Partners for Review

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Voluntary National Reviews submitted
to the 2018 High-level Political Forum
– a Comparative Analysis

giz
Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

On behalf of:

Federal Ministry
for the Environment, Nature Conservation
and Nuclear Safety

On behalf of:

Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

Partners for Review

BUILD ON THE IDEAS OF OTHERS

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Abbreviations

AAAA	ADDIS ABABA ACTION AGENDA
BMU	FEDERAL MINISTRY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, NATURE CONSERVATION AND NUCLEAR SAFETY
BMZ	FEDERAL MINISTRY FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT
CSIRO	COMMONWEALTH SCIENTIFIC AND INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH ORGANISATION
ECLAC	ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
GNH	GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS
HLPF	HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM
LGBTI	LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSSEXUAL/TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEXUAL
LNOB	LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND
NDCS	NATIONALLY DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS
P4R	PARTNERS FOR REVIEW
PPPS	PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS
SDGS	SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS
VNR	VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The paper at hand provides a comparative analysis of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that were submitted to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in New York, in July 2018. The purpose of the analysis is to identify major commonalities and differences in countries' approaches to implementing and reviewing the 2030 Agenda. A special focus was put on the three main themes of the Partners for Review (P4R) network: (i) institutional mechanisms for review processes; (ii) participation of non-state actors; and (iii) statistics and data. Based on the observed trends, the paper also provides a series of reflections, meant to serve as food for thought for further exchange and research. In order to facilitate the identification of trends and tendencies over time, this paper compares observations to VNRs submitted in 2016 and 2017, and, where applicable, highlights dynamics.

Overall observations

VNRs in 2018 display great diversity in terms of format and content, particularly concerning issue coverage, degree of complexity and level of detail provided. While this reflects the diversity in national contexts, it also tells of the different approaches to compiling the information and preparing the reports. Nevertheless, the comparative analysis also revealed relevant similarities. For most issues, this report identifies 2–3 common approaches and provides illustrative country examples.

Institutional mechanisms for implementing and reviewing the 2030 Agenda **vary greatly and appear to depend strongly on political systems and administrative traditions**: leadership tends to either lie with the centre of government or a specific ministry, or is assigned to a cross-sectoral and sometimes multi-stakeholder committee or council. Mandates of these institutions as well as coordination among departments and with other entities vary greatly. **Noteworthy is the increasing recognition of parliaments and sub-national levels of government**, compared to previous years, as key actors in the process. Equally, interlinkages between SDGs and correlations to other global agendas have gained importance from a governance perspective.

All 43 VNRs emphasise the importance of stakeholder engagement in implementing and reviewing the 2030 Agenda. Civil society, the private sector and, to a lesser degree, academia are involved through varying forms of consultation or representation in institutionalised committees. In comparison to previous years, **VNRs increasingly describe multi-stakeholder formats for consultations as well as efforts to raise awareness among the public**. However, this comparative analysis cannot assess the intensity and depth of involvement, or whether participative processes do inform or even affect transformative change.

The provision of statistics and data as an evidence base for VNRs has matured in comparison to previous cycles: **a majority of countries report on all SDGs, include a statistical annex and cross-reference national priority goals** to the remainder. Countries still widely engage in mapping efforts, gap assessments and prioritisation exercises to inform planning strategies. A vast majority of countries acknowledge challenges related to data quality, adequate monitoring and efficient statistical systems capable of accessing and processing alternative, big or open data. Interestingly, however, no detailed accounts of gaps or needs for capacity building are mentioned. Altogether, countries self-assess to be 'on track' towards achieving the Agenda.

Few countries mention follow-up or review measures, in terms of either specific mandates, periodic national reporting or recurrent VNRs. Despite conceptual ambiguity of these terms in reports, countries share very few recommendations or lessons learned to inspire peer learning.

Main reflections

The high number of countries that have presented VNRs, of which some recurrent, is vital evidence for the increasing recognition of the HLPF as the central forum for review and follow-up on the 2030 Agenda – which was not necessarily to be expected given its history. In the third HLPF cycle after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, VNR reports tend to be more holistic in reviewing national implementation efforts against the 17 Goals, more participative, and increasingly evidence-based.

The great diversity observed in previous years persists, nevertheless. Factual knowledge, such as mandates of lead institutions and alignment of sustainable development strategies to the 2030 Agenda, are described in great detail. **The involvement of the legislative branch and sustainability governance in federal systems are trending issues** from an institutional perspective, with relevance for all countries. Information about coordination mechanisms, both horizontal and vertical, remains less well covered. However, **the operational level is the space where transformative change is implemented – procedural knowledge might reveal experiences worth sharing** and lessons to be learned among peers.

All countries describe engagement mechanisms for stakeholders, mostly in greater detail than in previous years, and appear to install multi-stakeholder formats. **However, it remains unclear if a seat at the table will enable stakeholders to influence decision-making or if multi-stakeholder bodies actually reflect (even gradual) change in policy making.** For the time being, increasing institutionalisation of participatory processes is a welcome development in accordance with Agenda principles. However, it will be of interest if future VNRs do detect – and solve? – potential conflicts of interest among stakeholder groups, or explore different contributions from different stakeholder groups.

The statistical evidence base has become more solid in 2018, as more countries provide more, and more comprehensive, data for the VNRs. However, adequate statistics remain the single greatest challenge that is shared among all countries – interestingly, without concrete information as to what the gaps and shortcomings are. Nor has the greater provision of data led to greater cross-country comparability. Nevertheless, sound statistics and adequate monitoring do promise ample space for peer learning. While capacity building of national statistical offices will be long-term exercises, **the very methodologies to conduct mapping or prioritisation exercises may be a useful starting point for discussion**, especially for countries that are in the early stages of implementing the 2030 Agenda, or have not presented their VNR yet.

In general, **greater comparability among reports and the sharing of good practices, experiences made and lessons learned would be conducive to peer learning.** Besides the data challenge, three issues appear to be work in progress for the majority of countries: i) following up on the lessons and recommendations of the review , ii) leaving no one behind, and iii) links to other global agendas.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE PAPER AT HAND PROVIDES A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS (VNRS) THAT COUNTRIES SUBMITTED TO THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (HLPF) IN NEW YORK, IN JULY 2018. IT PROVIDES INFORMATION ABOUT APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES TAKEN BY COUNTRIES TO REVIEW THEIR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, AS WELL AS REFLECTIONS ON TRENDS AND TENDENCIES IN THE VNRS OF THIS YEAR, REGARDING BOTH CONTENT AND STRUCTURE.

1.1 About Partners for Review (P4R)

Partners for Review (P4R), initiated on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU), is a transnational multi-stakeholder network for government representatives and stakeholders from civil society, the private sector and academia that are involved in national review processes towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Partners for Review enables regular exchange on experiences made and lessons learned regarding follow-up and review of the SDGs in general, and towards HLPF in particular. Bi-annual conferences, diverse virtual formats and analytical work enable dialogue and peer learning on opportunities and challenges, provide space to explore good practices and lessons learned, mobilise knowledge, and share expertise on new and emerging issues related to national monitoring and review processes.

1.2 About this paper

This paper was compiled by an independent consultant on behalf of and in close cooperation with the P4R secretariat. The purpose of the analysis was to identify commonalities among the reports, noteworthy outliers as well as emerging trends in different countries' approaches to reviewing their implementation of the 2030 Agenda. To this end, the consultant analysed 43[1] reports, structured along the three main thematic areas of the P4R network:

- Institutional mechanisms for effective review

- Participation of non-state actors

- Statistics and data

The three corresponding main chapters contain sub-sections that highlight further aspects of interest regarding the respective main theme. The comparative analysis thus aims to identify major trends, commonalities and differences among the reports. As far as possible, these observations are quantified and visualised.

For reasons of comparability, the structure of the paper at hand aligns with Partners for Review's analysis of VNRs presented before the 2017 HLPF[2]. Where applicable and apparent, this paper emphasises dynamics across time.

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1 46 countries have presented their VNR before the 2018 HLPF. However, the report of Bahrain has not been considered due to submission in Arabic, while Kiribati and Sudan did not publish their reports.
2 Comparative analysis of 43 VNRs submitted to the HLPF: http://www.partners-for-review.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/P4R-Comparative-analysis-of-2017-VNRs.pdf
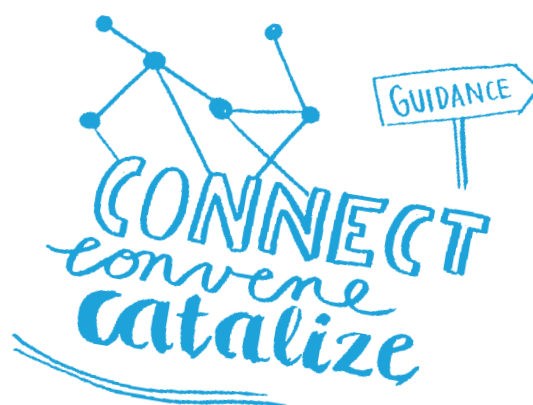
As the 2030 Agenda review process matures, the VNR reports are also gradually evolving, with regard to both form and content. In view of this, the analysis features sections on issues that have been more prominently reported on: the paradigm of leaving no one behind (LNOB), interlinkages between individual SDGs and progress tracking of the Goals. The paper provides brief examples for illustration, so that readers can, if they wish, refer to the corresponding reports for further details.

While the chapters mainly focus on factual observations and highlight different approaches, each chapter features a final section titled ,Reflections'. These sections elaborate on questions that may arise from the observations, in order to inspire mutual learning and discussion among P4R network members and other interested readers. The author would like to stress that these are mere suggestions meant to serve as food for thought for further exchange.

All country examples referred to in this paper serve exclusively for the purpose of illustration. References to individual countries are neither comprehensive, nor do they express any judgment, evaluation or political view. As such, they reflect the diversity of paths taken, but do not evaluate a selection as good practice or imply any sort of endorsement either on behalf of the P4R secretariat or the network members. The paper at hand solely utilises information provided by the countries in their VNR reports and does not involve further empirical research: no attempt is made to either question or verify the statements made or figures provided. Rather, this paper should serve as a starting point for further critical reflection and research.

