the government of the Bahamas created the Ministry of Disaster Preparedness, Management and Reconstruction, marking a significant step towards strengthening the national disaster preparedness and response capabilities in Bahamas. Despite dedicated emergency efforts, recovery has been arduous and gradual.

Local violence and high crime rates were also reported to be problematic in some countries. Bolivia also cited higher crime rates in some territories, which in response is increasing police and security presence in these susceptible areas. Similarly, due to some violence concerns in Colombia, the government announced the creation of Pan Acción Oportuna, which focuses on preventing and protecting social and community leaders, journalists, and defenders of human rights.

While industrialized and high-income economies are not suffering critically from corruption or high crime rates, significant challenges are still present. Despite having very low homicide and violence rates, Norway has reported important increases in intimate partner homicides and domestic violence. Furthermore, despite abuse, trafficking, and violence against children being relatively low, digital arenas may be concealing a greater problem. Sweden also reported that the proportion of people subjected to assault and threats has increased slightly. In the latest national survey on violence against children, 14 per cent of children questioned had experienced physical abuse by a parent at some point during their childhood. Japan also reported similar challenges, with an increase in the number of cases of abuse consultations with Child Guidance Centers. During the fiscal year of 2019, 215 Child Guidance Centers nationwide responded to a record number of 193,780 cases of child abuse consultations. Governments have called for action and are partnering with civil society organizations and the international community to tackle these major drawbacks.

Finally, countries reported actively promoting peacebuilding, institutional capacity, and human rights, including through UN bodies.

SDG 17

Countries recognized the need for revitalized global partnerships amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Low-income countries emphasized that the need for partnerships was apparent before the pandemic, where high debt, increasing poverty, crumbling infrastructure, and increasing crime rates were already threatening sustainable development. Responding to such challenges is proving to be difficult due to inadequate financial resources (Afghanistan, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Qatar), lack of multilateral trading systems and trade restrictions (Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea), and the lack of availability of crucial data (Antigua and Barbuda, Niger, Zimbabwe). With the global pandemic further exacerbating existing hardships, countries have highlighted the different levels of access to essential resources that countries face and underscored the need for clear commitments to international cooperation (Antigua and Barbuda, Denmark, Germany). Advancing sustainable development in the COVID-19 period will require the contributions of all governments, the private sector, civil society and the wider public.

Most countries reflected on the need to strengthen domestic resource mobilization and address falling government revenue during the pandemic. Numerous countries highlighted tax reform as viable

administrative reforms, including broadening the tax base, aligning tax policies with sustainable development, and incentivizing stronger foreign investments. Countries, both low and high income, highlighted the importance of foreign assistance, especially in the form of debt relief (Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Denmark, Germany, Niger, Sweden). Some countries recognized the need for greater international aid and some announced new initiatives intended to bridge the gap. Germany launched the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), to which the German Government pledged EUR 141 million for the 2018-2022 period, which has reportedly been increased in view of the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Denmark announced its support and interest in fostering economic relations with the forthcoming new partnership agreement between countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific on improved framework conditions for investment, trade promotion, regional integration, human rights and sustainability.

Countries reported mixed results with Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Bhutan highlighted the difficulties in attracting global investors and working with FDI as a viable source of financing for development. Angola reported that its integration with the global economy remains limited and is not improving, with negative FDI trends contributing to this development. However, other countries such as Egypt noted a positive increase in FDI, along with increased ODA. Some countries noted that loans comprised an increasing share of concessional finance relative to grants, which can pose certain challenges. Nevertheless, some providers of ODA committed to maintaining current aid allocation (Germany, Sweden) while others pledged additional capital or investment in developing countries (Denmark). Some developing countries drew attention to the imperative of fostering global coordination in support of developing countries' attainment of long-term debt sustainability, which has been severely impacted by the pandemic (Antigua and Barbuda, Cuba).

Multi-stakeholder partnerships were highlighted as factors for countries' progress on SDG 17. Countries identified participation in sub-regional, regional and international organizations to be a key means of strengthening capacities for sustainable development (Denmark, Indonesia). Indonesia maintained its support of South-South Cooperation (SSC), regarding the partnership as a crucial institution for the region. Antigua and Barbuda referred to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Single Market and Economy (CSME) platform for addressing challenges of globalization, which is critical for CARICOM countries, whose economies are extremely vulnerable to both international economic shocks and natural disasters due to climate events. Germany strongly pressed for African countries focused on reform to be given targeted support, and to this end makes public funds available for particularly reform-focused countries in Africa using the G20 Compact with Africa Initiative. Zimbabwe underlined its desire to build stronger partnerships in support of green growth and climate action. Sweden 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.

Guatemala drew attention to the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on its national sustainable development. With respect to data, Thailand identified the strengthening of information systems for decision-making and public policy orientation as a major challenge to be addressed by international cooperation, and experience- and knowledge-sharing.

Monitoring and data

Support for national statistical systems in providing comprehensive data is essential to successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. The collection, processing, analysis, and release of reliable, timely, 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 inform decision-making and enhance accountability, contributing to more robust follow-up and review in the long term.

Data, statistics and indicators

The global indicator framework for SDGs developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators and adopted by the General Assembly aimed 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 United Nations COVID-19 Data Hub (https://COVID-19-data.unstatshub.org/) 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 2021 VNRs demonstrate how countries have continued to address data availability and collection issues. Nearly all countries incorporated data into their reviews, and half of all VNRs in 2021 included a Statistical Annex (Angola, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Chad, Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Mexico, Niger, Norway, Sweden, Uruguay, Zimbabwe).

Countries shared information on data availability for the global indicators.

For example, the Czech Republic reported that data were available for approximately half of the indicators, broken down by Goal, as summarized below:

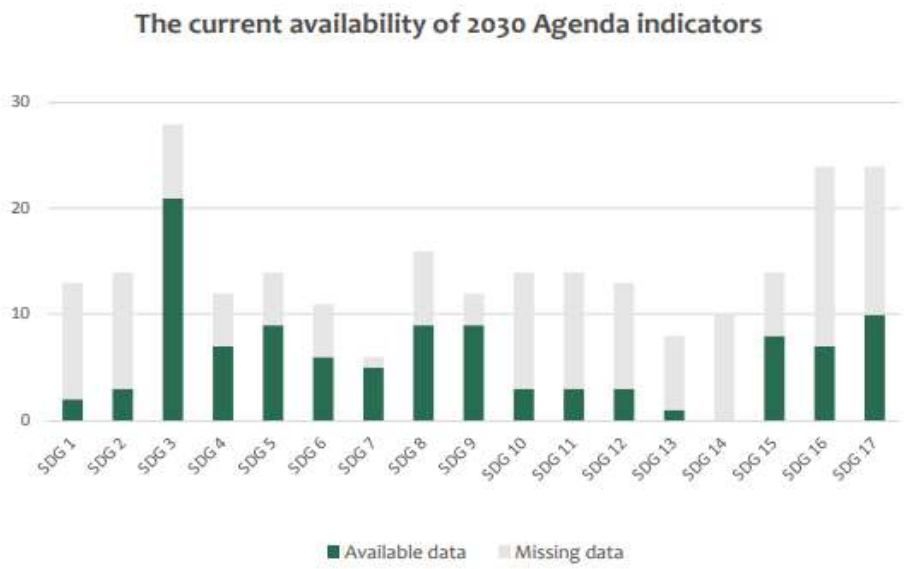

Figure: Current availability of 2030 Agenda Indicators (from the Czech Republic's 2021 VNR Report, page 30)

Some countries provided additional information regarding the level of data availability. Uruguay, for example, provided the level of availability for both global and national indicators, on a scale of 1 to 3, for each goal as summarized in the chart below:

Figure: Percentage of indicators by level of data availability in Uruguay, for ODS. Year 2021 (from Uruguay's 2021 VNR Report, page 31)

Countries also shared details on their ability to collect disaggregated data. While the majority of countries provided some level of disaggregation, the scope of indicators covered and the dimensions of disaggregation varied. For the countries that did provide some level of disaggregation, it was most often conducted by gender, region or age group, and in most cases only for a select number of indicators.

