

SNAPSHOT

SDGs IN CRISIS?

Emerging findings from the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of SDG Implementation in Fragile and Crisis Settings



KEEPING SDG IMPLEMENTATION IN FRAGILE STATES ON TRACK

According to a recent study (2018) by the Overseas Development Institute, **only 18% of fragile and conflict-affected states¹ are 'on track'** to meet selected SDG targets related to unmet basic needs.² About **two billion people currently** live in countries where development outcomes are affected by fragility, conflict and violence.³ **Millions of people are being left behind**, especially the poorest and those disadvantaged because of their sex, age, disability, ethnicity, religion, political belief or geographic location. The OECD States of Fragility report (2018) forecasts that more than **80% of the world's poorest** could be living in fragile contexts by 2030 if fragility is not addressed. Even though conflict is one of the biggest drivers of fragility, **only 2% of official development assistance (ODA)** was directed specifically to conflict prevention in 2016 to tackle underlying drivers of conflict and fragility.⁴

Based on a subset of self-declared fragile and conflict-affected countries (g7+)⁵ that have shared their experiences and lessons learnt in their voluntary national reviews (VNR), this snapshot outlines common bottlenecks in SDG implementation, highlights promising practices and makes some early recommendations about persistent challenges that impede progress on the 2030 Agenda in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

What are the main challenges?

Violent conflict and external shocks like disasters, health pandemics or global financial crisis can derail and reverse decades of development progress. Climate change, disaster and economic volatility can also exacerbate existing tensions or inequalities, rendering marginalized groups, including women and children, even more vulnerable to shocks. And while systems and institutions in fragile situations are still grappling with the means to mitigate the impact, violent conflict weakens social fabric, polarizes the political environment, damages the legitimacy of government institutions and threatens livelihoods. The following lessons on SDG implementation from the VNRs in fragile and conflict-affected settings have emerged four years into the 2030 Agenda:



Women working in the fields, UNDP Afghanistan

¹ There is no officially accepted measure of fragility. We use the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) definition of fragile states: "Fragility is defined as the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violence, the breakdown of institutions, displacement, humanitarian crises or other emergencies."

² ODI/IRC (2018), <https://www.odi.org/publications/11194-sdg-progress-fragility-crisis-and-leaving-no-one-behind>

³ World Bank (2019), Fragility, Conflict and Violence website

⁴ OECD (2018), States of Fragility 2018, OECD Publishing, Paris (<http://www.oecd.org/dac/states-of-fragility-2018-9789264302075-en.htm>)

⁵ There are currently 20 self-declared fragile countries (g7+) that have partnered with civil society organizations and international partners to achieve peacebuilding and statebuilding goals as well as implement the New Deal aid effectiveness principles and the 2030 Agenda in their countries (<http://g7plus.org/> and <https://www.pbsdialogue.org/en/>). To date, eight g7+ countries (Afghanistan, CAR, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste, Togo) have conducted a VNR at least once.

❖ **Government leadership & Institutional capacity gaps**

Across all VNRs, the importance of government leadership and of strengthening government capacities to coordinate, plan, communicate and implement the 2030 Agenda was mentioned. **Technical capacity in the public sector** needs to be strengthened and limited capacity can impede SDG-aligned planning, budgeting and implementation – especially in connecting national, subregional and local government planning, as stated in the VNR of the Central African Republic. In addition, fragile countries often face an acute **absence of quality data** and analysis, which poses serious constraints to timely monitoring, policy development and targeting interventions where most needed. Togo highlights in its VNR that national statistical institutions lack capacities to address new challenges, which leads to poor monitoring and inadequate setting of indicators. This is echoed in the VNRs from Timor-Leste and Sierra Leone: While improvements in national statistical capacity have been made, producing and analysing high-quality, timely and reliable data for national reporting on SDGs remain difficult and pricey. Progress has been made to **disaggregate data**, but more investment is needed to ensure all data can be disaggregated by income, gender, age, migratory status, disability, social grouping and geographic location.



SDG Workshop, UNDP South Sudan

❖ **Tackling Leave No One Behind**

Several countries point out the challenge of reaching vulnerable communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities and discriminated ethnic minorities. The Sierra Leone VNR specifically mentions stigmatized groups, such as people living with albinism, and the

discrimination they face. The Togo and Afghanistan VNRs underlined the difficulty of addressing gender issues due to persistent socio-cultural norms that prevent women's participation in social and political processes. Despite the 2030 Agenda's emphasis on Leaving No One Behind, ensuring meaningful participation of marginalized groups remains a challenge.