1.3 About Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

The 2030 Agenda encourages all member states to ,conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven'[3]. The primary purpose of national reviews is to enable countries to assess their own progress and draw lessons learned on their way to achieving the SDGs. At the same time, these national reviews can serve as a basis for VNR reports submitted to the annual HLPF, the central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. In 2016, 22 countries presented their VNRs before the HLPF, while there were 43 in 2017, and 46 in 2018. For 2019, 51 countries have announced their VNRs[4].
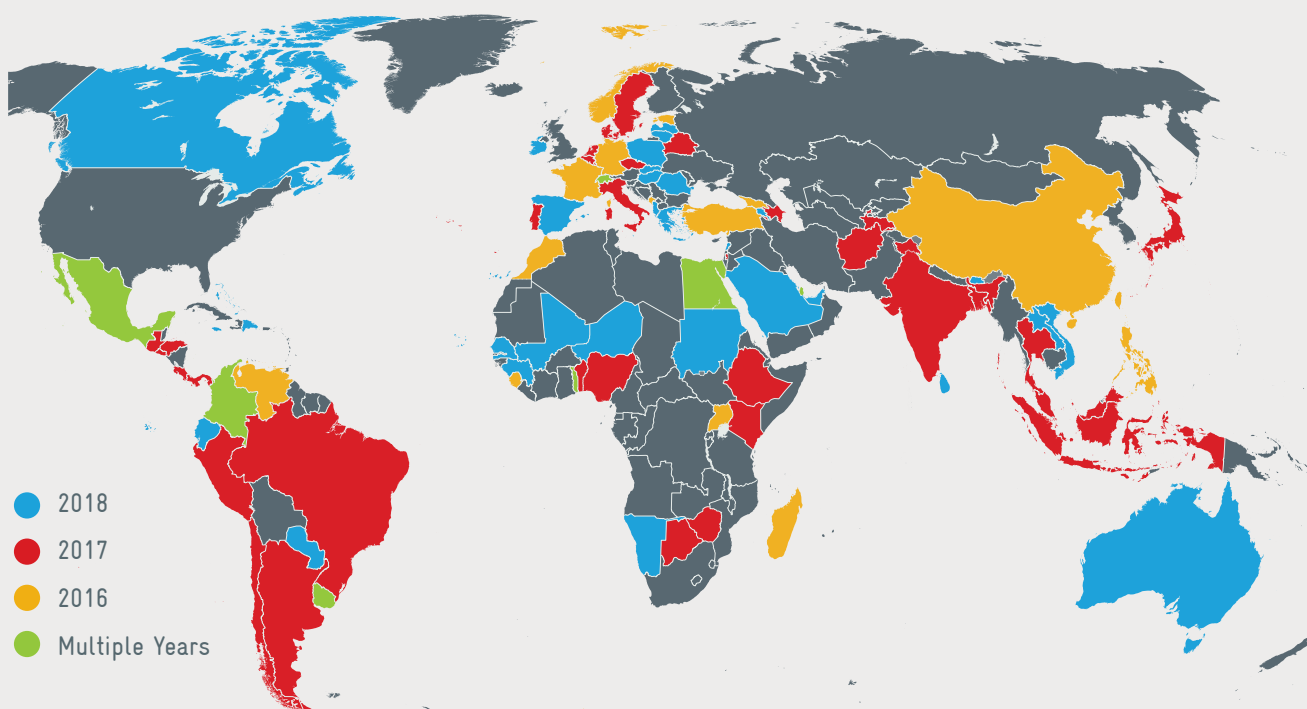
3 A/RES/70/1 §79
4 http://sdg.iisd.org/news/51-countries-preparing-to-present-national-sdg-reviews-at-hlpf-2019/

2. VNRS 2018:
GENERAL FEATURES

AMONG THE 46 COUNTRIES THAT HAVE SUBMITTED VNRS TO THE 2018 HLPF, THERE WERE 8 FROM LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, 9 FROM AFRICA, 15 FROM EUROPE, AND 13 FROM THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION. OF THESE, 7 COUNTRIES HAVE PRESENTED FOR THE SECOND TIME, WHILE TOGO HAS PRESENTED BEFORE EVERY HLPF SINCE THE ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA. SINCE THEN, 102 COUNTRIES HAVE SUBMITTED VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS.

VNRs BY YEAR

- 2018
- 2017
- 2016
- Multiple Years

Albania	Ecuador	Mali	Singapore
Andorra	Egypt	Malta	Slovakia
Armenia	Greece	Mexico	Spain
Australia	Guinea	Namibia	Sri Lanka
Bahamas	Hungary	Niger	Sudan
Bahrain	Ireland	Palestinian Territories	Switzerland
Benin	Jamaica	Paraguay	Togo
Bhutan	Kiribati	Poland	United Arab Emirates
Cabo Verde	Laos	Qatar	Uruguay
Canada	Latvia	Romania	Vietnam
Colombia	Lebanon	Saudi Arabia	
Dominican Republic	Lithuania	Senegal	

2.1 Languages used

Countries may use any of the six official UN languages for their VNR reports and main messages. In 2018, English was the most common language (35 countries), followed by French (6), Spanish (5) and Arabic (1).

2.2 Volume and coverage

All 46 countries have submitted an executive summary of main messages and 44 countries have submitted a full written report. As countries are free to decide what and how to report, the VNR reports tend to be very diverse, in thematic focus and coverage as well as in form. Similarly, the length of the full reports continues to vary considerably, ranging from 26 to nearly 300 pages in 2018.

A group of 34 countries reported on all 17, or at least 16 SDGs. The latter cases typically repre-

sent landlocked countries that classify SDG 14 as not applicable or countries that subsume SDG 17 in chapters on means of implementation. The remaining seven countries focused their report exclusively on the six SDGs subsumed under the theme of ‚Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies', namely SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17, or chose a priority set of SDGs. While a large group of countries structured their report along individual SDGs, a small group focused on their national plans and priorities, or the so-called 5Ps (Planet, People, Prosperity, Partnership, Peace) of the 2030 Agenda.

There is a notable trend towards more holistic reviews of the Agenda; reports that focused on national plans nevertheless included clear cross-referencing to all SDGs instead of focusing on priority Goals. Individual countries that placed emphasis on the thematic SDGs nevertheless tended to provide statistical annexes on all 17 SDGs. Compared to 2017, only a minority (11 of 43 countries) had chosen to report on all SDGs, while 32 reported exclusively on the thematic focus SDGs of that year (16) or priority sets of SDGs (16).

COVERAGE OF SDGS 2017–2018

COVERAGE OF SDGS 2017
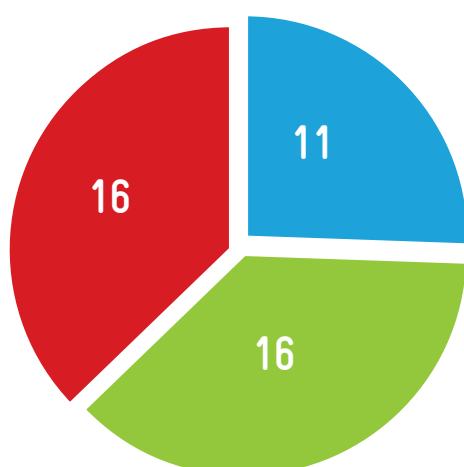
COVERAGE OF SDGS 2018
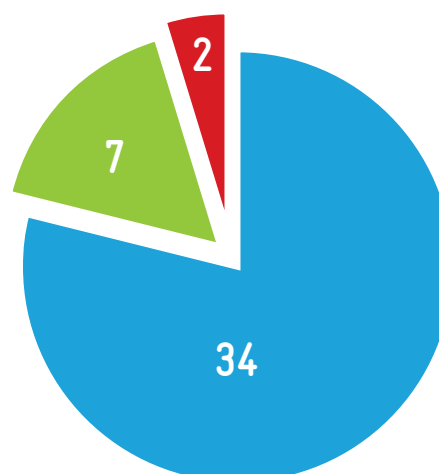
● All SDGs   ● Thematic focus SDGs   ● Custom set of SDGs

2.3 Reference to Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines

The updated ‚Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF)'[5] by the UN Secretary General provide guidance to countries engaging in VNR preparation. The guidelines suggest that countries describe the methodology for preparing the VNR, reflect on the policy environment, monitor progress on goals and targets, refer to means of implementation, indicate next steps and provide a statistical annex.

The reports nevertheless differ greatly in terms of issue coverage, degree of complexity and level of detail. Central topics such as policy environment, the VNR preparation and mechanisms of stakeholder involvement were rather unevenly covered. Other aspects, such as condensed lessons learned, resource mobilisation, follow-up mechanisms, and need for capacity development or data are hardly reported on. On the other hand, new issues have gained importance, such as the engagement of parliaments and the LNOB paradigm. The observed variety hinders a more in-depth comparison across reports in this paper, and may be subject to future research.

2.4 Annexes

Diversity is also apparent regarding the provision of statistical annexes. A total of 17 countries provided data on all of the Goals, while three countries featured an annex exclusively on the thematic focus SDGs or a set of priority goals. Some countries provide technical charts, at times without references to SDG target values, while some incorporate progress markers or verbal definitions of indicators. Disaggregation of data and level of detail provided vary greatly. While some countries provide one page per SDG, one country's statistical annex has exceeded 100 pages.

However, the above constitutes a significant development from the previous year, when only 15 countries provided statistical annexes, of which five covered all 17 SDGs. Additionally, some countries have included other documents, such as case studies, organisational charts or process visualisations.

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5 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf

2.5 Recurrent VNRs

At the HLPF 2018, seven countries presented their second VNR – Benin, Colombia, Egypt, Mexico, Qatar, Switzerland and Uruguay – while Togo presented their third. Likewise, Andorra, Ireland and Romania announced their recurrent presentation. Since it is likely that a considerable group of countries will present twice or even several times before the HLPF by 2030, these early recurrent VNRs may be indicative for the international community.

Qatar, Uruguay and Togo centred their successive VNRs on the thematic focus SDGs of HLPF 2018. Egypt, Mexico and Switzerland demonstrated new available data or methodologies, emphasised progress tracking, and followed up on strategies laid out in their first VNR in 2016.