Countries have also taken 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, relevance to national context, and the principle of leaving no one behind.

Bolivia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Guatemala, Iraq, Japan, Mexico, Paraguay, and Qatar, among others, have launched online SDG data reporting platforms to provide the latest data available and show progress. In Mexico, for example, the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI) regularly updates the indicators, their metadata and the data for their calculation on their site, thus facilitating the monitoring of progress toward the 2030 Agenda in the country.

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. Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Chad, Dominican Republic, Marshall Islands, Namibia, Spain, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe, among others, cited gaps in data availability and insufficient data as major challenges in monitoring progress toward the SDGs. Chad described how their National Strategy for the Development of Statistics should strengthen the operational capacities of services in charge of statistics to improve the frequency of data collection and dissemination. Data collection challenges were also highlighted in Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Mexico, Niger, and Sierra Leone, among others.

Data disaggregation. Angola, Colombia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mexico, and Paraguay, among others, described their challenges in producing disaggregated data. Some countries mentioned the lack of data for special population groups. Afghanistan, for example, highlighted that statistics pertaining to the size and circumstances of the population with disabilities are unclear, and policymaking is hindered by this lack of data.

Need for financial and technical support for monitoring and capacity building. Bhutan, Colombia, Cuba, Japan, Madagascar, Marshall Islands, San Marino, and Uruguay, 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 Sweden leads a network of about 70 relevant agencies and ministries within the Government Offices to coordinate the indicator-based follow-up of the SDGs and their targets. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) acts as the national focal point for SDG indicators that coordinates data collection and compilation from various line ministries and agencies. In Niger, the National Statistics Institute was part of a technical working group responsible for the preparation of the VNR. Germany's Federal Statistical Office is responsible for publishing all 75 indicators contained in the German Sustainable Development Strategy for 2021, which form the backbone of the VNR. In Cuba, the National Statistics and Information Office (ONEI) is responsible for the statistical information and the monitoring and analysis of the SDG indicators. The National Institute of Statistics (INE) in Mexico prepared the statistical annex.

Azerbaijan, Chad, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Malaysia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Norway, Sweden, and Tunisia, among others, expressed the need to strengthen their national statistical system to produce more data and statistics to monitor progress. Antigua and Barbuda acknowledged their relatively low statistical capacity and highlighted the need for improvements through technical cooperation and investment in the national statistical system.

The broad scope of the SDGs calls for the use of new technology to improve data collection, analysis and accessibility. Azerbaijan created an interactive tool, known as the National Information Portal (NIP), that collects aggregated information on the SDGs from designated government agencies, thus allowing everyone to track progress being made toward the SDGs. Mexico introduced the Municipal Progress Data platform (DataMun), a tool that allows the country's municipalities to access useful information for local planning in relation to their constitutional powers and the 2030 Agenda. Zimbabwe developed a statistical information database designed to monitor the implementation of agriculture projects.

Countries noted the importance of partnerships and other types of support to strengthen their national efforts on SDGs. For example, ECLAC provided technical assistance to Antigua and Barbuda to design and implement an institutional mechanism for mainstreaming the SDGs. In Chad, the Project for the

Development of Statistics was financed by the World Bank. In Egypt, CAPMAS is working on the formulation of the first National Strategy for Statistics, with support of the World Bank and the African Development Bank. The World Bank also recently committed a total of US$ 30 million to supporting Statistics Sierra Leone to undertake various projects, including deepening statistical services at district level, implementation of the first electronic mid-term population and housing census in Sierra Leone, and a whole range of related data systems improvement

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. Statistics Denmark has decided to use experimental statistics in order to illustrate the impact of COVID-19 in the most useful way. The Zimbabwe National Statistic Agency, together with the World Bank and UNICEF, designed a high-frequency telephone survey of households to measure the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.

Coherence among global frameworks and with regional frameworks

International cooperation through an inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism remains pivotal to the success of the 2030 Agenda and its interlinked SDGs. This notion also stands central in the 2021 Report of the Secretary-General– Our Common Agenda, in which he calls for the accelerated implementation of existing multilateral agreements, including the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda itself provides a roadmap to solve complex global challenges through multilateral and integrated solutions and international solidarity.

COVID-19 has disrupted the trends across multiple SDGs. It has exacerbated inequalities and structural issues, as well as the vulnerability of systems, institutions and people. A rapidly unfolding climate emergency will likely further complicate countries' recovery efforts to get on track during this Decade of Action and Delivery for sustainable development. Some countries noted that interest in the SDGs is growing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several countries noted the importance of the alignment of policies and programmatic responses to the COVID-19 crisis with the 2030 Agenda, guided by the Agenda's central principle of LNOB (Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Norway, San Marino, Sweden). In times of global crisis, multilateral agreed frameworks play an instrumental role to optimize development outcomes, leveraging new innovations and mobilizing policies, including regulatory reforms.

Coherence between global and regional frameworks and the 2030 Agenda requires countries to pursue integrated follow-up through strategies, plans and measures to get back on track and accelerate SDG implementation where it is most needed and reach the objectives of other agreements.

Countries have continued to integrate international or regional agreements into national sustainable development plans and strategies. The most commonly recognized frameworks in conjunction with the 2030 Agenda are: The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – the Paris Agreement, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.

Addis Ababa Action Agenda	2015
Paris Agreement on Climate Change	2020
Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction	2015
Agenda 2030	2015
Samoa Pathway	2015
Istanbul Declaration and Programme of Action	2011

Main international agreements in the development area
(from Angola's 2021 VNR Report, page 18)

For instance, regarding integration of global frameworks in addressing SDG 5, some countries (Cabo Verde, Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Namibia, Paraguay, Spain, Thailand, Tunisia, Zimbabwe) 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 (Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Denmark, Iraq, Japan, Malaysia, Sweden). Germany and San Marino drew attention to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe referenced the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol). Antigua and Barbuda, Namibia and Thailand highlighted the work done in the Review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA).

Many countries are aligning their national plans and strategies with regional frameworks. African VNR countries described how the African Union's Agenda 2063 shapes the formulation and implementation of the SDGs in Africa (Angola, Cabo Verde, Egypt, Namibia, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe), and how they also align with the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Cooperation Framework (Angola, Zimbabwe). Comparably, many countries in the European region seek to ensure policy coherence through the decisions taken to implement European Union policies and laws, such as for instance the EU4Climate (Azerbaijan) or the European Green Deal (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden).

SIDS that highlighted the S.A.M.O.A. Pathway is intrinsically linked to the 2030 Agenda and some countries called for urgent and concrete actions to address their particular vulnerabilities in a concerted manner (Antigua and Barbuda, Cabo Verde, Dominican Republic, Marshall Islands), or similarly with the UNFCCC Paris Agreement.

Countries also highlighted other avenues for integrated approaches such as The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES, the South Asia Cooperative Environment Program (SACEP), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), the UN Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes, the UN Convention against Corruption, (UNCAC), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees, and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (of which some, but not all were mentioned in VNRs by Afghanistan, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Indonesia, Thailand).

Some VNRs mentioned the Paris Agreement and multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) including, but not limited to, the Basel Convention, the Rotterdam Convention, the Montreal Protocol, the Minamata Convention, the Vienna Conversion, the Kyoto Protocol (Afghanistan, Angola, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Denmark, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Marshall Islands, Norway, San Marino, Thailand). Others noted regulatory frameworks such as the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) (Angola, Marshall Islands), the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) (Angola, Cabo Verde, Uruguay), CARICOM's Regional Food Security Plan 2011-2025 (Antigua and Barbuda), the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Indonesia, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Norway, Qatar, Sweden), the Vienna Convention on Road Traffic (Thailand), or Education 2030: The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of SDG 4 (Angola).

