



Voluntary national reviews (VNRs)*

Summary

The analysis by the Committee of the voluntary national reviews indicates that those presented in 2021 showed welcome improvements compared with earlier reports in the broader capture of all aspects of the 2030 Agenda and in increased attention to previously underreported goals and targets, in particular those related to the

environment. Two key continuing concerns are the lack of substance and analysis, which limits the potential of the reports to share meaningful experiences and lessons learned, and the lack of attention given to the transformative and integrated objectives of the 2030 Agenda.

Recommendations

The Committee recommends that the Council continue to explore how the voluntary national reviews can be made more effective for the purpose of sharing experiences on implementing the 2030 Agenda. This should be achieved by incorporating into those reviews more specific and substantive discussions and analysis on national and international policies, actions and strategies taken as part of the global social contract in pursuit of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Such reflections should review in particular the challenges of achieving the transformative and integrated objectives of the 2030 Agenda and include a reference to the key constraints faced by countries and the support needed.

The Committee also recommends that the Council and Member States undertaking voluntary national

reviews strengthen the role of the reviews to share lessons learned among Member States and other stakeholders. Member States undertaking their second and successive reviews should report on how findings from earlier reviews were used to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda nationally and internationally.

The Committee further reiterates its recommendation that the Council and Member States undertaking voluntary national reviews explore ways to tap into new opportunities to make the review processes more inclusive, while ensuring adequate representation of groups that are disadvantaged. That requires the ongoing engagement of civil society and space in the review process for independent input from all stakeholders, including the presentation of shadow reports.

* Excerpt from Committee for Development Policy, Report on the twenty-fourth session, See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2022, Supplement No. 13 (E/2022/33)

Analysis of the 2021 voluntary national reviews

The Committee has conducted an analysis of the voluntary national reviews presented at the high-level political forum every year since 2018.¹ In 2022, it conducted an analysis of the 40 voluntary national review reports presented in 2021. While there are welcome advances, key concerns raised by the Committee in the past on the scope and content of the reports remain. The reports reviewed do not reflect the transformative ambition of the 2030 Agenda, nor do they appear to be effectively used as tools for taking lessons learned into policy debates and processes.

Voluntary national review reports are largely descriptive and lack the substantive assessments and analyses required to serve their intended purpose of sharing experiences of national Governments, civil society, businesses and international partners. More detailed attention to and reflection on policies, strategies and actions taken, nationally and internationally, and their impact would facilitate the identification of experiences and lessons learned, which could in turn support improvements in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

COVID-19 pandemic impact and response. All the voluntary national reviews report on the severe impact of the pandemic on progress in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, with most reports placing more emphasis on socioeconomic impacts than on health impacts. Many reports describe the disproportionate impact that the pandemic has had on marginalized and disadvantaged groups but do not reflect on why that is the case. Most reports detail the health response and social protection support, but a number leave out any mention of vaccine access. Only about a third of the reports refer to target 3.d on pandemic preparedness.

Leaving no one behind. The Committee is encouraged by the increasing attention given to the pledge to leave no one behind, which is mentioned in all reports. However, the focus of policy response, such as on the effects of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, is mostly on social protection measures for the vulnerable and marginalized groups, with less reflection on structural issues. Furthermore, only two reports mention reaching the furthest behind first and none refer to actions taken to avoid pushing people further behind. When identifying marginalized and disadvantaged groups, disabled persons, women and girls, the elderly and children are widely recognized, while references to indigenous people, religious or ethnic groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender, queer and intersex persons and people living with HIV/AIDS are rarer.

Income inequality. The trend of giving increasing attention to income inequality in the voluntary national reviews continues. However, there is underreporting of important Goal 10 targets, in particular those referring to financial market regulation and enhanced representation of developing countries in international decision-making. Furthermore, the notion of structural change, nationally and internationally, is still absent and there is still a focus on social safety nets and redistribution rather than on underlying fundamental causes of inequality.

Gender inequality. Three quarters of the reports have a dedicated section on Goal 5, which is a lower share than in previous years. Even fewer reports refer to specific targets and the treatment of gender inequality, and in most of them, the discussion is superficial. Only around half of the reports recognize gender pay gaps, and only one in four refers to any policies or strategies to address the issue.

Environment. The Committee found that there was a substantial increase in the attention given to climate action and clean energy, which had been underreported in the reviews presented in 2020. Sustainable consumption and production is discussed in almost all reports but, aside from waste reduction and management, the attention to individual targets is modest and the topic is not treated in much depth. Very few reports mention the mobilization of resources for ecosystem protection and sustainable management of forests. On the basis of a mapping of the interlinkages among environmental targets, as well as between environmental and other targets, the Committee explored how the reports address and refer to such interdependencies. For instance, the relationship between access to clean water and education is referred to in some reports.

Partnerships and means of implementation. Resource mobilization in general receives the most attention in the reporting on Goal 17. Other aspects, such as international commitments and the creation of enabling environments, are given less coverage in the 2021 reviews. As an example, only one quarter of the reports refer to policy coherence. That could indicate a failure to recognize and address the integrated nature of the sustainable development challenge and the transformative change needed to realize the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. The Committee is also concerned that targets, such as

¹ See <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/our-work/committee-for-development-policy.html>.

investment promotion and market access, that specifically support the development of least developed countries, remain among the least reported targets overall. Furthermore, the importance of policy space is scarcely mentioned in any reports.

Underreported goals and targets. A general trend in past reports and again in the reports presented in 2021 is the lack of attention to means of implementation targets. Targets and themes related to technology transfer, capacity-building and inclusive and equitable globalization and trade remain among the least reported. This is true for the reporting on all Goals.