2.6 Reflections

The high number of countries that have presented VNRs, of which some recurrent, is vital evidence for the increasing recognition and institutionalisation of the HLPF as the central forum for review and follow-up on the 2030 Agenda – which was not necessarily to be expected given its history.

In the third HLPF cycle after adoption of the 2030 Agenda, VNR reports tend to be more holistic in reviewing national implementation efforts and progress made. Reports are increasingly evidence-based, despite the frequent invocation of a 'data challenge'.

Great variation observed in previous years persists with regard to form and most notably content. Central issues tend to be unevenly covered depending on individual countries' priorities; however, greater comparability would be conducive to the sharing of experiences and learning from peers, both during HLPF and beyond. Consequently, attention to issues less fully covered might reveal challenges countries are facing, most notably follow-up mechanisms and identification of lessons learned.

3. INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR REVIEW PROCESSES

A LARGE VARIETY OF INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS AND MECHANISMS HAS BEEN DESCRIBED BY COUNTRIES REGARDING NATIONAL SDG IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW THEREOF. THESE DIFFER IN ASPECTS OF INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP, THE ASSIGNMENT OF MANDATES AND RESPONSIBILITIES, COORDINATION MECHANISMS, BOTH HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL, THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE LEGISLATIVE OR THE ROLES GRANTED TO ACTORS ON SUB-NATIONAL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT. COMPARED TO PREVIOUS YEARS, COUNTRIES REPORTED MORE THOROUGHLY ON THE ‚LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND' PRINCIPLE AND INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN SDGS. THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER ATTEMPTS TO IDENTIFY PATTERNS, CATEGORISE OBSERVATIONS AND HIGHLIGHT CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THESE APPROACHES.
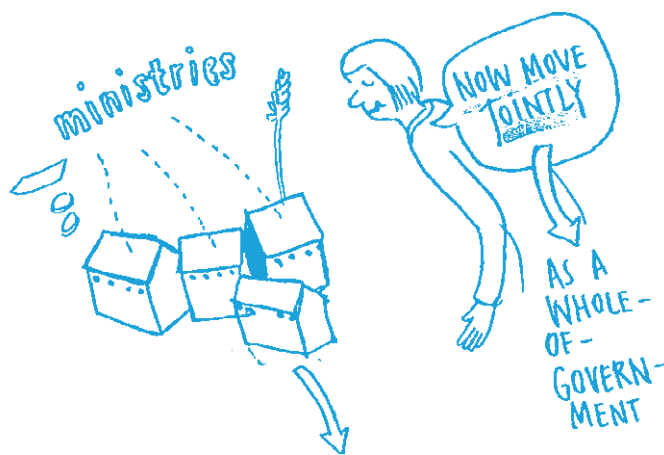
LEAD INSTITUTIONS
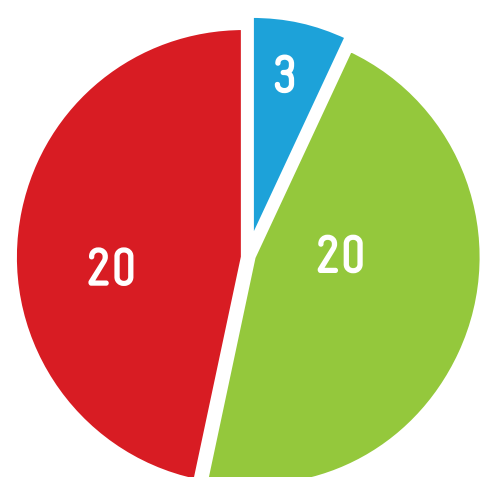
- 🔵 Built on pre-existent councils, commissions or committees
- 🟢 Assigned specific ministry or centre of government
- 🔴 Established entirely new bodies

Overlapping categories due to ambiguities in the VNR reports

3.1 Lead institution and coordination with other national institutions

Mechanisms for implementation, follow-up and review of the SDGs depend strongly on national political, administrative and societal contexts, among other factors. Three main approaches can be identified regarding institutional leadership and coordination at the national level.

Firstly, in 20 countries, national leadership for the 2030 Agenda has been assigned to a specific ministry or the centre of government (Office of the Presidency / Prime Minister). Typically, Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Economics, Planning, Finance and the Environment are steering national efforts, including SDG implementation, the alignment of national planning documents with SDGs, but also review. Co-leadership is common between Ministries of Planning and Environment; another route is to divide between the national arena and Foreign

Affairs departments. In some cases, mandates are assigned to newly-established secretariats or coordinating bodies within the institution concerned.

Ireland, for example, has assigned the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment with specific responsibility to promote the SDGs, oversee their coherent implementation across government, prepare Ireland's SDG National Implementation Plan 2018-2020 and steer the VNR process. To carry out these tasks, a National Sustainable Development Unit was established within the Department.

In **Canada**, the Prime Minister appointed the Minister of Children, Families and Social Development to lead the country's implementation of the 2030 Agenda with a broad mandate: tasks include the responsibility to develop a national strategy through engagement with provinces, territories and municipalities, Indigenous peoples and other stakeholders, to raise public awareness, create new partnerships and networks as well as administering a funding programme to support the achievement of the SDGs.

Secondly, another 20 countries established entirely new bodies to lead and coordinate national processes to achieve the 2030 Agenda. The composition and mandate of these new bodies vary greatly among countries, ranging from groups of ministerial representatives responsible for inter-departmental coordination only to multi-stakeholder commissions or committees with broad, overarching mandates for implementation, coordination and

review. These bodies are usually not designated to or located within one ministry but act, to varying degrees, independently.

Egypt, for example, illustrated an approach with emphasis on government representatives: the National Committee for Monitoring the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, established by prime ministerial decree, is composed of representatives from 17 ministries and state entities. A similar approach was chosen by **Paraguay**, in the formation of the Inter-institutional Coordination Commission composed of representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Technical Secretariat of Economic and Social Development Planning and the Social Cabinet of the Presidency of the Republic. Singapore's Inter-Ministry Committee on SDGs is co-chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources and is mandated to ensure the buy-in of all other relevant agencies.

By contrast, **Mali** presented a broad multi-stakeholder approach, manifest in a National Steering Committee chaired by the Prime Minister, involving all departments, the Parliament, the regional governors and the Presidents of Councils of Regions, the National Council of Civil Society, trade unions, as well as technical and financial partners.

In a similar manner, the **Dominican Republic** outlined an institutional architecture coordinated by the Inter-Institutional High Level Commission for Sustainable Development with broad participation of the public sector, private companies, academia, local governments, civil society and the legislative branch. This commission is organised into four sub-committees responsible for People, Prosperity, Planet and Institutionality, a Statistics Committee and a Technical Secretariat.

Another relevant piece of information is the explicit notion that all ministries and departments are responsible and accountable for SDG achievement in **Canada**, **Ireland** and **Singapore**.

Third, three countries build on pre-existing councils, commissions or committees related to sustainable development and assign these with further mandates related to the 2030 Agenda and SDGs.

One of these particular cases was described by **Bhutan**, where the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Commission serves as the high-level SDG Committee. In this context, the indivisibility of GNH and the SDGs provided the reasoning that a separate institution was not necessary to achieve the SDGs in Bhutan. In consequence, the 15-member GNH Commission, chaired by the Prime Minister, assumes responsibility of overseeing SDG-related matters in the country.

Mechanisms for implementation, follow-up and review of the SDGs depend strongly on underlying national political, administrative and societal contexts, among other factors, which are, again, unevenly covered. However, some countries shared additional information about their institutions, organisational structures and SDG-related mechanisms through visualisations. While **Albania**, **Mexico**, **Spain**, **Paraguay** and the **United Arab Emirates** provided (organisational) charts, **Australia**, the **Dominican Republic**, **Singapore** and **Uruguay** provided a comprehensive list of all actors, institutions or other entities involved in their arrangements or their VNR processes.
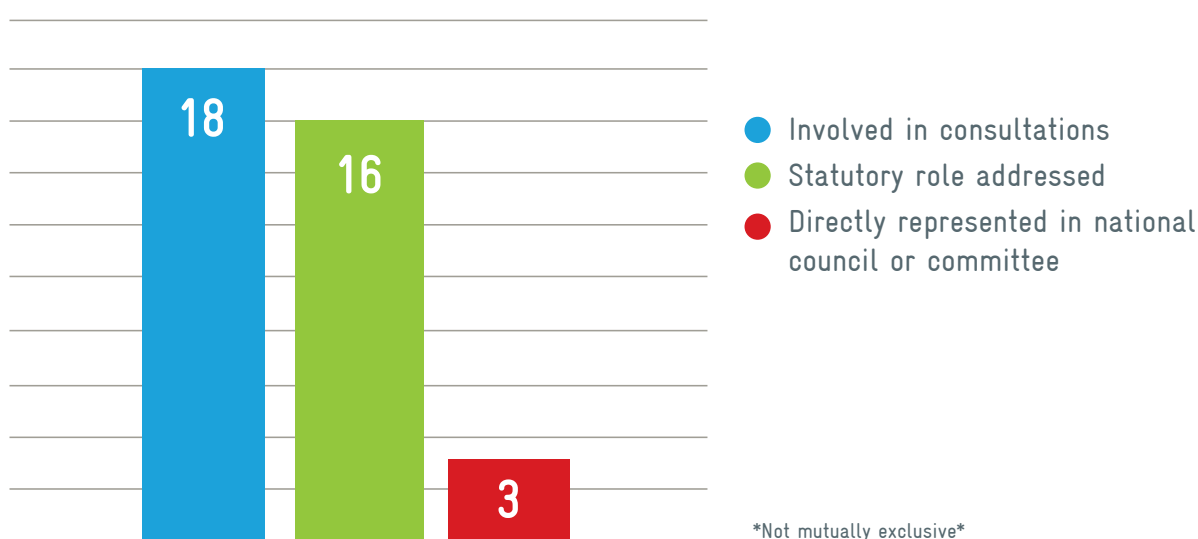
3.2 Role of parliaments

The majority of countries mentioned parliaments as important actors in their reports. Specific roles and processes appear to be addressed in more detail than in previous years, while further analysis also reveals shifts concerning contents. Again, there are three main approaches:

In 18 countries, parliamentarians have been involved in consultations, surveys and workshops. In six of these, parliaments have also created special SDG- or 2030 Agenda-themed committees or working groups, as outlined by **Lebanon** and **Mexico**, for example. The roles these bodies fulfil are not limited to serving as direct counterparts for consultation, but may also include diverse mandates in monitoring, overseeing budget allocation to SDG-related projects or coordination. Multiple reports also emphasise the role of MPs with regard to awareness-raising for the SDGs or sustainable development as a whole.