Engagement of local governments and parliaments

Efforts to localize the implementation of the SDGs lead to a higher level of engagement of local and regional governments in SDG implementation and follow up (Cabo Verde, Colombia, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Norway, Paraguay, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Zimbabwe and others). In Cabo Verde, a partnership with UNDP, Luxembourg and the National Association of Municipalities established 22 Local "Platforms" as multi-stakeholder spaces to link national and local SDG strategies. In the Marshall Islands, the VNR Working Group met with the Marshall Islands Mayors Association (MIMA) to raise awareness about the VNR process and gather inputs. Paraguay organized a "dialogue" (conversatorio) to raise awareness of local government around the SDGs. In Spain, the Network of Local Entities for the 2030 Agenda, integrating 317 local entities, aims to promote the coordination of actions towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the local level.

Several countries mentioned the engagement of local governments through the development of Voluntary Local Reviews. Malaysia undertook efforts to support VLRs with six local authorities. Sweden flagged municipalities that have undertaken VLRs (Helsingborg, Malmö, Stockholm and Uppsala) and Zimbabwe as well (Harare and Victoria Falls). Germany listed the contributions of VLRs from Bonn, Mannheim and Stuttgart. Indonesia incorporated results from Surabaya's VLR and those from the Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSR) conducted in 13 provinces, nine cities and three regencies. Denmark

encouraged local governments to prepare VLRs and included excerpts from Gladsaxe Municipality's VLR in its report.

The role of Parliaments was underscored by Denmark, Japan, Indonesia and several others.

Countries highlighted trends in decentralization and the importance of building local capacity (Angola, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mexico, Paraguay, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Zimbabwe). Several countries, including Cuba and Colombia, highlighted efforts in holding capacity building workshops with municipalities.

Stakeholder Engagement

Governments continue to recognize the important role of stakeholders from different sectors in SDG implementation and follow up. VNRs detailed how stakeholders participated in national SDG decision making and consultative mechanisms and showcased concrete contributions from different sectors to the 2030 Agenda, including the VNR preparatory process.

Stakeholder participation in SDG-related coordination and decision-making mechanisms

Some countries (Afghanistan, Angola, Azerbaijan, Cabo Verde, Chad, Cuba, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Germany, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Japan, Mexico, Namibia, Niger, Norway, Paraguay, Spain, Sweden and Zimbabwe) include stakeholders in SDG coordination and consultative mechanisms and/or working groups.

In Indonesia, non-state actors self-coordinate to nominate representatives to the SDG National Coordination Team (TKN) and participate in SDG related Working Groups. In Germany, the State Secretaries' Committee on Sustainable Development has been advised by a multi-stakeholder dialogue group since 2018.

Lao People's Democratic Republic established a Round Table Process including national, sectoral, provincial and international stakeholders. In Denmark, the Danish Parliament's Cross-party Coalition for the SDGs established the "2030 Panel", an advisory body comprising 25 stakeholders that provides advice on SDG solutions and policies. In Sweden, the national body for dialogue and consultation between Government and civil society (NOD), established in 2018, encourages dialogue in all policy areas, including the SDGs. In Japan, the Ministry of the Environment has been holding "Stakeholders' Meetings" since 2016 to promote stakeholders' efforts in the environmental aspects of the SDGs.

Stakeholder engagement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

The engagement of stakeholders in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda was featured in numerous VNRs (Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Colombia, Cuba, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Norway, Paraguay, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay, Zimbabwe).

Azerbaijan, Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, and Mexico were among those that set up web-based solutions to showcase stakeholders' contributions as well as promote government SDG action. In Egypt, stakeholders could submit their contributions towards achieving the SDGs through and online platform. Cyprus is developing an online platform to map and raise awareness about the SDGs. In Azerbaijan, a publicly accessible interactive tool was set up to collect SDG information from government agencies. Mexico managed a digital platform to carry out sectorial consultations with stakeholders. In Cuba, the "Laboratorio ODS Cuba" (Lab-ODS) is an inter-institutional, multidimensional and participatory technological platform on SDG actions. In Colombia, a "Multi-Stakeholders Platform" (Plataforma Multiactor) was established as a dialogue and participatory space. In the Czech Republic, all stakeholders can register and report on voluntary commitments in an open SDG database.

The specific contribution from different sectors to SDG implementation were highlighted in several VNR reports. For instance, Chad, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Zimbabwe, and several others listed contributions from civil society organizations. Mexico undertook a survey to identify the main areas where CSOs contributed to the implementation of SDGs in the country. In Sweden, 82 Swedish CSOs signed a joint declaration of intent setting out higher ambitions for implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Some countries (Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, Paraguay, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Zimbabwe and others) mentioned initiatives to engage children and youth. Mexico conducted the consultation "Our world, our future" with adolescents

and youth to generate recommendations for the 2030 Agenda implementation. In Bhutan, youth engaged in the review of the National Youth Policy. Japan, Paraguay, and Spain referred to SDG consultations with children.

The contribution from academic institutions was emphasized in many VNRs (Bhutan, Chad, Cuba, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay, Zimbabwe and others). In the Dominican Republic, the initiative "Academy for the 2030 Agenda" mobilized government, UN and several Universities and higher education associations. In Norway, the National Committee for the 2030 Agenda in the Higher Education Sector aims at strengthening the universities' role in the 2030 Agenda. In Malaysia the SDG Academic Network collected inputs from academic institutions, think tanks, practitioners, and researchers regarding national SDGs progress. In Spain, the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities promotes the implementation of the SDGs within universities.

Many countries (including Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Colombia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Norway, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay, Zimbabwe and others) that listed the contribution of the private sector to SDG implementation and follow up.

In China, the nearly 400 member enterprises that integrates the Global Compact Network, with the China Enterprise Confederation as the lead organization, have incorporated SDGs into their business strategies.

In Tunisia, a cooperation agreement was signed with the Global Compact Local Network for the promotion of socially responsible practices with banks and financial institutions. The Global Compact Network in Paraguay launched a capacity building course on sustainability for private sector representatives.

In Sweden, the newly created Platform for international sustainable business enables cross-sectoral dialogue to foster innovation. Mexico and Spain conducted studies with private companies about the 2030 Agenda.

Almost all 2021 VNRs reported MSMEs as crucial stakeholders for implementing the 2030 Agenda. MSMEs are primarily reported as the engine of job creation. SME banks and green finance programmes in Bolivia, Cyprus and Egypt have strengthened MSME resilience and facilitated innovations. VNRs report challenges facing MSMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as supporting measures launched. These include emergency relief packages (Denmark), loan moratorium (Malaysia) and subsidy programmes (China, Qatar). Investing in MSMEs has become a part of national economic recovery plans (Indonesia, Sierra Leone). E-commerce and MSME digitization are identified as crucial ways to enhance MSME resilience (China, Germany, Malaysia). MSME formalization is a focus of countries to boost productivity and exploit opportunities arising from regional market integration mechanisms

(Cabo Verde, Colombia, Cuba, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Zimbabwe). An SDG digital toolkit has been applied in Malaysia to support MSMEs incorporating sustainability principles into their operations.

Several countries (Colombia, Cyprus, Denmark, Indonesia, Malaysia, Namibia, Thailand and Tunisia) reported on volunteers' contributions to SDG implementation.

Other groups were identified as contributors to SDG implementation and follow up. For instance, Iraq did a consultation with persons with disabilities in preparation of the VNR. In Indonesia, focus group discussions were conducted with representatives from vulnerable groups, including children, youth, and labor organizations.

Philanthropic organizations (China, Egypt, Indonesia and several others), the media (Denmark and others), and trade unions (Spain, Sweden, Japan, Tunisia and others) were also mentioned in VNR reports.

Several countries (Angola, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Paraguay and Zimbabwe) mentioned the contribution of the United Nations System to the development of their VNR.

Stakeholder engagement in monitoring and reporting, including VNRs

Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Angola, Cabo Verde, Chad, Colombia, Cyprus, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mexico, Niger, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia and Zimbabwe and others) reported on the process of establishing and consolidating stakeholder consultation mechanisms for the SDGs, including for the VNR process.