❖ **Sustaining reliable funding for development priorities, also in crisis situations**

The biggest challenge mentioned by all VNR countries – especially Guinea and CAR – is the mobilization and sustaining of resources for SDG implementation. Mobilization of financial resources from domestic sources remains a main difficulty to sustaining SDG implementation in the mentioned VNRs, especially **as fragile economies are highly vulnerable to external shocks** such as currency fluctuations or commodity devaluation. Reliance on fluctuating and sometimes **unpredictable donor support** to carry out development programmes adds to the complexity. Afghanistan, for example, pointed out that, after many years of support the current trend of donor funding is diminishing. Meanwhile, Sierra Leone notes that insufficient funding greatly inhibits the timely collection and analysis of good data.

❖ **Comprehensive coordination needed**

Across the board, the VNRs (e.g. Chad, Togo) noted the need for better coordination. There is often **no government mechanism** for SDG implementation on a meaningful level, while there is **weak coordination** of initiatives by development actors between the national and decentralized levels and **fragmentation among civil society actors** is too common. Furthermore, incoming humanitarian and security actors in a crisis context worsen coordination. In its VNR, Sierra Leone stresses that there simply are too many uncoordinated partners, government bodies, CSOs and local communities with a keen interest in the SDGs. The report calls for **integrated approaches to SDG implementation** to reverse this fragmentation.

Recommendations to change trajectory

So how could SDG implementation in fragile and conflict-affected states be kept on track? The VNRs deliver some of the solutions by pointing out emerging promising practices that already tackle a few of the aforementioned challenges:

1) Address the root causes of fragility by prioritizing prevention, equality and non-discrimination

SDGs cannot be achieved in fragile settings if underlying structural drivers of fragility and conflict are not addressed. Thus, investing considerably in SDG 16, for example, is necessary, but not sufficient. As the extensive Pathways for Peace⁶ research shows, exclusion also tends to be a primary driver of conflict and fragility. Furthermore, **addressing horizontal inequalities and discrimination** of any type (gender, race, social, religious, economic, political, geographic, etc.), **making institutions more inclusive** and **ensuring that development strategies are risk-informed and more resilient**, are central to preventing the fraying of the social fabric that could erupt into crisis. Demonstrating this, Afghanistan's VNR states that the fundamental cause of hunger in the country is protracted internal conflict and instability and the Côte d'Ivoire report underscores the need to address structural challenges of strengthening social cohesion and equitable distribution of wealth and economic growth in the country.

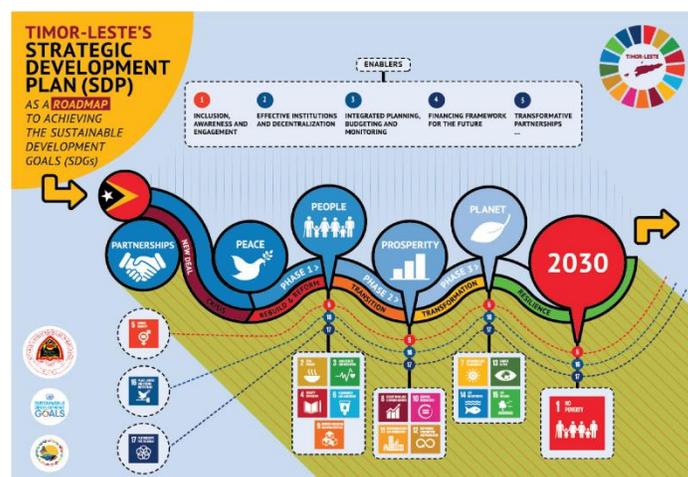
Sierra Leone: 'Walking out of Fragility'-Roadmap

In its National Development Plan 2019-2023, based on an updated fragility assessment, the Government of Sierra Leone has identified human capital development and SDG 16 as the central drivers for resilience, the eradication of poverty and the sustaining of peace. Based on this assessment, the Government has instructed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation and the Ministry of Planning & Economic Development to develop a road map that will define a path out of fragility by 2021. Milestones on this path include: strengthening access to justice; securing free, quality education; and providing service that leaves no one behind.