In **Sri Lanka**, a Select Parliamentary Committee of 15 MPs received a very broad mandate, ranging

ROLES ASSIGNED TO NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS

- ● Involved in consultations
- ● Statutory role addressed
- ● Directly represented in national council or committee

Not mutually exclusive

18

16

3

from making recommendations on the formulation of policies and laws to coordinating among implementing government agencies, obtaining the support of stakeholders, developing a database and sharing experiences among countries.

The direct representation of parliamentarians in national SDG councils or commissions, as a second approach, is reported only by the **Dominican Republic**, **Jamaica** and **Mali**, as part of very broad multi-stakeholder constellations.

Another 16 reviews involve parliaments according to their statutory role in adapting government budgets for SDG implementation, overseeing legislative processes or acting as counterparts in national progress reporting. These notions commonly invoked roles of ensuring transparency and accountability or referred to continuity across government cycles. In 2017, only six countries linked parliamentary statutory roles to the SDGs.

Latvia and **Malta** periodically report to parliament on SDG-related matters, while **Spain** referenced plans for periodic reporting with schedules to be determined by parliament.
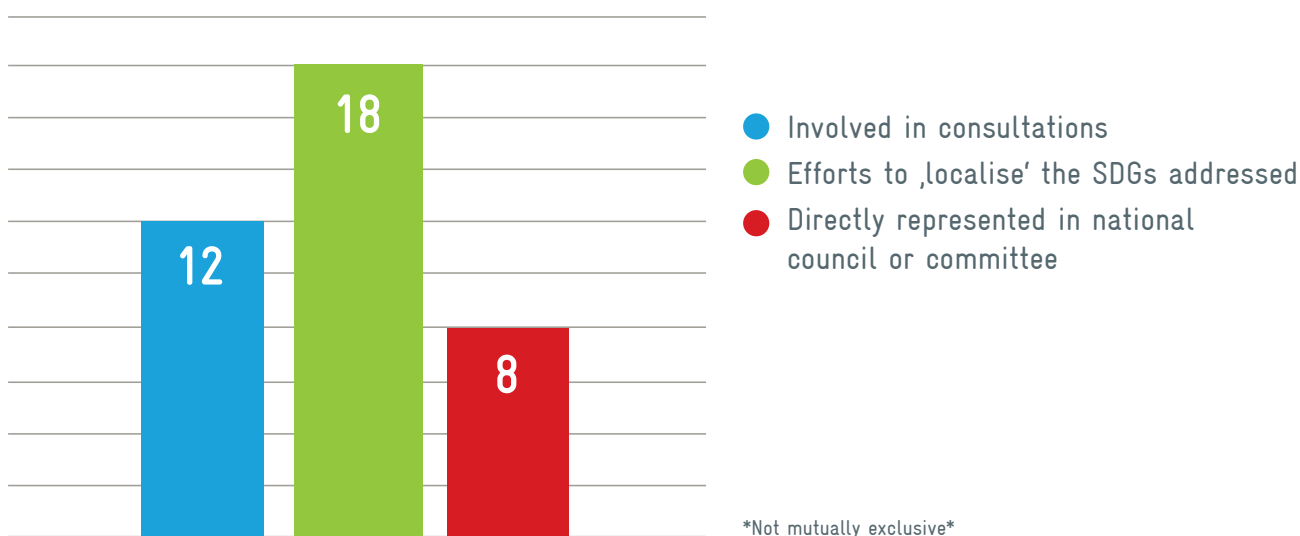
3.3 Involvement of sub-national levels

Nearly all countries addressed sub-national level actors or institutions in 2018, with a greater level of detail provided compared to previous years.

For example, 9 countries reported directly involving representatives of local levels in their national SDG councils or commissions. Another 12 countries stated that they had conduct consultations with actors from sub-national levels. Both figures constitute a notable increase compared to 2016 and 2017.

Additionally, 18 countries described approaches of 'localising the SDGs', dedicated chapters on local level actors and plans, or reported about prioritisation exercises of SDGs in the local context. Five of these cases explicitly referred to capacity building measures for local level actors.

Greece, for example, distinguished between 'Localising the SDGs' and 'Regionalising the SDGs' according to the mandates of different levels of government in

INVOLVEMENT OF SUB-NATIONAL LEVELS

- Involved in consultations
- Efforts to 'localise' the SDGs addressed
- Directly represented in national council or committee

Not mutually exclusive

their federal system, and addressed issues of capacity building for and awareness raising on these levels.

In a similar manner, **Benin** and **Armenia** also addressed the localisation of SDGs in dedicated sections, placed further emphasis on the distinct institutional frameworks on sub-national levels and mentioned the need to ensure adequate funding for the latter. **Ecuador** additionally chose to include an annex about relevant local initiatives.

Uruguay dedicated a chapter to the process of localisation and prioritisation of the SDGs at municipal level, by means of workshops, events and a roadmap, and summarised related achievements as well as challenges.

3.4 National plans and strategies

The majority of countries refer to overarching national visions, strategies or plans as their main frameworks for SDG implementation.

The largest group of 27 countries chose to utilise pre-existent or periodically updated national (sustainable) development strategies or plans, and described efforts to integrate the SDGs into these frameworks or align these plans with the 2030 Agenda.

In such an approach, **Namibia** described how the 2030 Agenda was absorbed in its Fifth National Development Plan, which was launched deliberately one year after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, in order to ensure their alignment and allow national processes to benefit from the global discussions on the new development agenda. Similarly, **Albania** reported that it had aligned its National Strategy for Development and Integration with the 2030 Agenda, of which all components are directly related to the achievement of specific SDG targets.

A second group of 14 countries has developed new overall strategies, plans or visions, typically adopted after 2015 and inspired by the 2030 Agenda. Examples for these mostly carry related elements in their names, i.e. **Latvia** 2030, Vision **Jamaica** 2030, **Egypt** Vision 2030 or extend the horizon of long-term planning even further, as in the **Malta** Vision 2050.
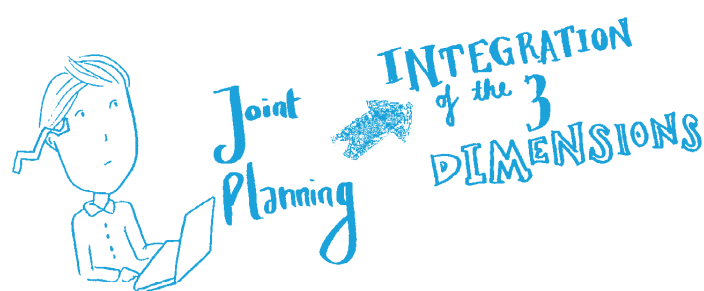
These approaches are not mutually exclusive; countries might also use their pre-existent planning instruments for SDG implementation while working on their new strategies.

Mexico illustrates one of these cases; it is drafting a 2030 Agenda–inspired sustainable development plan, while currently implementing SDGs according to its regular national planning strategy. Once adopted, the new sustainable development plan, in turn, is to serve as guidance for national planning. By comparison, the previously referenced **Latvia** 2030 is a long-term strategy and framework to be implemented by seven-year national plans.

A third group of countries referenced no overarching national plan and reported that they were implementing SDGs via sectoral planning mechanisms; they typically also provided reasoning why it was not deemed necessary to create new plans within their national contexts.

Related examples can be found in **Singapore's** distinct focus on its whole-of-government approach, which is referenced to become the national planning framework, or in **Australia's** emphasis on mainstreaming SDGs directly into sectoral strategies.

Regarding the coverage of these concrete, sectoral or national policies within the reports, **Australia** also provided an extensive chapter listing the key policies and commitments relevant to SDGs. While sharing such a comprehensive range of national policies remains uncommon, a few other countries have also undertaken efforts to showcase their approaches. Correspondingly, **Lebanon** provided charts on key national strategies and their alignment with the SDGs, **Saudi Arabia** visualised the alignment of current national plans with SDGs, and the **Bahamas** incorporated extensive charts displaying all the goals of national development plans and strategies.

3.5 Interlinkages between SDGs

Almost all countries reference the three dimensions of sustainable development in their reports, as well as interlinkages between SDGs. However, detailed accounts of how policy integration is achieved or which interlinkages are identified and accounted for are almost never shared in detail. Interlinkages further tend to be described solely as positive, desirable synergies – never as trade-offs.

Of all VNRs, 15 countries address interlinkages or the three dimensions in a separate chapter or provide at least one example, chart or box related to either:

Cape Verde's Technical Implementation Organisation of the SDGs created working groups according to the three dimensions of sustainable development as well as one tasked with institutional processes.

Accounting for the interlinkages on the level of government, **Malta** introduced a Focal Point Network across ministries to foster the exchange of information and harmonisation of policies.

Singapore similarly reflects on the VNR preparation as a learning process regarding the interlinkages between SDGs for the government and ministries, deriving lessons learned to feed into its whole-of-government approach.

However, trade-offs, negative effects or possible bottlenecks are - with the exception of few countries, among those the **Dominican Republic** - never addressed.

Two countries introduced scientific research on interlinkages between SDGs conducted by government-funded research agencies: **Australia**, on the one hand, showcased the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), which undertook a systems change approach. The **United Arab Emirates**, on the other hand, referred to studies on SDG interlinkages specifically focusing on policy choices in the light of trade-offs and synergies.

3.6 Leave No One Behind

The ‚leave no one behind' principle is central to the 2030 Agenda and frequently quoted in the majority of reports.

However, only around one third of countries directly link LNOB to specific topics, which are typically stakeholder involvement, social policy, the reduction of inequalities and efforts to address marginalised groups - while these accounts also vary greatly in their level of detail.