Egypt developed a stakeholder engagement plan to identify key stakeholders to contribute to the VNR preparatory process. In Tunisia, stakeholders participated in 17 SDG Technical Commissions established to support the VNR elaboration. In Chad, a presidential decree established an Inter-ministerial Technical Committee including representatives from several sectors. In Niger, CSOs, women, youth, persons with disabilities and other stakeholders integrated a technical coordination team for the VNR process. In Cyprus, non-governmental stakeholders provided inputs to sectorial Ministers responsible for consolidating the country's report on each SDG.

In Angola the VNR process involved national oversight or human rights bodies, civil society, academia, youth, the business sector, UN and other development partners. In Cabo Verde the VNR process benefited from the participatory process previously established for the review of the National Sustainable Development Plan. In Antigua and Barbuda stakeholders engaged in consultations and replied to "SDG/VNR" questionnaires. In Niger and Sierra Leone, the VNR was submitted for a technical validation by stakeholders from several sectors. In Malaysia several rounds of engagement sessions, including workshops and interviews were held.

Virtual and in-person consultations were the favored approach to compile inputs from stakeholders, especially considering the COVID-19 limitations. In the Dominican Republic, virtual consultations were

carried out with more than 80 organizations. Marshall Islands and Tunisia organized a series of consultations and workshops while Denmark and Indonesia registered a higher level of interest from stakeholders facilitated by online activities.

Colombia, Cuba, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia and Norway worked in coordination with national, self-coordinated umbrella stakeholders' networks, supporting self-organization and ownership. In Sweden, the government and stakeholders' networks facilitated consultations with the private sector, local governments, trade unions and others. In Zimbabwe, the CSO Reference Group adopted the People's Scorecard tool to collect information from organizations working with women, youth, children, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, migrants and others. In Thailand, stakeholders contributed inputs through networks established under the Open-Ended Working Group with civil society and other channels. In Sierra Leone a data collection instrument gathered stakeholders' testimonies on SDG implementation, including traditional chiefs, local councilors, community based CSOs and NGOs, youth and women groups, persons with disabilities and local/community level officials.

Denmark included chapters drafted in collaboration with stakeholders from different sectors such as parliament, civil society, the private sector, academic institutions, municipalities, and regions. A similar approach was undertaken by Norway and Germany. The report from Mexico includes extracts from consultations held with different sectors. Indonesia coordinated an open call for good practices on SDG implementation for all sectors and a number were featured as an annex to the VNR.

Countries also reported on the role of stakeholders in the broader follow up of the 2030 Agenda. For instance, the revision of the German Sustainable Development strategy received around 360 written statements submitted by key community stakeholders, from civil society, business and trade unions, academic community and others.

Challenges and Next Steps

Many countries reflected on the challenges and next steps to strengthen stakeholder engagement in the 2030 Agenda implementation and follow up. These include: strengthening stakeholders participation in decision making, governance, consultation and partnerships mechanisms (Antigua and Barbuda, Chad, Denmark, Iraq, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Marshall Islands, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Thailand, Zimbabwe); supporting stakeholders SDG-related platforms and capacities (Chad, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, Uruguay); improving mechanisms to measure stakeholders contributions to the SDGs (Colombia) and increasing stakeholders awareness about the 2030 Agenda, (Bhutan).