⁶ 'Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict' is a joint United Nations and World Bank study that looks at how development processes can better interact with diplomacy and mediation, security and other tools to prevent conflict from

2) Strengthen coordination

Coordination structures must do more than merely exchange information – they must develop and implement more **integrated policies**. Because challenges are closely interrelated, the Sierra Leone report calls for an **integrated approach to SDG implementation**, which also holds true for other fragile settings. The Government of Timor-Leste, for instance, established an interministerial working group on SDG implementation that described how the SDGs could be harmonized with the Strategic Development Plan. The Prime Minister's Office chairs the group, which benefits from strong representation from the ministries and units responsible for planning, budgeting, monitoring and implementation of the integrated plan. The group also identified the government agencies that would share the responsibility for achieving each of the 169 SDG targets.



SDG Roadmap, UNDP Timor-Leste

3) Promote institutionalized multi-stakeholder engagement in all phases of SDG localization and implementation

Strong civic engagement is critical to ensuring that no one is left behind. Côte d'Ivoire's report emphasized the need to focus on **enabling and mobilizing civil society** and other stakeholder groups and on promoting their sustained participation in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Some countries noted that **more consultations** are needed to include diverse

becoming violent. United Nations/World Bank. 2018. Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28337>

perspectives, especially from groups and people in remote areas, and that **participation of marginalized groups** was critical not only to produce better VNR reports (e.g., Togo), but also to more inclusively pursue SDG implementation. Participatory methodologies to ensure more systematic and **sustained civil society outreach and engagement**, such as (online) consultations at the local level and focus group discussions (e.g., MyWorld Survey), are thus recommended.

Timor-Leste: Political Participation of Youth

The second youngest nation in Asia, with 62% of the population under the age of 25, Timor-Leste is committed to transforming the youth bulge into a ‘demographic dividend’ by 2030. In 2009, the country established a Youth Parliament, which is composed of young Timorese between 12 and 17 years old, represents youth from municipalities in national debates on key issues and makes recommendations to the National Parliament and the government. Furthermore, each political party has a youth wing enshrined in party statutes. Timor-Leste’s 2017 SDG Roadmap identifies the inclusion of youth in development as an enabler to achieve the SDGs. In addition to taking part in political processes, more and more youth occupy existing civil society spaces to make their voices heard and have established dynamic and vocal groups. The youth group HATUTAN led the organization of the first two Pride Marches in Timor-Leste in 2017 and 2018 and increased awareness of LGBTI rights throughout the country.

4) Strengthen country systems and national capacities

Strong political commitment and ownership are central to nationally owned development pathways out of fragility, a fact that the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States noted already in 2011. Sierra Leone’s report emphasizes that the institution leading implementation of the SDGs must have sufficient political clout and power to mobilize and coordinate all of government and society at large around the SDGs. As the Afghan report states, **capacity development** within the public sector is critical to ensuring effective policymaking, implementation, and data gathering and analysis. Strengthening **decentralization** can help deliver localized and tailored SDG strategies for people left furthest behind.

5) Invest in data availability and engage civil society and the private sector to validate and collect data

Quality, timely, disaggregated and open data and statistics are vital for governments, international organizations, civil society, the private sector and the public to make informed decisions about the 2030 Agenda, to prioritize accelerators particular to a given context and to ensure that no one is left behind. In addition to strengthening national statistics systems, as stated in the Guinea and Togo VNRs, **involving civil society and the private sector more systematically** can be particularly useful in conflict and post-conflict states, where data and government outreach are often lacking. In certain situations, countries can rely on third-party data collectors from civil society or the business sector to collect data on sensitive topics about which respondents may be unwilling to talk with official state authorities.

Central African Republic: Addressing the data gap

In a context of fragility, challenged state authority, insufficient financial and human resources as well as electricity and IT, reporting on the SDGs is a challenge for the Central African Republic Government. However, awareness of the need for data to prepare the CAR Voluntary National Report 2019 compelled the Government to establish sector-wide data and statistics mechanisms. As recommended by stakeholders, third-party data collection should be used in addition. Thus, the UNDP/MINUSCA perception surveys of almost 27,000 Central Africans on peace, justice and security, was provided to the government which greatly expanded the database. Furthermore, a joint UNDP/MINUSCA Rule of Law programme is building case management mechanisms and compiling judicial statistics and partners with the National Statistics Office to improve collection methods and databases.

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