Sri Lanka and **Romania**, for example, placed particular emphasis on health and education, while other countries linked ‚leave no one behind' to completely different contexts, such as calls for international solidarity in financing and capacity building (**Guinea**) or political support in conflicts (**Palestinian Territories**).

The reports of **Cape Verde**, **Laos**, **Jamaica** and **Mexico**, among others, provide detailed accounts of addressing vulnerable groups. While the groups identified vary based on national contexts, frequently mentioned are rural populations, people with disabilities, indigenous people, migrants, refugees, the LGBTI community and the elderly, with children and adolescent girls also mentioned in some cases.

3.7 Links to other international processes

The vast majority of countries mention one or more international agendas in their reports with relevance to achieving the 2030 Agenda, including the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (37) and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (16).

Especially regarding the Paris Agreement, stronger links to the SDGs are established in the reports of 2018 compared to previous years, including the increasing coverage of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), other commitments, as well as policies and measures related to climate change.

Additionally, in 2018, almost 30 countries dedicated distinct chapters to SDG 13, in comparison to only a small number in 2017. At the same time, links to the Paris Agreement are established, even if less frequently, in chapters on SDG 7 and SDG 15. In summary, 32 countries shared, to some degree of detail, measures, policies or commitments related to the Paris Agreement – more than twice as many as in 2017, when 14 countries reported on the Paris Agreement.

The 16 references to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) make it the third large international agreement, along with the 2030 Agenda and Paris Agreement. Contrary to the latter, however, almost no information on concrete commitments or measures is shared by the vast majority of countries regarding the AAAA. Most nations focus on re-emphasising the need for resource mobilisation to implement the 2030 Agenda, while at the same time processes and figures on resource mobilisation or budgets remain some of the least covered aspects in VNRs.

References to other agreements or frameworks, such as the New Urban Agenda or Sendai Framework can also be found in the reviews but remain uncommon and seldom provide details.

3.8 Reflections

Reflecting on the sections above, the institutional mechanisms described in the 2018 reports continue to display great diversity. Mandates of lead institutions and national plans are frequently described in great detail, whereas distinct coordination mechanisms are covered to a lesser extent, leaving open a number of questions regarding the operational level[6].

The increasing involvement of parliaments since 2016 is noteworthy: a significant number of countries highlight the roles of parliament in SDG-related processes – although it is not clear if this observation corresponds to another policy arena that parliaments have entered or to increased recognition of otherwise routine processes.

Sub-national levels of government are likewise increasingly recognised, e.g. via consultations or as stakeholders in sustainability councils. The "localisation of the SDGs", the translation of the global Goals to individual country contexts, trickles down from federal to state, regional, district or municipal levels, and expresses an ever more complex institutional framework for implementing and reviewing the SDGs.

As a trend over the past three years, growing engagement of non-executive actors is apparent – and indicates that the 2030 Agenda has not only entered national policy making, but is gradually widening its reach.

In this regard, institutional mechanisms bring a great amount of knowledge and opportunities for the sharing of experiences regarding effective planning tools and methodologies, horizontal and vertical coordination, efficient administrations, encompassing (cross-)sectoral strategies, and evaluation mechanisms.

The growing attention to and detailed accounts of interlinkages among the 17 Goals and with other global agendas may likewise indicate a more holistic view on sustainable development within the overall international debate. It will be of interest to observe whether future VNRs will record growing synergies of integrated policy-making. It is evident that neither agenda can be isolated – instead, policy coherence for sustainable development is a necessary lever to achieve the global agendas.

The ‚leave no one behind' principle and interlinkages between SDGs, on the other hand, are unevenly addressed. However, understanding the nature, intensity and effects of interlinkages is essential to navigate the enabling environment for sustainable development – and to ultimately leave no one behind. Further exchange and research will be necessary in order to identify related options and challenges – and to draw the attention of policy makers.

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6 A forthcoming P4R discussion paper on the whole of government approach aims to help fill this gap by looking at how these mechanisms work in practice and identifying underlying challenges and success factors.

4. PARTICIPATION OF NON-STATE ACTORS

ALL COUNTRIES EMPHASISE THE IMPORTANCE OF STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION AND OUTLINE APPROACHES IN THEIR REPORTS. SOME REVIEWS DEVOTE ENTIRE CHAPTERS OR ANNEXES TO INDIVIDUAL STAKEHOLDER GROUPS, DESCRIBING THEIR ROLES IN THE NATIONAL CONTEXT, MECHANISMS OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT OR THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO SDG IMPLEMENTATION. THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER AIMS TO GRASP THE VARIETY IN STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT.
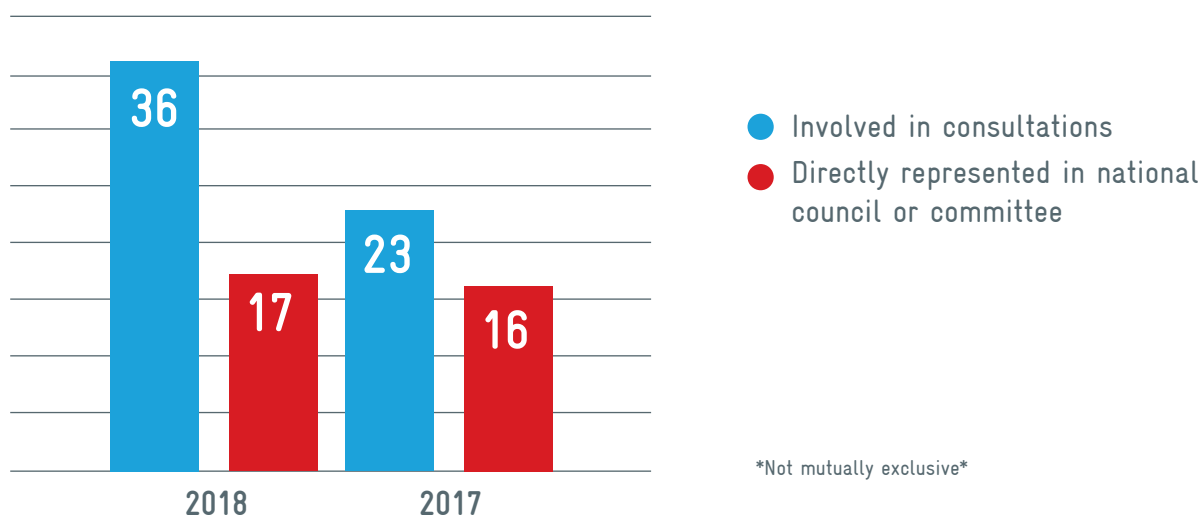
4.1 Civil society

Without exception, all reports emphasise the role of civil society as an important stakeholder group for the realisation of the 2030 Agenda. Interpretations of the term 'civil society' differ – many countries refer exclusively to organised groups such as NGOs, while others also address faith-based organisations, social associations, or explicitly reference grass-root and community-level initiatives – as much as the nature of mechanisms tends to be diverse. However, two broad approaches can be distinguished in the reports:

In 17 countries, civil society groups are represented in either the national SDG council or committee, or the permanent technical working groups directly related to these bodies. These approaches typically involve 2-4 seats for selected representatives and often turn to umbrella organisations.

Another 36 countries described the involvement of civil society actors via consultations, surveys, workshops or other singular events. These activities may involve interviews of a few selected individual representatives from umbrella organisations on behalf of certain sectors or outreach via online polls or similar methodologies – which blurs the

INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

36		
	23	
17		**16**
2018	2017	

● Involved in consultations
● Directly represented in national council or committee

Not mutually exclusive

line between notions of organised civil society and the general public. Similarly, events and workshops may range from high-level political conferences inviting selected representatives for dialogue, to rather technical, sector-specific workshops, or series of events open to hundreds of participants.

However, neither approach, nor a combination of the two, indicates the quality of involvement, or allows conclusions to be drawn on the degree to which outcomes or recommendations from these processes feed into VNRs or national policies. While the figures constitute a further notable development from 2017 and suggest that over 80% of countries have engaged in some sort of consultation or dialogue at large, it is important to note that the VNRs do not allow for sufficient comparison, nor do they allow for evaluations as to how 'meaningful' that involvement is.

A group of 9 countries feature distinct chapters or annexes on civil society engagement. Countries typically highlight roles, specify the organisations involved and list SDG-related initiatives organised by and with civil society. In addition, **Lebanon** included an annex on national consultations with civil society on the VNR, while **Ecuador** chose to present detailed case studies of civil society initiatives related to SDGs. **Greece** placed further emphasis on

particular roles of civil society for certain sectors and for certain SDGs, namely poverty reduction, human rights and environmental protection.

At the same time, references to so-called 'shadow reports' conducted by civil society are not made, except in **Senegal's** review.
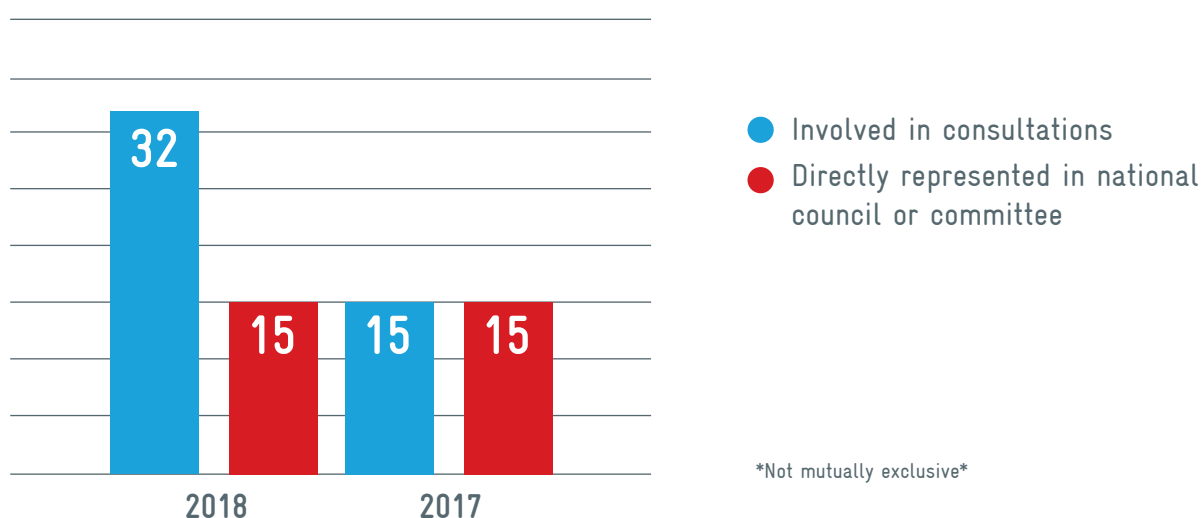
4.2 Private sector

All countries likewise refer to the private sector and the importance of its involvement. Countries reference all types of actors, from the UN Global Compact Network and national umbrella organisations to local start-ups and micro entrepreneurs.