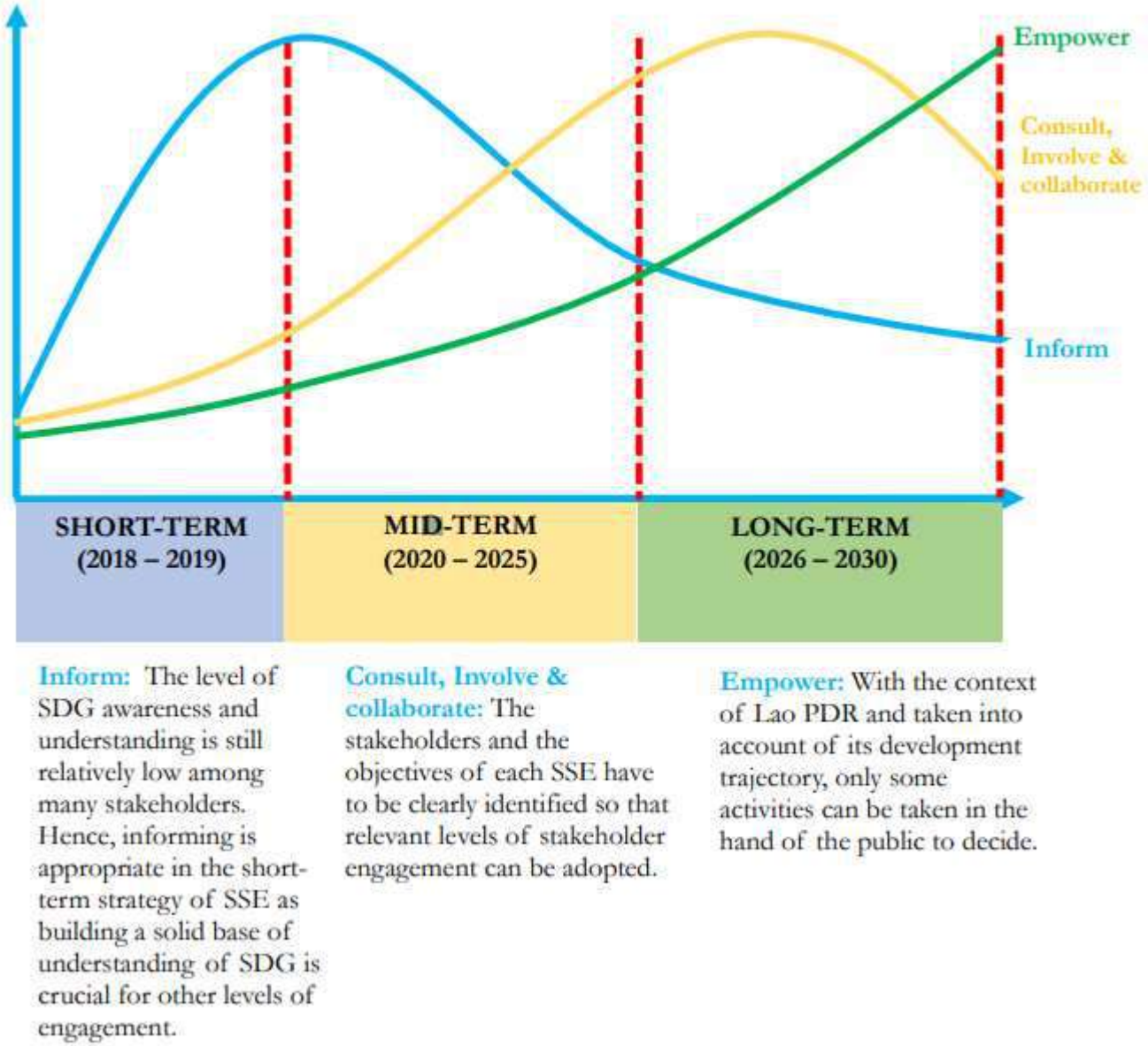

Figure 1: From Lao People's Democratic Republic's 2021 VNR Report, page 94

Figure 2: From Denmark's 2021 VNR Report, page 19

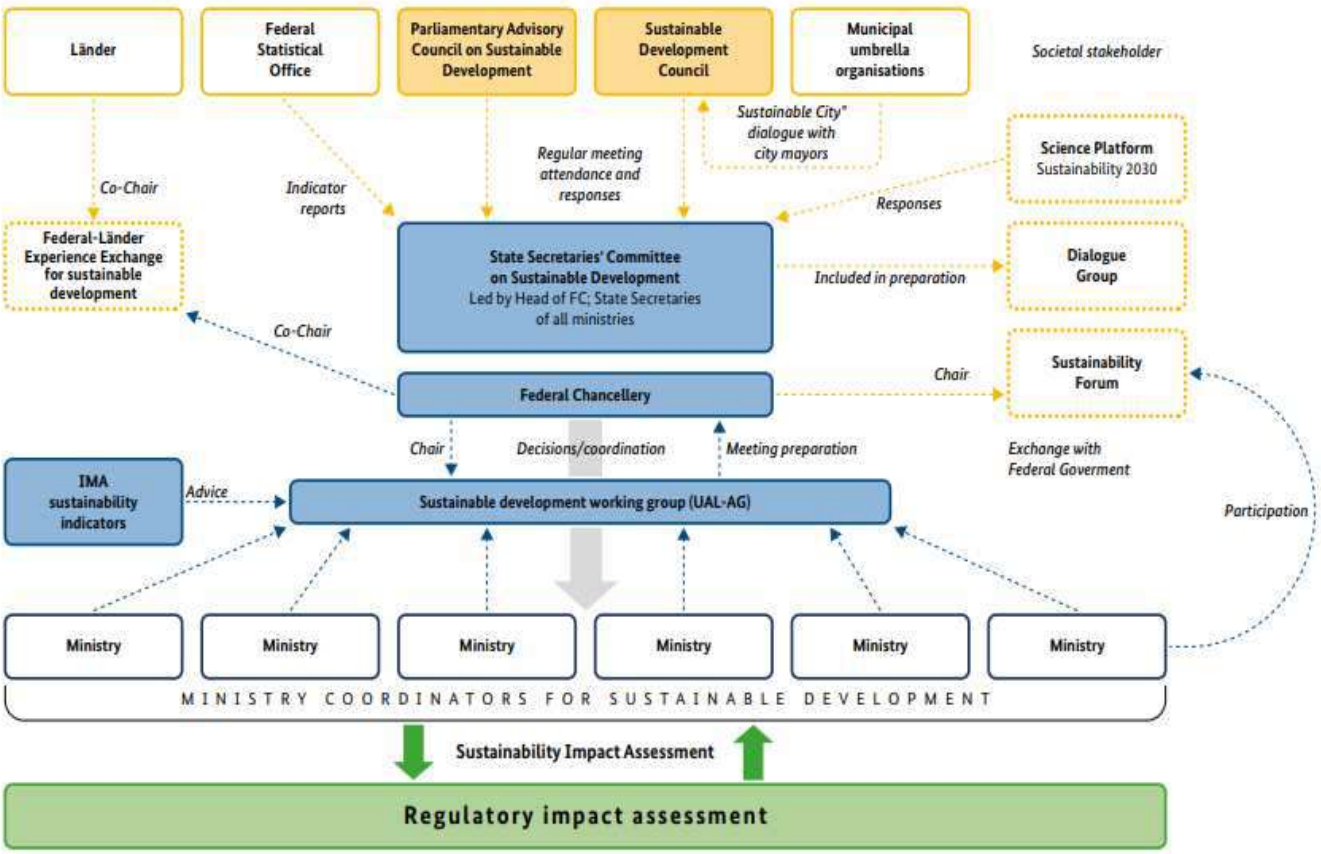

Figure 3: From Germany's 2021 VNR Report, page 18

Awareness-raising

Governments identified the need for continued efforts to raise awareness about the 2030 Agenda with the public and specific sectors of the society.

Numerous countries (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Chad, China, Colombia, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay, Zimbabwe) reported on initiatives to raise awareness about the SDGs.

Azerbaijan and the Czech Republic organized awards and national competitions, in partnership with stakeholders, to promote the SDGs. Efforts to raise awareness with candidates of local elections were held in Colombia, aiming to encourage them to include the SDGs in proposed government and legislative plans. Similarly, in Germany, the "Municipalities for Global Sustainability Programme" encourages local authorities to engage in sustainable development policies.

Norway and Zimbabwe translated the SDGs and related official documents into national languages.

In Cyprus, an open survey was promoted through social media channels with the general public to review awareness of the SDGs. According to a 2020 survey, 77 per cent of the Danish population had heard about the SDGs. In Indonesia, SDG Centers were established in universities to promote the SDGs on and off campus.

Azerbaijan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Madagascar, Mexico, and Zimbabwe reported on efforts to disseminate information on how the SDGs are being implemented. For instance, Egypt launched a mobile application (Sharek 2030) to publish project plans and integrate citizens in designing and monitoring the annual sustainable development plan.

Antigua and Barbuda, Bhutan, Cuba, Denmark, Japan, and Zimbabwe reflected on the challenges and next steps related to awareness raising for the 2030 Agenda. Antigua and Barbuda committed to ensuring that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness on sustainable development. Zimbabwe recognized the need to strengthen awareness raising efforts on the SDGs with people living in rural areas, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

Means of implementation

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted countries' ability to mobilize resources for the pandemic response and recovery and for the achievement of the SDGs. A large number of countries highlighted challenges relating to mobilizing resources towards these ends (Afghanistan, Angola, Bolivia, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Indonesia, Iraq, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mexico, Namibia, Nicaragua, Thailand, Zimbabwe).

Egypt noted that preexisting financing challenges have been exacerbated by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring the mobilization of finances in order to provide adequate stimulus packages and protect vulnerable segments against the background of waning government revenues. Indonesia noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has further widened the financing gap for the SDGs.

Resources and Financing

The VNRs in 2021 reflected on a wide range of financing flows that can support implementation of the SDGs, which this section discusses in greater detail. Countries pointed to the role of domestic and international as well as public and private sources of financing for the SDGs. A number of countries highlighted the critical role of foreign direct investment (FDI) in mobilizing resources for investment in the SDGs and noted specific strategies to scale up FDI (Cabo Verde, Dominican Republic, Iraq, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Indonesia, Namibia). Egypt, for instance, is putting in place investment promotion

instruments such as the Investment Map, which works as an innovative and interactive software to present investment opportunities by sector and location. A number of countries noted the impact of commodity prices on financing flows (Iraq, Bolivia, Qatar). Countries also noted the importance of remittances to mobilize resources for the SDGs (Cabo Verde, Dominican Republic, Madagascar). Madagascar noted absorptive capacity for financing as a critical challenge. In order to mobilize additional resources, Indonesia highlighted the need to pursue various financing instruments, including innovative financing, such as philanthropy, green bonds/green sukuk, social impact investing, faith-based funds and crowdfunding. Germany underlined the importance of pursuing lessons learned and advancing actions through international discussions on debt and debt sustainability, including those already taking place on more detailed topics such as state insolvency mechanisms.

A number of countries emphasized the importance of mobilizing financing for infrastructures, including in physical infrastructure and connectivity (Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Colombia, Indonesia, Mexico, Nicaragua). China has advanced infrastructure connectivity through top-level design and planning and increased investment, improving infrastructures to become resilient and play a bigger role in serving economic development and livelihood. Cyprus is applying a new process for the evaluation and selection of public investment, which includes the preparation by the line Ministries of Project Concept Notes (PCNs) and feasibility studies for new public investment projects. Lao PDR noted the development of infrastructure in rural areas as essential for improving livelihoods and creating equal access to public and private services. Nicaragua has advanced reforms to advance the financing of sustainable, resilient and quality infrastructure to advance economic development and human wellbeing. Chad noted the importance of financing regional infrastructure connectivity in support of landlocked countries.

Domestic resource mobilization

Countries shared concrete measures and reforms geared to increase domestic resource mobilization as a key pillar for the financing of the SDGs (Indonesia, Bolivia, Niger, Japan, Sierra Leone, Cabo Verde, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Chad, Democratic People's Republic of Korea). Indonesia is pursuing an integrated policy to increase the tax revenue ratio as its main source of financing. Niger is advancing efforts to increase fiscal revenues as pathway to mobilize additional domestic resources. Bolivia noted prudent and sustainable fiscal management as critical to mobilize financial resources at favorable rates. In Japan, the Advisory Panel on New Funds for Achieving the SDGs was launched to explore further financing through tax collection, taxation on stock and bond transactions and foreign exchange transactions and promotion of impact investment, promotion of the SDGs bond investment as well as use of blended finance. Sierra Leone is implementing its Integrated Tax Administration System (ITAS) project to strengthen national revenue mobilization. Cabo Verde has implemented tax reforms to align and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs, by promoting business development and émigré investment, essential avenues for strengthening domestic financing capacity. Lao People's Democratic Republic underlined continued efforts to enhance macro-economic management and stability by maintaining a low budget deficit policy, together with a stable exchange rate and inflation. Chad has implemented reforms of public financing to optimize tax receipts.