15 countries have assigned seats to representatives of the private sector in the national SDG councils or committees or permanent technical working groups under these.

Another 32 countries described efforts to engage

INVOLVEMENT OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

● Involved in consultations
● Directly represented in national council or committee

Not mutually exclusive

2018   2017

in consultations with the private sector, including surveys, dialogue with representatives, workshops, conferences or similar events. As with the consideration of civil society, this paper can neither assess the quality of this engagement nor state whether, and if so how, outcomes have indeed fed into VNRs or policy-making.

A range of countries featured distinct chapters or annexes on the private sector, such as **Latvia** and **Colombia**.

The **Bahamas** introduced a "National Private Sector Conclave" on the SDGs, involving chambers of commerce, manufacturers associations and small business associations, as well as representatives from the tourism, maritime and financial services sectors.

Hungary's review also places particular emphasis on the private sector, including a chart with business solutions and best practices regarding the sector's contributions to each SDG in addition to presenting related private sector initiatives.

Another group of countries drew attention to the role of the private sector in providing resources and funding for SDG implementation, with varying emphasis on Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) as

concrete means. While particularly prominent in the reports of certain LDCs such as **Guinea, Laos, Mali, Niger** and **Togo**, it is also important to note that this theme was not limited to developing countries, as demonstrated by the VNRs of **Canada** and **Malta**, among others.
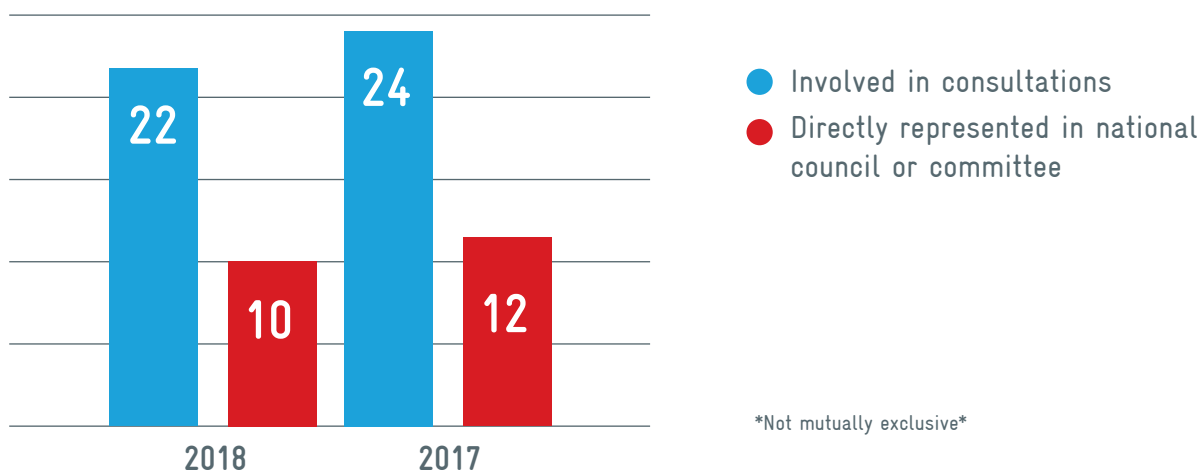
On the other hand, the concrete roles in, or contributions to, national reporting, particularly for VNRs, have not been elaborated on. Accounts of partnership with the private sector are overwhelmingly positive; trade-offs between the economic, ecological or social dimension of sustainable development along with potential resulting conflicts of interest are hardly addressed.

4.3 Academia

The majority of reports also refer to academia, universities or research organisations in one way or another.

For example, 10 countries have representatives of academia in their national SDG council or committee, or related permanent technical working groups, typically from associations of national universities. Another 22 reports further reference having engaged

INVOLVEMENT OF ACADEMIA

22 — 2018 (Involved in consultations)
10 — 2018 (Directly represented in national council or committee)
24 — 2017 (Involved in consultations)
12 — 2017 (Directly represented in national council or committee)

● Involved in consultations
● Directly represented in national council or committee

Not mutually exclusive

academia in consultations, surveys, workshops or other singular events. Compared to stakeholders from civil society or private sector, who appear to be ever more engaged and recognised for SDG review, academia continues to be the least represented group.

Some individual initiatives were nevertheless highlighted in reports. For example, **Albania** referred to a national agreement signed by 25 public and private universities to advance SDGs in the country. Similar efforts with particular focus on aligning research and activities with SDGs were reported by **Latvia's** Riga Technical University, while **Andorra** addressed cooperation with its National University on SDG summer schools and trainings.

Multiple countries again included separate chapters or annexes, specifying the relevant national institutions or presenting case studies in similar formats as for civil society or the private sector, e.g. **Ecuador** and **Greece**.

Mexico further outlined various initiatives at different universities and research institutions that aim to reflect on proposals for sustainability policies, explore policy implications of the 5 Ps (Planet, People, Prosperity, Partnership, Peace) and work on local development indicators. **Australia** and the **United Arab Emirates** address research related to SDG interlinkages and their policy implications (previously referred to in the section 3.5 on interlinkages between SDGs).

4.4 Multi-stakeholder approaches and partnerships

Most countries refer to multi-stakeholder approaches directly in their VNR reports or describe activities that can be attributed as such. The use of the term, its interpretation and the depth of coverage continue to vary considerably – ranging from short references exclusively in reports on SDG 17 to extensive chapters or annexes dedicated to multi-stakeholder processes.

As stated above, many countries have established multi-stakeholder councils, committees or commissions that assume leadership and typically coordinate the countries' VNRs. Many have also conducted consultations that invite a range of diverse stakeholder groups.

Yet another group considers their VNR process itself as a multi-stakeholder project and exercise. This may include independent, unedited contributions to VNR reports, feedback loops to comment on draft versions of the report, or the invitation of one or several stakeholder groups to contribute to the presentation before the HLPF.

Finally, some countries use the term in the context of sectoral projects and partnerships (including PPPs) to implement specific SDGs or SDG targets, typically presented with varying levels of detail.

4.5 Public communication strategies

All 43 countries recognise public communication and awareness-raising as important steps to advance the 2030 Agenda nationally. Some reports even directly address low public awareness as a structural challenge.

However, the amount of information on concrete actions, campaigns and measures remains modest overall, with only a handful of countries dedicating separate chapters to the issue or highlighting the processes in depth. References to the preparation of distinct strategies or roadmaps such as the **Jamaica** Communication and Advocacy Roadmap 2018–2021 remain an exception.

While 13 countries conducted live events, such as workshops, road shows, contests or other activities with and for the broader public or specific communities, eight describe web-based approaches such as online SDG portals, websites or social media campaigns.

For example, **Uruguay** introduced a website though which official documents, as well as educational

materials for young people, are disseminated, and which is part of a social media campaign. At the same time, a number of physical events are also reported on, including a travelling exhibition featuring the main results of the VNR conducted in 2017.

The online SDG portals or websites presented by various other countries, such as **Colombia**, **Mexico** and **Paraguay**, tend to be notably multi-purpose tools that entail geographical visualisation of data related to SDG indicators and provide customisable search-masks to view data disaggregated by sub-national units or other variables.

Notably fewer countries used other media, e.g. the **Bahamas** and **Lithuania** mention SDG-related TV and radio shows as means to improve public awareness.

Another group of countries drew attention to the roles of non-government stakeholders in public awareness raising, most commonly civil society, less frequently also the private sector, and in some cases also international partners, as seen for instance in the reviews of **Armenia** and **Vietnam**.

Finally, a large number of sectoral awareness-raising campaigns (e.g. water, health, climate) can also be found in a wide range of reports, sometimes in combination with SDG-related communication activities listed above, but more commonly as the only means of public outreach appearing in the review.

4.6 Reflections

Involvement of non-state actors constitutes an essential part of the 2030 Agenda and its review, as is evident across the VNRs. Moreover, the majority of countries describe engagement mechanisms in greater detail than in previous years. Attitudes to and experiences with the engagement of stakeholders, or even multi-stakeholder formats, in policy making obviously differ greatly in line with countries' political systems or social traditions.

However, most countries either invite representatives to commissions on sustainable development, or conduct various formats of consultation, or both.

The number of newly established multi-stakeholder bodies set up to steer SDG implementation and review efforts may hint at the institutionalisation and sustainability of such formats and approaches. However, it is not clear if countries expect different contributions from individual stakeholder groups, and if so, how these distinct capacities might best be made use of. Moreover, within each group, the question of legitimate representation persists among potentially conflicting sectoral interests. Further, it is not clear if stakeholder contributions actually have impacts on decision making[7]. Answers to both questions might materialise in the longer term.

Conflicts of interest also remain largely absent from the VNR reports. In effect, they tend to assume a natural alignment of interests of all stakeholder groups in pursuit of the SDGs as the greater goal. Conflicts between the economic, ecological and social dimensions are hardly elaborated on. Given the complexity and sometimes sensitive or conflicting nature of the subjects involved, moderation and open debate may be beneficial in order to draw a more realistic picture of the potential of multi-stakeholder participation.

On the other hand, the frequently mentioned notions of broad ownership, "whole of society" approaches, or the 2030 Agenda as a social contract stand in sharp contrast, with low awareness levels among the general public diagnosed as structural barriers.

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7   A forthcoming P4R discussion paper on the whole of society approach will explore different levels of engagement and meaningful participation of stakeholders in the review process of the 2030 Agenda.