Countries also highlighted efforts to align domestic financing with the SDGs, including through Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs) (Egypt, Sierra Leone, Colombia, Cabo Verde, Guatemala).

Sierra Leone has advanced its INFF by implementing its strategy entitled Strengthening Domestic Resource Mobilisation for Financing the SDGs. In Cabo Verde, the INFF is currently being set up with the aim of strengthening the National Planning System, aligning budget and planning, and creating conditions for mobilizing new funding flows through an enabling ecosystem.

Colombia is advancing its Joint Programme Roadmap for an Integrated National Financing Framework. Egypt noted its project with the UN SDG Fund to set up an Integrated National Financing Framework for costing the implementation of SDGs at the national level, aiming at identifying the national resources used to finance SDGs, the gaps and challenges in this context and the innovative financial tools and mechanisms to bridge these gaps. Malaysia is undertaking various efforts to further enhance its financing landscape and infrastructure to enable a more comprehensive and systematic approach of financing SDG-related programmes and projects, including introducing SDG-related milestones in its Budget 2021.

Countries noted the importance of domestic resource mobilization to finance social services as well as regional and rural development. Financing social systems is highlighted as a key priority to advance human development (Chad). Germany highlighted the importance of strengthening social security systems, especially health insurance schemes, and to develop risk financing to cover poor and vulnerable sections of the population against disasters and climate shocks. To foster local economic development, in China more credit has been issued to rural areas, where increasing number of farmers have access to basic financial services and credit. Columbia is implementing policies to expanding access to banking and financing services.

Countries also underlined the importance of tackling illicit financial flows and noted efforts relating to money laundering and terrorist financing (Marshall Islands, Nicaragua, Norway, Qatar, San Marino, Sierra Leone). Norway noted its international efforts and multilateral cooperation to prevent and combat tax

evasion, corruption and illicit financial flows, highlighting the considerable potential of combatting illicit financial flows to increase the mobilization of resources for sustainable development.

International Development Cooperation

Official Development Assistance (ODA) was noted as essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda across the globe (Afghanistan, Angola, Azerbaijan, China, Cuba, Japan, Nicaragua, Norway, Qatar, Spain, Sweden). Countries also underlined the critical role of South-South cooperation (China, Germany, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Namibia, Niger).

A number of countries noted the difficulties of middle-income countries in relation to concessional financing and ODA (Cabo Verde, Dominican Republic, Namibia).

Cabo Verde stressed the need to take the Vulnerability Profile into greater consideration as a specific criterion for SIDS in access to official development assistance and concessional financing, as well as the to create a SIDS Compact as a mechanism for the financing of a sustainable recovery. Namibia noted that ODA assistance has been on a downward trajectory, consistent with the experience of other countries as they approach and attain upper-middle-income status.

Countries highlighted specific programmes and focus areas for their Official Development Assistance. The Czech Republic focused on immediate aid during catastrophes, conflicts and forced displacement, on aid during complex humanitarian crises caused by a combination of poverty, instability and climate effects. Azerbaijan provided assistance to thirty-three countries with humanitarian, financial and technical assistance. Denmark's ODA focus lies on mobilizing private investments as a means of increasing the private sector's contribution to sustainable development in developing countries, including through the Investment Fund for Developing Countries (IFU), which focuses on commercially viable projects. Germany has been actively involved in the Infrastructure, Cities and Local Action (ICLA) track in the UNFCCC and has launched two initiatives: Action towards Climate-friendly Transport (ACT) and Leadership for Urban Climate Investment (LUCI). Qatar noted its commitment to contribute US$ 100 million for the support of SIDS and LDCs to deal with climate change and other environmental challenges.

Regarding South-South cooperation, China is strengthening cooperation on green infrastructure, green energy and green finance, including through the BRI International Green Development Coalition, the Green Investment Principles for the Belt and Road Development, and other multilateral cooperation platforms.

Trade

Trade was stressed as a critical engine for economic development (Afghanistan, Bhutan, China, Cuba, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Qatar, Sweden). Afghanistan highlighted the significance of regional trade and transit facilitations to strengthen regional cooperation, increase investment, and contribute to regional stability and prosperity. Lao People's Democratic Republic noted its efforts through joining the formation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Bhutan signed a

Preferential Trade Agreement in December 2020 with Bangladesh, in hopes of increasing trade and diversifying market access.

Countries made reference to specific initiatives to promote trade and foster inclusion through trade. Sweden underlined the need for trade to advance gender inclusion and has created a feminist trade initiative. Cabo Verde put in place TradeInvest public entity with the mission of promoting sustainable, inclusive and balanced economic growth through the mobilization of quality investments and the stimulation of exports of products and services. Indonesia highlighted efforts towards optimizing the Preferential Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) for export expansion and improved logistics efficiency.

Partnerships

All countries made references to efforts to foster partnerships for the achievement of the SDGs, including with local government, CSOs, the private sector, academia and other relevant stakeholders. A large number of countries noted the importance of CSOs in advancing partnerships for financing and advancing the SDGs (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Cuba, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Norway, Qatar, Spain, Sweden, Thailand), Civil society proposals have supported progress in the fields of environment, education, international health, poverty, gender, social responsibility, disability, community, development, development finance, disaster prevention and mitigation and youth. Several countries highlighted the role of CSOs in pursuing the principle to leave no one behind (Afghanistan, Angola, Azerbaijan, Denmark, Madagascar, Norway, Qatar, Spain, Tunisia).

A large number of countries highlighted the importance of working with the private sector and pursuing public-private partnerships (Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Cyprus, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Iraq, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Thailand, Zimbabwe). Countries noted concrete strategies to advance partnerships with the private sector. Malaysia, through the establishment of the MySDG Trust Fund, is advancing the financing of more SDG-related programmes and projects by multi-stakeholders. Angola is implementing a SDG platform which is aimed, among other objectives, to mobilize private financing for the SDGs including through public-private partnerships and using international SDG financing initiatives to develop catalytic and strategic projects. In Japan, the "Public-Private Partnership Platform for Local SDGs" and "Local SDG Finance" have created momentum to promote the SDGs and encouraged every citizen to treat the SDGs as their own concern. Zimbabwe is working to further strengthen ties with the private sector and foster innovative financing solutions to better ensure that projects within the agricultural and health sectors are supported and fulfilled.

Many countries underlined efforts to advance partnerships focused on climate (Denmark, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, Norway). Active public-private partnerships for the SDGs and climate action in Denmark include the Sustainable Development Goals Fund, Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals (P4G), the Getting-to-Zero Coalition for carbon-neutral ships by 2030, the Climate Investment Coalition for green investments, and climate development partnerships with businesses and civil society actors. Japan noted effort to develop the "Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency Principles" (CEREP) as a set

of norms for global corporations and the financial community. In Malaysia, the Joint Committee on Climate Change (JC3) was established as a platform for financial regulators and financial institutions to strengthen the financial industry's capacity in managing climate risks and enhance its role in scaling up green finance. Norway noted the need to accelerate the move towards circular solutions by building more partnerships across industries and sectors, with innovation and development of technologies as well as knowledge, tools and new markets as key outputs.

Strengthening linkages and partnership with local government was noted as vital by a number of countries (Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Thailand, Zimbabwe). The localization of the SDGs in Cabo Verde has brought together civil society and the private sector to foster sustainable local development, especially local economic development, thanks to greater coordination of different actors.

Countries also noted the importance of advancing sustainable and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) investments (Denmark, Japan, Mexico). Sweden has brought the business sector together in broad partnerships to implement the 2030 Agenda, including the Swedish Investors for Sustainable Development (SISD) bringing together pension funds, asset managers and investment companies to work on the role of investors in achieving the 2030 Agenda and mobilizing additional financial resources. Japan underlined the importance of mobilizing ESG finance, impact finance, social finance and SDGs finance as well as to disclose the information of these mechanisms and verify their effectiveness when supporting the expansion of the ESG financing.