5. Statistics and data

5.1 Priority setting

Countries take a variety of approaches in national priority setting regarding the 2030 Agenda, with 30 reports directly or indirectly referring to prioritisation processes. Some of the countries placed more emphasis on these activities, describing participative prioritisation processes in detail and showcasing the results in distinct chapters or charts, while in some cases only the brief mention of priority targets or priority sectors reveals that some sort of prioritisation exercise has been conducted.

As addressed in the first chapter of this paper, the 2018 VNRs have brought a substantial increase both in terms of the coverage of SDGs and the provision of data on SDG indicators. A vast majority of countries reported on all 17 SDGs in the text chapters of their report and/or statistical annexes. Correspondingly, the process of prioritisation is less directly displayed in the general content of the VNRs; national priorities mostly appear as select targets or indicators from all 17 SDGs, in qualitative assessments or in descriptions of national plans, while the construction of custom SDG sets or explicit prioritisation of SDGs over each other almost completely disappeared.

In the case of the decreasing number of countries that reported exclusively on the thematic focus SDGs of the 2018 HLPF rather than presenting distinct national priorities, it is not possible to determine, however, to what extent those 6 SDGs reflect and constitute their national priorities or if the choice has been guided by that year's HLPF theme. As an example of a country addressing the issue of prioritisation in a distinct chapter, **Spain** presented priority action areas in a detailed manner, including cross-references to the corresponding SDGs.

Other countries, such as **Benin**, **Greece** and **Slovakia**, drew attention to stakeholder involvement in the prioritisation process, describing the participatory activities conducted. **Mali** further referred to national and regional workshops conducted during the prioritisation of SDG targets, sharing the priorities and outcomes in a separate annex.

Despite these examples and other notable exceptions, details provided on prioritisation processes remain even more scarce than on the VNR process itself, leading to low transparency regarding the prioritisation exercises, the underlying methodology and interests and modes of decision-making, as well as the extent of stakeholder involvement.

5.2 Gap analyses

More than half of the countries (24) mention gap analyses or mapping exercises, and an additional four announced that these were planned or work-in-progress at the time of VNR submission.

It needs to be noted that the subject of these also displays certain variation. While in most cases data availability or indicators are addressed (hence the positioning in this chapter), some others refer to policy gap analyses or stakeholder mappings, or a combination thereof, whilst the lack of coverage of processes or concrete results does not allow the topic to be clearly determined in certain cases.

Similarly, reports that mention gap analyses undertaken for data and indicators lack detail regarding which gaps have been identified in each area. While the notion of data gaps, data challenges or shortages in statistical systems can be found in almost all VNRs, almost no reports point to concrete sec-

tors, SDGs, SDG targets, or indicators where gaps had been found.

As such, gaps are often only indirectly derivable, where a statistical annex is provided, by scanning which indicators are not reported on, although this may also not lead to accurate results in all cases, since various statistical annexes report on selected or prioritised indicators only.

5.3 Data availability

Rather than speaking of data gaps, a range of 22 countries provide figures of data availability. The first group of 14 reports provides numerical assessments of how many SDG indicators are covered with available data, while a second group of eight countries uses percentages. However, references to data availability do not necessarily imply that the corresponding data is shared in the report or statistical annexes.

As a first observation, the majority of countries that provide figures reported 40-50% availability, a level similar to 2017, without significant differences between global North and South or specific regions. While there were some outliers - for example, **Lithuania** spoke of **61%**, **Senegal** of **68%**, **Hungary** of approximately **75%** availability – it is unclear how countries arrived at their assessments. While exceptionally strong statistical systems and differences in national contexts may be involved, differences in definitions and underlying standards may also be at play.

Other figures or percentages directly refer to national priorities or indicator sets of choice only, in some cases practically achieving 100% availabil-

ity within those, although not being applicable for cross-county comparisons.

The other half of the countries do not share any assessment, so data availability could only be investigated with the additional effort of analysing statistical annexes, if provided, or online SDG data platforms linked, despite the risk of biases as described above for the determination of gaps.

Notwithstanding the persisting difficulties in comparing cross-country data availability, it should be noted that the number of statistical annexes, and especially of those covering all 17 SDGs, has significantly increased. As outlined in the section on annexes, 20 countries featured statistical annexes in their reports, 17 of these provide data on all SDGs, up from only five countries in 2017.

STATISTICAL ANNEXES COVERING 16 OR 17 SDGS

● 2017
● 2018

5

17
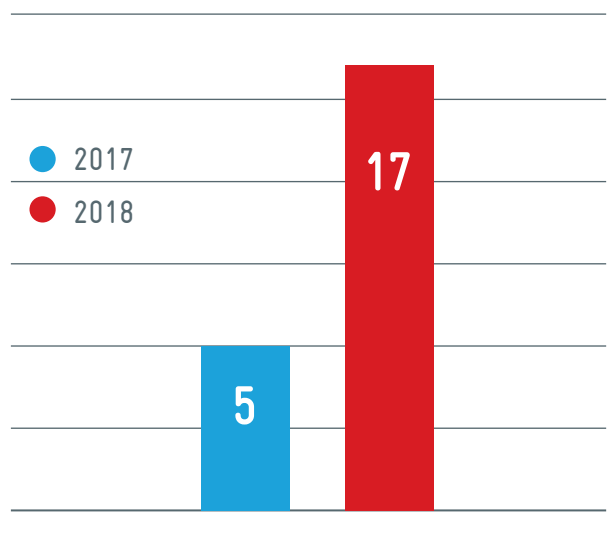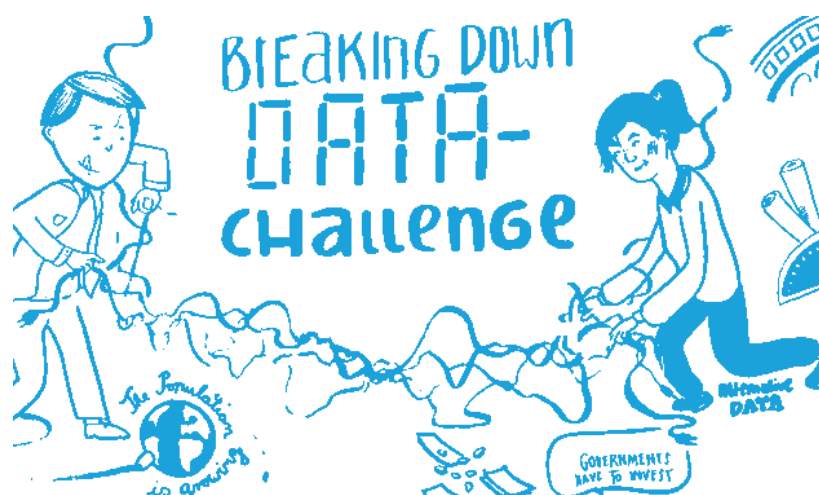
Corresponding, the contents and design of the statistical annexes also span a wider spectrum in 2018. On the one hand, some countries provided purely technical charts featuring the exact figures for all available indicators, sometimes with, sometimes without related target or reference values. On the other hand, some annexes only showcased selected indicators, including verbal explanations of their meanings. For example, **Albania** and **Greece** have chosen these different approaches. Given these disparities, it appears likely that authors assumed different target groups or audiences for the VNRs.

Other countries such as **Latvia** and **Singapore** also incorporated progress or trend tracking tools of some sort, for example markers with green (up) or red (down) arrows highlighting whether progress has been made on individual SDG indicators or the country faces downward trends.

A further notable observation is the increasing notion of regional aspects regarding data coverage. These became apparent particularly in, but are not limited to, certain European countries (e.g. **Ireland**, **Malta**) that chose an EU SDG data set over the global framework for their annexes, as well as to countries from Latin America and the Caribbean, which referenced support by and partnerships for statistics with the Economic Council for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Finally, the provision of SDG-related data was not limited to statistical annexes; some countries linked their SDG online platforms or websites in the reports instead, as did **Colombia**, **Lebanon** and **Lithuania**.

5.4 Data quality

The majority of countries (28) identify data quality directly or indirectly, often in direct combination with data availability, as a challenge, while individual countries even cite it as 'the main' or 'a key' challenge for the implementation and review of SDGs.

Disaggregated data, or the lack thereof, is mentioned in most of these assessments, sometimes with particular emphasis on 2030 Agenda principles such as 'leave no one behind'. Although the provision of disaggregated data has also improved along with the increase in statistical coverage, most countries still describe challenges in this department. While **Ireland** and **Uruguay** provide particularly detailed statistics in their reports, **Colombia** and **Mexico** refer to their SDG websites, which provide disaggregated data via customisable search-masks.

Concurrently, several reports address capacity building efforts, sometimes combined with calls for international support (**Lebanon**) or funding (**Mali**) in this area. Only very few countries, such as **Cape Verde** and the **United Arab Emirates**, share distinct strategies or roadmaps for statistics, the latter also drawing attention to PPPs as an option to derive the data required for SDG review.

5.5 Non-official data sources

A group of 18 countries address alternative data sources in one way or another, spanning a wide range from individual stakeholder contributions to projects with big or open data.

Sri Lanka's report mirrored a wide national data ecosystem that includes alternative sources, stressing that the traditional statistical system could not produce the required data and there was therefore a need to engage new actors such as the private sector, universities and research institutes. **Egypt**, in turn, showcased non-governmental monitoring and evaluation efforts in a distinct section of the report, presenting crowdsourcing approaches and polling apps among others. Similarly, the **Dominican Republic** also dedicated a separate box to innovation in developing measurement instruments for the 2030 Agenda, introducing an innovation laboratory for multi-sectoral data collection.

Concrete approaches utilising such data for the current VNRs, on the other hand, remain rarely addressed, with barely any country incorporating data from stakeholders or their shadow reports in the annexes.

A group of 11 countries touched upon 'open data', addressing relevant initiatives and efforts on different levels and in varying detail. Individual reports described investments in ambitious national projects such as **Australia's** 'Open Data Cube', **Canada's** reference of Open Data for Development, and **Greece's** 'data platform Thessaloniki'. However, the interpretation of 'open data' varies; while some references take it to mean 'publicly accessible', it is not always clear whether or how stakeholders are able to contribute.

Eight countries, in turn, mentioned 'big data', again mirroring different levels and approaches. One group of countries, i.e. **Australia**, **Canada** and the **United Arab Emirates**, addressed research into ways to utilise big data nationally or internationally. Some oth-

NON-OFFICIAL DATA SOURCES ADDRESSED

18

11

8

● 'Alternative data' in general
● Open data
● Big data

Not mutually exclusive
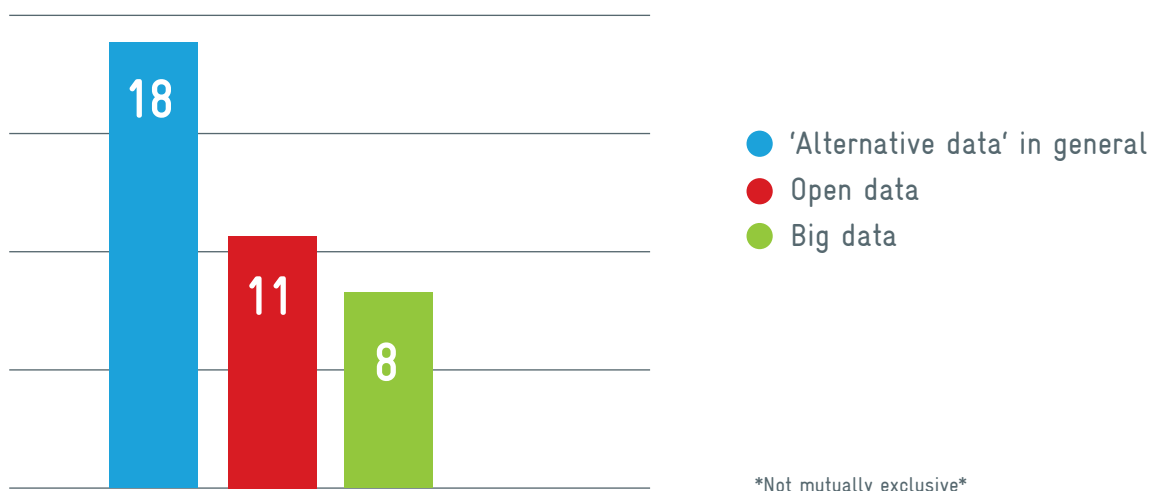
er countries focused instead on sectoral approaches. For example, **Saudi Arabia** presented projects in the context of SDG 9 and transportation, while **Vietnam** displayed efforts to calculate some indicators related to enterprises and labour using big data. One should note that not all references of big data or its potential were exclusively positive; individual reports raised concerns regarding the 'leave no one behind' principle, or the capacity of statistical offices to utilise big and open data.

5.6 Reflections

Statistical evidence, as the basis for effective monitoring and review of national SDG implementation, has become more prominent in the VNRs of 2018 compared to previous years: more countries cover all 17 SDGs, provide statistical annexes, and report on gap analyses, prioritisation efforts or mapping exercises. The inclusion of alternative data sources, and the potential of big and open data are increasingly explored.

The 'data challenge' however prevails as a common major obstacle for the majority of countries. This relates to the quality of available data, disaggregation (by sex, age, income, migratory status, disability and geographic location), the definition of national indicators, the capacities of national statistical systems to report against these, or the ability to access and process alternative, big or open data – regardless of the degree of detail provided in the reports.

Interestingly, **however, barely any report shares concrete results regarding identified gaps, institutional shortcomings, or strategies addressing these**. Without such 'grounding' it remains difficult or even impossible to draw cross-country comparisons, initiate exchange and enable learning – but also to target support and capacity building measures efficiently.

One might ask if the HLPF is the suitable forum to accommodate such discussion – given the degree of technical detail required and knowledge involved. Nevertheless, within the realms of the HLPF or Agenda 2030 review as a whole, the shared challenge of sound statistics and adequate monitoring do promise ample space for peer learning. While capacity building of national statistical offices will be long-term exercises, the very methodologies to conduct mapping or prioritisation exercises may be a useful starting point for discussion, especially for countries that are in the early stages of implementing the 2030 Agenda, or have not presented their VNR yet.

6. FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

MOST COUNTRIES USED THEIR VNRS TO DOCUMENT EXPERIENCES REGARDING THEIR NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES OF THE 2030 AGENDA, ADDRESSED CHALLENGES AND OUTLINED THEIR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE. THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS DESCRIBE HOW COUNTRIES CHOSE TO PRESENT THEIR GOOD PRACTICES, CHALLENGES, NEXT STEPS AND ELEMENTS OF (SELF-) ASSESSMENT REGARDING PROGRESS MADE ON SDG IMPLEMENTATION.

6.1 National follow-up and review beyond VNR preparation

References to follow-up and review processes were made in various reports of 2018. Countries appear to interpret the terms in different ways and often do not provide details, revealing some degree of conceptual ambiguity.

Very few countries mention approaches of institutionalising follow-up or assigning distinct responsibilities, such as **Mali's** resolution on follow-up and establishment of follow-up committees or **Uruguay's** legal definition of an institutional framework for follow-up in 2017, including the conduct of another VNR in 2018. **Andorra, Ireland, Romania** and **Paraguay** have shared distinct timelines.

Plans or mechanisms in place to institutionalise periodic annual or biannual national reporting on SDGs are referenced by **Albania, Ireland, Slovakia, Sri Lanka** and the **United Arab Emirates**, among others. **Spain** additionally reported that it had an action plan in place for 2018–2019 to identify priority areas of action in which accelerator policies are being implemented, including periodic reporting of progress to parliament.

6.2 Presentation of good practices, lessons learned and challenges

The ‚voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF)' encourage countries to share and ‚identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices.'

The sharing of experiences and lessons learned has become more prominent in 2018, as countries share 'success stories', 'best practices' and relevant 'case studies' in their reports. A group of 11 countries even dedicated separate chapters or annexes to describe good practices or lessons learned, e.g. **Armenia, Vietnam** and **Ecuador**. On the other hand, the examples or case studies presented usually do not demonstrate links to distinct policy choices or processes related to the 2030 Agenda. Condensed lessons learned including both implementation and review remain rare.

By contrast, only a small group of countries address challenges in distinct chapters and in more detail, while most countries do share challenges that are exclusive to certain sectors. However, three issues appear to be common challenges:

Most prominently, 28 countries highlight data and statistics. This may include monitoring, evaluation and statistical capacity building, but also more spe-

cific issues such as data availability, data gaps, disaggregated data and alternative data.

Another 21 countries mention the institutional dimension. Challenges addressed include the alignment of institutions with the 2030 Agenda, efficient governance, institutional capacity building, policy coherence for sustainable development, as well as decentralisation.

Another 17 countries identify the alignment of national strategies and plans with the 2030 Agenda, along with their implementation, and in some cases include resource mobilisation.

Other issues include social or geographic heterogeneity within the country, identification and outreach to vulnerable groups, violence and instability in the region or neighbouring states. Some countries of the global North addressed trade protectionism and ageing populations, while some countries of the global South focused on declining ODA, vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters.

A new aspect is that transboundary conflicts enter the discourse about SDG implementation and review, as in reports by the **Palestinian Territories, Armenia** and **Qatar**.

6.3 Next steps

While most reports address next steps in one way or another, some countries share dedicated plans and schedules, including **Armenia's** 'Looking Forward', **Poland's** 'Future Plans', **Qatar's** 'Next Steps' and **Romania's** 'Follow-up'.

A considerable group of countries plan to strengthen their statistical systems, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, promote statistical capacity building, or explore new and alternative data sources.

A small group of countries intends to focus on policy coherence for sustainable development, institutional capacity building, the finalisation of SDG-related strategies, or broader stakeholder engagement.

6.4 Tracking progress on SDGs

The first and most notable observation concerns the positive references to progress – most countries are 'on track', while very few raise concerns or question SDG achievement at the current rate. The greater number and volume of statistical annexes provided in 2018 allow for a more nuanced assessment of individual countries' progress towards SDGs; however, an assessment may not be easy, depending on the design of the charts, provision of descriptions or target values. As a new approach, **Latvia, Singapore** and **Switzerland** introduced progress trackers for SDG targets that display easily recognisable up- or downward trends. National SDG websites or portals are referred to in the reports of **Colombia, Lithuania** and **Mexico**, among others. These tend to provide real-time access to large amounts of data, combined with customisable search-masks and visualisations for sub-national levels.

Senegal and **Ireland** reported that they were not on track for certain SDGs. **Bhutan** and **Niger** referenced rapidly declining and volatile ODA as a challenge, along with uncertainty and difficulties in planning processes.

Laos, as one of the very few countries providing a numerical assessment, concluded that the government can only fund 12-15% of SDG implementation alone, emphasising the roles of development partners and the private sector regarding resource mobilisation. Mali, in turn, listed the external funding it needed in a distinct section of the report.

On the other hand, **Bahamas** and **Cape Verde**, among others, highlighted the need for international support to escape the 'middle income trap'.

While a certain bias towards achievements and successes is to be expected for a document representing a country and being presented at a high-level global political event, it should also be noted that the majority of these assessments are not directly illustrated with or supported by solid data.

6.5 Reflections

Reflecting on the various interpretations, there still appears to be little conceptual clarity about follow-up and review in 2018. In this context, review is still commonly used interchangeably with reporting, while follow-up is often subsumed under next steps, at times unrelated to the VNR process. Only a few countries reference plans to establish routines of national reporting, announce future VNRs or share roadmaps of future activities.

As before, few recommendations, good practices or needs for learning are presented in the reports. It is thus unclear whether national reviews of Agenda 2030 implementation, or the preparation of VNRs for the HLPF, do provide added value to the presenting countries, and if so, how these insights feed into policy making or affect transformative change. Similarly, no assessment can be made as to the lessons other countries can and do draw from these reports.

One might ask if the overwhelmingly positive assessments of progress towards the SDGs found in most reports indicate that countries see little need for peer learning – or depict the limitations of high-level formats such as the HLPF for open discussion. Complementary formats that provide safe space for exchange and dialogue may provide the necessary space.

Some degree of harmonisation and clearer distinction of terms appears relevant to enable the identification of peers to learn from or provide support to. While reports will continue to reflect individual contexts and priorities, the presentation of lessons learned and greater comparability between reports would be conducive to fostering exchange and peer learning – and to underline the rationale behind the HLPF.

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