Denmark noted the importance of including responsible business conduct in its forthcoming action plan on the SDGs by introducing a "smart mix" of measures to promote responsible business conduct, including legislation, sector initiatives and further guidance in this area and make it mandatory for companies and financial institutions to carry out human rights and environmental due diligence. Responsible and sustainable business practices with an emphasis on efficient management and use of natural resources are also being pursued in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Dominican Republic, Iraq, Malaysia, Namibia, Paraguay and Tunisia, as highlighted in other areas of this report.

SMEs or MSMEs have been deemed crucial for attaining the SDGs by a number of countries (Cyprus, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, Qatar). Angola is utilizing microcredit and other financial instruments as strategies for economic empowerment and expanding economic opportunities for women living in poverty, particularly in peri-urban and rural areas. Indonesia is advancing the recovery for MSMEs through providing capital loans, credit relief, business recovery assistance, providing tax incentives, increasing access to cooperatives and MSMEs,

assistance to access financing channels, and increased partnerships. Egypt has taken several measures supporting MSME funding by launching initiatives to provide them with opportunities and credit facilities, including increasing financing directed to SMEs from 20 per cent to 25 per cent of banks' credit facilities portfolio and by launching the "Forsa" (Opportunity) program which aims at empowering vulnerable groups through establishing their own MSMEs and include them in value-chains that ensure sustainable income for them.

Science, technology and innovation

A large majority of countries noted the importance of advancing technological change and innovation as key driver for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Countries noted technology transfer as critical for developing countries (Cuba, Cabo Verde, Czech Republic, Denmark, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Namibia, Paraguay). China noted efforts to transfer technology on vaccines. Scaling up investment in technology, particularly in sectors that can advance climate goals, was noted as a key priority (Angola, Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Norway).

Countries have advanced strategies to strengthen science, technology and innovation as enablers for sustainable development (Czech Republic, Germany, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mexico, Paraguay, Sierra Leone). Lao People's Democratic Republic noted its focus on ensuring the access of rural communities to ICT, Internet and other technologies. Paraguay is implementing the InnovaPy strategy to advance a national strategy for innovation. Angola is pursuing further investment through the National Policy for Technological Science and Innovation, as well as through a support fund to finance STI actions. Czech Solutions for SDGs is used to support the application of Czech know-how and innovative solutions. With the innovation pact for climate action Germany is seeking, in collaboration with the industrial and academic sectors, to put into practice further ideas for reducing greenhouse gases in industry. In Malaysia, the Green Technology Financing Scheme (GTFS) introduced in 2010 provides access to private funds for green technology projects. Mexico noted efforts to advance entrepreneurial access to digital technologies for women. Sierra Leone is focusing efforts on increasing investment in enabling infrastructure, such as energy, water and ICT and scaling up mobile network coverage in rural areas, necessary for enhancing financial inclusion.

Several countries noted the role of technology as a crucial tool in ensuring proper data is being collected and research is being done to achieve the Sustainable Developmental Goals (Antigua and Barbuda, China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Marshall Islands, Norway, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe).

Capacity Building

Countries continued to note the critical role of capacity development to improve efforts towards implementation of the 2030 Agenda particularly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some countries noted that capacity building should be given higher priority. They highlighted a range of areas where capacity building was needed, and described initiatives taken. Some included building capacity of women (Antigua and Barbuda, Chad, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Paraguay, Qatar, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay), while others called for strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters (Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Lao

People's Democratic Republic, Mexico, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Again in 2021, like previous years, a large number of countries including Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Chad, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Qatar, San Marino, Sierra Leone, Tunisia and Zimbabwe called for data collection and statistical capacity to be strengthened. Some donor countries including Denmark, Norway and Sweden reported on their efforts to build capacity for the production of reliable statistics in developing countries.

The 2021 reports, noted that COVID-19 highlighted the importance of digital literacy, and the need to address the digital divide and gaps in ICT infrastructure. Bhutan pointed out the need for strengthening capacities for ICT enhancement, including through upskilling programmes; and to bridge the digital divide through digital literacy training, development of digital content, and creation of digital advocacies through different outreach channels.

Countries such as China, Cyprus, Marshall Islands, Paraguay, Qatar, Sierra Leone and Tunisia stressed the importance of innovations, including in science and technology, and in building capacity in technological innovations, noting that evolving technologies will be critical in speeding up implementation, promoting partnerships and monitoring and evaluation. Thailand pointed out the need for the development of capacities in the application of modern technology to increase incomes and connect different groups to the wider economy. Sweden highlighted that in low-income countries, major investments and capacity building in science, technology and innovation are needed if countries are to have a chance of meeting the challenges of the SDGs.

Strengthening the technical capacity of public service and ensuring that it becomes highly productive and innovative was noted by Antigua and Barbuda. Chad highlighted the importance of building the capacities of public administrations in several areas such as strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation of public policies and mobilization of traditional and innovative financing. Several countries called for institutional capacity building of public administration bodies (Angola, Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Cuba, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mexico, Niger), and highlighted the efforts that had taken place, including with the United Nations system (Cuba, Paraguay, Tunisia). Countries such as Chad and Cabo Verde also called for capacity building actions on the monitoring and evaluation of public policies.

Many countries pointed out that capacity development for stakeholder participation was crucial for implementation of the 2030 Agenda and highlighted that more was needed in this regard (Afghanistan, Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Chad, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Zimbabwe). Azerbaijan noted that special attention should be given to building the capacity and education of stakeholders in public-private partnerships, while Sweden noted its work with the development banks to boost the capacity of local financial markets in partner countries.

Several countries pointed out their efforts in building the capacity of developing countries. Malaysia and China pointed out their various initiatives in South-South cooperation. Countries such as Denmark, Germany, Qatar and Spain highlighted the efforts in developing capacity in local, regional and national governance structures, while Japan and Norway also highlighted their initiatives in building capacity for effective tax collection.

Differences between first and subsequent VNRs

In 2021, the increasing numbers of second and third time VNR reporting continued. The number of second and third time reporting increased drastically, with three times more countries presenting a second VNR than in 2019. Out of 42 countries presenting, only eight were first time reporters, while there were 24 second-timers and 10 third timers. All second and third-time presenters except two mentioned their first and/or second VNR, but the degrees to which the first- or second- time reviews were taken into account for the subsequent VNRs varies. Only one-fourth of the countries conducting their second VNR mention their first/second VNR only indirectly or very briefly in the introduction, which is an improvement from last year when half of them did so. Others highlighted a paradigm shift in the second VNR or cited major achievements since the year of their review's presentation: from shifts in policies to assessments of impacts of strategies and progress in SDG implementation since the first/second VNR (Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Qatar, Thailand).

Some refer to what has changed in their institutional structure or how it has been further reinforced, including localization of SDGs (Chad, Egypt, Guatemala, Niger, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tunisia). Others emphasized the increased engagement of stakeholders, both from government and outside government, in their second or third VNR, including some who have incorporated the views of civil society on SDG implementation in their country (Denmark, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Norway). 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, including dedicated sections on SDG progress since their first VNR, and greater elaboration on financing strategies (Czech Republic, Germany, Guatemala, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Namibia, Zimbabwe). Some highlighted concrete measures that have been undertaken as announced in the first or second VNR (Iraq, Madagascar, Uruguay).

Main measures in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and information on overall impact

Impacts of the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound global impacts, pushing approximately 119 million people into extreme poverty in 2020.[6,7] Pandemic-related income loss and poverty has particularly affected those who were already vulnerable, including the poor, the elderly, women, children, refugees, and migrants. During 2020, global food prices rose almost 20 per cent,[8] increasing risks of food insecurity.

[6] World Bank Group (October 2020). Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020. https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/poverty-and-shared-prosperity.

[7] World Bank Group (January 2021). Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: Looking back at 2020 and the outlook for 2021. https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-COVID-19-global-poverty-looking-back-2020-and-outlook-2021.

[8] World Bank (2021). Food Security and COVID-19. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-and-COVID-19.

Unprecedented school closures affected 94 per cent of the world's student population.[9] Border closures, lockdowns and other restrictions impacted livelihoods and made digitalization a critical global priority.

Measures to address the impacts of the pandemic

In their VNRs, Member States detailed the unique challenges the pandemic presented, and the measures taken to address them.

Health

The most common measures to address immediate health impacts included lockdowns, social distancing, mask wearing and increased healthcare capacity.

Some countries took this opportunity to improve overall healthcare systems, including mental health services. Azerbaijan and Uruguay improved conditions for healthcare workers by boosting salaries and/or improving occupational insurance. Namibia, Nicaragua and Spain improved hygiene and sanitation amenities. Angola established new molecular biology laboratories. To address mental health, Indonesia initiated a school program to provide curriculum-based health education.

With increasing strain on healthcare systems, countries noted decreased access to routine vaccinations, screenings, and maternity care.

To address this, Uruguay encouraged early screening for diseases such as cancer; Madagascar implemented measures to reduce maternal deaths; and Indonesia implemented e-registrations and e-consultations for healthcare services.

Addressing nutrition, Antigua and Barbuda suspended tariffs on food imports, while Bolivia addressed breakdowns in the agricultural supply chain to ensure food supply to all areas.

Income and Employment

Many reviews underscored the need for socio-economic protection measures. Government recovery programs and funds often provided social benefits including cash assistance or guaranteed minimum income (Azerbaijan, Indonesia, San Marino, Sierra Leone, Uruguay). Some governments implemented measures incentivizing banks to provide credit to the private sector (Egypt, Iraq, Sierra Leone) and suspend loan repayments or reduce interest rates (Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Tunisia).

[9] World Bank (January 2021). Urgent, effective Action required to quell the impact of COVID-19 on education worldwide. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2021/01/22/urgent-effective-action-required-to-quell-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-education-worldwide.

Rising unemployment particularly impacted low-income households and those working in the informal sector. Sectors most affected by job loss included tourism, agriculture, aviation, and arts and culture. Countries implemented stimulus packages and employee salary protection programs to mitigate the impacts on those sectors (Czech Republic, Namibia, Sweden).

Many governments pursued programmes to deliver basic goods and services to vulnerable populations, including providing food and sanitary supplies, water, and electricity subsidies (Chad, Indonesia, Namibia, Paraguay, Tunisia). Several countries provided stimulus packages targeting poor and vulnerable groups (Colombia), people with disabilities, elderly groups (Sweden), those who work in the informal sector (Indonesia, Madagascar, Namibia, Thailand), and migrant workers (China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand).

Gender and domestic violence

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated gender inequalities, including gender-based violence. To address these challenges, some governments granted exceptional leave to pregnant women or women caring for small children during the pandemic (Cabo Verde, Egypt), while others like Cuba guaranteed income for mothers of small children.

Japan approved the "Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality," which addresses the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of women. San Marino promoted a phone application enabling users to make emergency calls and share GPS locations in emergency situations. Cyprus adopted technology that helps the police track and support victims of domestic violence, including children.

Education

Investments in education and the digitalization of schools have been high priorities in response to the pandemic.

Several countries improved ICTs in schools by improving software and hardware; providing digital devices; and ensuring high-speed, high-capacity communication networks in schools (Czech Republic, Japan, Spain).

Marshall Islands is working on providing Internet services to neighbouring islands.

Several countries supplemented distance learning with a combination of take-home printed materials, television, and radio to support children who lack electronic devices or internet connectivity (Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Lao People's Democratic Republic).

Technology, Innovation, and digitalization

Several countries are promoting digitalization and digital inclusion. Malaysia introduced the Pelan Jalinan Digital Negara (JENDELA) to increase nationwide coverage and

quality of broadband infrastructure. Qatar doubled internet speeds for its citizens to support the move to a digital lifestyle.

Several countries leveraged innovative technologies to lessen the spread of COVID-19, for example by using big data for contact tracing (China). Egypt launched the COVID-19 policy tracker, a database of all policies developed in response to the pandemic. Qatar launched self-service kiosks throughout the country for contactless delivery of state services. To ensure public access to justice, several countries conducted court proceedings via video conference (Azerbaijan, Egypt).

Economic and fiscal measures

Many governments offered tax breaks to both households and companies (Azerbaijan, Egypt, Sierra Leone, Tunisia). Some offered targeted support to companies that had to suspend operations due to the pandemic. Uruguay and Indonesia undertook policies to benefit MSMEs.

Azerbaijan provided direct financial support for entrepreneurs in affected industries.

The pandemic motivated many governments to undertake larger changes to national strategy, such as diversifying the economy for greater stability. Colombia and Denmark noted initiatives to implement principles of circular economy.

Economic recession coupled with increasing public expenditure has led to large international debt for many developing countries. Many called upon developed countries to pursue debt relief measures beyond those stipulated under the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative.

Some countries contributed to international efforts to alleviate pandemic impacts. Germany contributed EUR 25 million to assist partner countries, while China contributed US$ 15 million to the UN COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

Environment and climate change measures

While there have been many investments in green recovery, overall evidence suggests that most governments have not used COVID-19 stimulus to transform economies toward green development.[10] Apart from briefly reducing GHG emissions due to lockdown measures, the pandemic has not altered the trajectory of climate change.[11]

[10] Vivid Economics (July 2021). Greenness of Stimulus Index. https://www.vivideconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Green-Stimulus-Index-6th-Edition_final-report.pdf.
[11] UNEP (2020). Emissions Gap Report. https://www.unep.org/emissions-gap-report-2020.

Some countries, particularly developed countries, undertook ambitious measures to address climate change and the environment. Green transition is central to Denmark's recovery plans including measures for sustainable agriculture and green tax reform. Cyprus is investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency to bolster climate change resilience goals, while creating jobs. Bhutan is installing three major renewable energy power plants.

In other cases, climate change resilience programmes were delayed, either due to the need to divert funding and/or resources to urgent COVID-19 response measures, or due to logistical challenges stemming from lock-down and social distancing measures.

Partnerships and Way Forward

International cooperation will be essential to disseminating vaccines and overcoming the virus.

Responses to the pandemic demonstrate immense global capacity to adapt systems for public benefit. By leveraging the lessons learned from this experience, governments and the international community can build better, more resilient systems to address future challenges, including the climate crisis.

Conclusion

Through the VNRs, achievements and progress toward the implementation of the SDGs can be measured and evaluated. The wealth of information and data contained in the database of VNRs continues to grow, aiding governments, development partners and stakeholders in identifying challenges and gaps, and drawing attention to areas where urgent assistance is needed.

Apart from evaluating and measuring progress toward SDGs, and perhaps more importantly, the VNR exercise has helped to strengthen multilateralism and international cooperation for the 2030 Agenda, and to inspire new partnerships for implementation of innovative policies, using new tools and methods to collect data and information in an increasingly digitized world, including through online surveys, virtual platforms, and remote collaboration. Preparing and presenting a VNR has become, for many countries, an exercise central to a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic; one that can integrate and institutionalize the principles and targets of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national-level planning, legislation and policy.

With 176 out of 197 member countries of the HLPF having now presented at least one VNR, many governments and stakeholders can reap the benefits of the rich knowledge they generated so as to ensure evidence-based decision making for their national development plans, and to support targeted interventions to achieve the SDGs. The United Nations system stands ready to provide support for the remaining 21 countries, to achieve universal reporting.

The shift to an increasingly virtual VNR process, from inception to presentation at the HLPF, has occurred this year as a result of measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Such measures have allowed for expansion to a more global audience and increased accessibility to the work undertaken by these countries.

The wealth of VNR presentations archived in the VNR database have the potential to assist anyone seeking to launch new projects that could be adapted and scaled up; to develop and enhance local, national and regional strategies for systemic change; and to identify challenges and future trends in the years ahead, as the need to put the transformative vision of the 2030 Agenda into practice becomes ever more urgent and important.

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS