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What did the 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports still not tell us?

*CDP Subgroup on voluntary national reviews**

ABSTRACT

The fourth in a series of annual analyses of voluntary national reviews (VNRs) by the Committee for Development Policy (CDP), this paper analyses the 2020 reports. It consists of an introductory chapter with general conclusions and recommendations for consideration by governments and other stakeholders participating in future VNRs; and a short series of authored thematic chapters. The document revisits issues addressed in the previous editions, such as the pledge to leave no one behind, inequalities, gender inequality, COVID-19 and pandemic preparedness, and SDG 17, and includes new topics of analysis, such as how countries have treated the issue of structural transformation and sustainable consumption and production. In doing so it identifies issues that are absent or under-reported in the VNRs while critical for the success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The general finding is that while there have been notable improvements in the VNRs over time, and the 2020 reports showcase numerous positive developments and initiatives, the reports suggest a disconnect between the ambition to meet the SDGs and the attention given to the type of developmental transformation that could drive and sustain SDG implementation in the long run such as strategies to secure sustainable, climate resilient productive capacities and structural transformation.

Keywords: Sustainable development, SDGs, 2030 Agenda, voluntary national reviews, leaving no one behind, global partnership, inequality, gender inequality, structural transformation, productive capacities, COVID-19, pandemic preparedness, sustainable consumption and production

JEL Classification: F55, O1, Q01

* This document was prepared by CDP members Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (Vice-Chair), Natalya Volchkova, Kori Udovički, Rolph van der Hoeven, Trudi Hartzenberg and Leticia Merino, with the assistance of Marcia Tavares, Annette Becker, Haya Haddad, Ksenija Ivanovic, Lana Hadzi-Nikovic, Igor Idjoski, Maria Plakhtieva, Elizaveta Smorodenkova, Emilio Rodríguez-Izquierdo and Francisco Lemus. The document benefitted from inputs by other CDP members during the Committee's 2021 plenary session. Comments should be addressed by e-mail to the authors at cdp@un.org.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction and overview	1
2	Under-reported goals and targets	4
3	Leaving no one behind	7
4	Strengthening partnerships and SDG 17.....	11
5	Structural transformation for higher productive capacity in the 2020 Voluntary National Reviews (Kori Udovički, Rolph van der Hoeven, Trudi Hartzenberg)	20
6	A critical reading of SDG5 chapters of Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports (Maria Plakhtieva, Elizaveta Smorodenkova and Natalya Volchkova)	28
7	Reducing inequality should be a top priority during the COVID-19 pandemic, but isn't: SDG 10 in the 2020 Voluntary National Reviews (Rolph van der Hoeven and Leticia Merino)	40
8	Pandemic preparedness and consequences for SDGs (Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Haya Haddad).....	44

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Typesetter: *Gabe Scelta*

UNITED NATIONS
Committee for Development Policy
UN Secretariat, 405 East 42nd Street
New York, N.Y. 10017, USA
e-mail: cdp@un.org
cdp.un.org

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1 Introduction and overview

The United Nations Committee for Development Policy (CDP) has analysed the voluntary national reviews (VNRs) annually since 2017 (CDP subgroup on voluntary national reviews, 2018, 2019, 2020).¹ One of the first questions it sought to answer was how countries were reflecting the pledge to “leave no one behind” made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Committee has since incorporated new topics into its annual review of the VNRs, with the objective of reflecting on what the reports as a group reveal or conspicuously omit about the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, thus contributing to continuously improve the VNRs as instruments to advance implementation of the Agenda. This document focuses on the analysis of VNR reports presented in 2020 (see box 1.1. for information on the approaches adopted). This introductory chapter summarizes the main conclusions and makes recommendations for future VNRs. Subsequent chapters analyse selective coverage of SDGs and identify under-reported goals and targets (chapter 2) and explores in greater detail how the 2020 VNRs addressed the pledge to leave no one behind (chapter 3), strengthening partnerships and SDG 17 (chapter 4), structural transformation (chapter 5), gender inequality and SDG 5 (chapter 6), inequality and SDG 10 (chapter 7), and pandemic preparedness and COVID-19 (chapter 8).

Main conclusions

The key message from the CDP’s analysis of the 2020 VNRs is that reports have improved over the years but still do not show evidence of the transformation needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda. There are some persistent blind spots both in terms of the goals and targets that are covered and in terms of how they are addressed.

The most commonly unreported goals in the 2020 VNRs were those most closely related to environmental sustainability and climate change (chapter 2) This may reflect the legacy of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and data availability but omits a major part of the 2030 agenda and is inconsistent with the integrated and indivisible concept of the SDGs. Furthermore, within several SDGs, there are targets or issues that received scant attention, such as international support for least developed countries (LDCs) under SDG 17 (chapter 4).

It is encouraging that greater attention was given in the 2020 VNRs to the pledge to leave no one behind and to inequalities, including gender inequality, compared to earlier VNRs (see, for example, CDP subgroup on VNRs, 2018). However, treatment of these issues still suggests a focus on target-driven action rather than transformational strategies establishing firm pathways to sustainability and addressing the structural determinants of inequalities, exclusion and unsustainable “development”. For example, most countries referred to “leaving no one behind” but many avoided a discussion of what that means concretely and how they are addressing development trade-offs to avoid pushing people behind (chapter 3). The treatment of inequality as reflected in SDG 10 has improved but is still limited, particularly in terms of addressing structural determinants of inequality and inequality between countries (chapter 7).

¹ Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) were adopted as part of the follow-up and review mechanisms of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They are presented annually, on a voluntary basis, at the high-level political forum (HLPF) meeting under the auspices of ECOSOC, to facilitate the sharing of experiences with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; strengthen policies and institutions of governments and mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). More information can be found at [Voluntary National Reviews ∴ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform](https://cdp.un.org). Previous reports by the Committee for Development Policy are available at <https://cdp.un.org>.

Neglect of inequality is reflected across other themes. While gender inequality was addressed by all countries, few reported on action to address the root causes of gender inequality (chapter 6). Relatively few reports reflected meaningfully on the unequal distributional and gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its containment measures (chapter 8).

An important feature of the 2030 Agenda that distinguishes it from previous approaches is that it recognizes in principle the critical role that structural transformation has to play in attaining the SDGs. However, the analysis in chapter 5 shows that few VNRs reflect clear intent or action towards economy-wide transformation of production structures or make a strong connection between that and the potential of achieving the SDGs. This suggests that structural transformation does not yet have a commensurate place in the conceptual framework with which the Agenda is being tackled.

Analytical methods and approaches

The general approach adopted by the CDP in its analyses of VNRs has been to review how the VNRs presented each year have considered, or failed to consider, selected cross-cutting principles, goals or targets. The methods used for the content analysis include searches for references to specific terms, software-assisted contextualized word searches and focused analyses of specific sections of reports. Analysing a large number of reports that cover such a wide scope as that of the 2030 Agenda necessarily involves trade-offs, analytical choices, and a degree of subjectivity, particularly considering the diversity in report structures. Methodological differences, differently structured reports in different languages and other characteristics of the VNRs limit comparability across reports and in time. However, taken together, and acknowledging the limitations of this type of analysis, these complementary perspectives provide an overview of what the VNRs are revealing about the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and especially where the main gaps are.

Recommendations for future VNRs

Moving forward, if the VNRs are to support a transformative approach to SDG implementation, greater attention needs to be given to goals and targets on environment, climate change, sustainable consumption and production and the blind spots in SDG 17, including support to LDCs, and to how countries are tackling profound structural problems in their development and in how they relate to the rest of the world, particularly those related to inequalities, environmental sustainability and productive capacities. The VNR processes can be used not only as space to showcase achievements but also to identify the barriers and challenges, the stakeholders and their concerns, and impacts of actions on the wellbeing of people within and outside their border, in order to work towards solutions.

The processes that lead up to the final report should provide space for different perspectives on the complex and fundamental challenges and trade-offs that need to be tackled to ensure transformative action, including, for example, how to develop without pushing groups of people further behind. As countries undertake their second, third and successive VNRs, more attention could be given, in terms of process, to the stage following the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), during which the lessons learned during the process and at the Forum are brought back to the relevant government bodies and stakeholders. In this context, more can be done also to enhance the use of shadow reports to develop debate on key issues. This would require giving more space and an independent voice to non-state actors in the process, the report and the VNR presentations at the HLPF.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly shed light on and aggravated digital inequalities, it has also massively accelerated and amplified the possibilities for online interaction between people in different parts of the world and of the same country. This expanded online engagement, if adequately harnessed, can make engagement at the HLPF more inclusive and comprehensive than could have been imagined when the VNRs were conceived.

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- (2020). “Voluntary National Reviews Reports: What do they (not) reveal?” CDP Background Paper No. 50. ST/ESA/2020/CDP/50. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/CDP-bp-2020-50.pdf>

2 Under-reported goals and targets

Among the 45 VNR reports submitted in 2020, the vast majority addressed all or most SDGs; five reports prioritized a small set of goals; and one did not report on the goals. The goals least reported on were 6, 12, 13, 14, and 15 – those most closely related to the environmental dimension of sustainable development – and 10 – inequality (Figure 2.1). With the exception of SDG 14 (“Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”), which several landlocked countries chose not to refer to, the least reported goal overall is SDG 12 (“Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns”) (see Box 2.1). This matters because the commitment to achieve “sustainable development in its three dimensions– economic, social and environmental – in a balanced and integrated manner” is central to the 2030 Agenda.²

Countries adopted different approaches to reporting on targets. Thirty-five countries referred to at least some of the targets by number, either in the main text or indirectly by reporting on those targets’ indicators. An overview of those references shows that the goals least reported on are also those in which the coverage of targets (referenced by number) was the lowest (Figure 2.2).³ The exception is SDG 17, which was reported on by most countries but in which the coverage of the targets was relatively low (see chapter 4).

Figure 2.1
Percentage of reports addressing each SDG

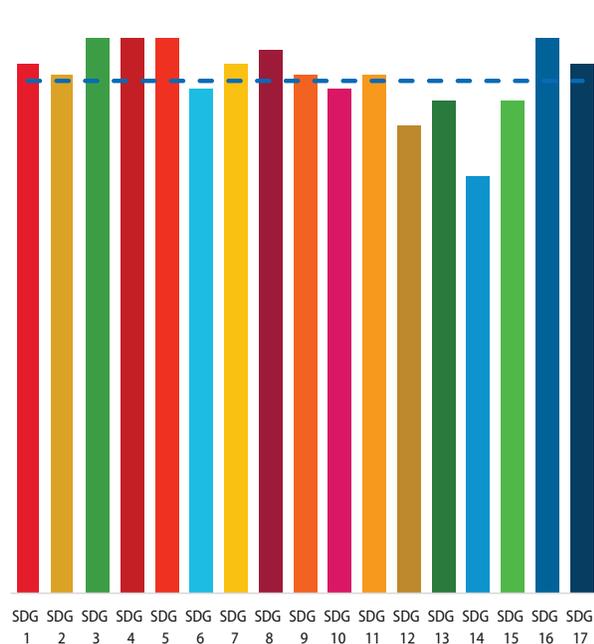
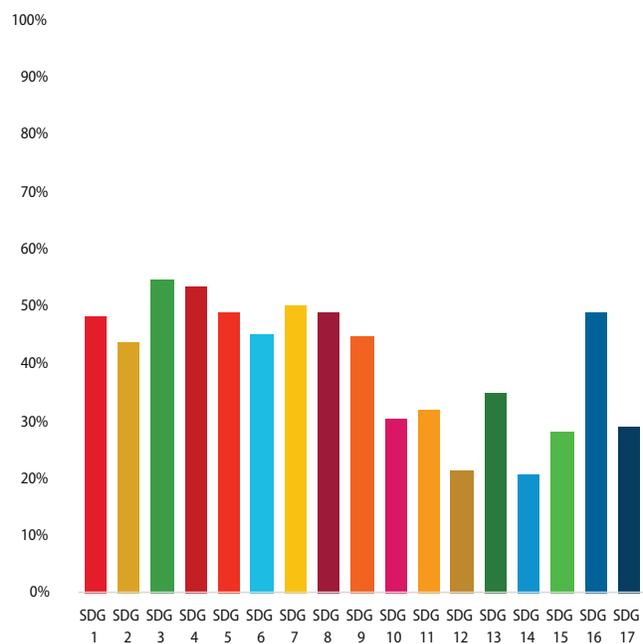


Figure 2.2
Average share of targets addressed under each SDG



² General Assembly resolution 70/1, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1 (21 October 2015), available from undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/1.

³ A target was considered reported on if it was referred to by number (but not if the report only restated the target text or included it as part of a list or table without additional information) or if the report contained references to at least one of the indicators in that goal (but not if this was limited to listing the indicator without providing any data).

Box 2.1

SDG 12 AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

While most countries did report on SDG 12 or referred to sustainable consumption and production, in general the treatment of the issue suggests that it is still being addressed marginally, often limited to a small number of international commitments, rather than one of the fundamental transformative and cross-cutting aspects of the 2030 Agenda.

The targets least reported on by number are possibly where the most important potential for transformation, and the greatest challenges, lie: 12.a (support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production) and 12.c (rationalizing fossil fuel subsidies). Even for the targets most frequently reported on – 12.4 (sound management of chemicals and wastes) and 12.5 (reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse) – reporting has often been limited to references to isolated actions without references to baselines that would enable assessments of progress. Countries as diverse as **Finland, Panama, Mozambique and the Gambia** mention lack of information on the issues covered by this goal as an impediment to progress.

Taken in its broad, transformative sense, achieving sustainable consumption and production requires fundamentally rethinking development, for which there is a window of opportunity in the current context of crisis. The challenges associated with this come across in some of the VNRs. **Mozambique** reported on its commitment to SDG 12 and its efforts in expanding renewable energy. It acknowledged that while investments in extractive industries, particularly liquefied natural gas (LNG) have potential in terms of increasing the country's level of income and providing resources for health and education, they will also have environmental and social impacts. The government was introducing reforms for the management of extractive industries and the creation of a Sovereign Wealth Fund, and the report referred to warnings by national experts that the country should not rely on revenues from extractive industries and rather more proactively develop labour-intensive, non-polluting industries. Interviews with the private sector highlighted that the cost of investing in sustainable practices was a barrier and that incentives to support greener investments were needed if the country was to meet SDG 12 by 2030. **Papua New Guinea** reported on several efforts related to sustainable consumption and production but noted that these are being challenged by "increasing population growth and high demand for products and services" and, on the other hand, several challenges to a diversification away from natural resources, such as lack of technology, skills, infrastructure and business environment. For **the Gambia**, sustainable consumption and production is stated as not being a development priority.

Another limitation of the treatment of this issue can be traced back to the design of the goal and its targets, which translates the concept of common but differentiated responsibilities into a commitment – contained in target 12.a – to strengthen the scientific and technological capacity of developing countries but omits a reflection on the main drivers of ecological losses in the developing world, which include the treatment of natural resources as commodities (food, energy, minerals) with scarce attention to sustainability and to accountability by transnational corporations and global markets.

Source: based on analysis undertaken by Leticia Merino

Table 2.1 Least reported targets	
10.6	Ensure enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions in order to deliver more effective, credible, accountable and legitimate institutions
10.a	Implement the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in accordance with World Trade Organization agreement
11.a	Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, per-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning
11.c	Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials
12.a	Support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production
12.c	Rationalize inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption by removing market distortions, in accordance with national circumstances, including by restructuring taxation and phasing out those harmful subsidies, where they exist, to reflect their environmental impacts, taking fully into account the specific needs and conditions of developing countries and minimizing the possible adverse impacts on their development in a manner that protects the poor and the affected communities
13.a	Implement the commitment undertaken by developed-country parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to a goal of mobilizing jointly \$100 billion annually by 2020 from all sources to address the needs of developing countries in the context of meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation and fully operationalize the Green Climate Fund through its capitalization as soon as possible;
14.3	Minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels
14.6	By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation;
15.c	Enhance global support for efforts to combat poaching and trafficking of protected species, including by increasing the capacity of local communities to pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities
15.b	Mobilize significant resources from all sources and at all levels to finance sustainable forest management and provide adequate incentives to developing countries to advance such management, including for conservation and reforestation
17.5	Adopt and implement investment promotion regimes for least developed countries
17.7	Promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favourable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed
17.14	Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development
17.15	Respect each country's policy space and leadership to establish and implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development

Considered individually, the targets least reported on by number are related to environment, climate change, sustainable consumption and production; the representation of developing countries in international institutions; or support to developing countries, including to least developed countries (LDCs) (chapter 4). In some cases, there are overlaps between these categories, such as in the case of goals 11.c, 12. a., 13.a and 14.6 (see table 2.1).

Reports often address issues covered under the targets without referring to their numbers, and complementary approaches are needed to understand precisely what goes unreported, but numbered references to the targets are an important measure. By that measure the issues that set the SDGs apart as an agenda for sustainable and inclusive development, are still not being reported on equal terms as those on the traditional, pre-2015, development agenda.

3 Leaving no one behind

It is encouraging that almost all the 2020 VNRs referred to the pledge to leave no one behind, which was not the case when the reviews started in 2016. Approximately 70 per cent of reports in 2020 had a dedicated section on leaving no one behind and others addressed the concept across the report. Even countries that did not refer to the term did refer to efforts to address the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

Who is considered as being left behind or at risk of being left behind?

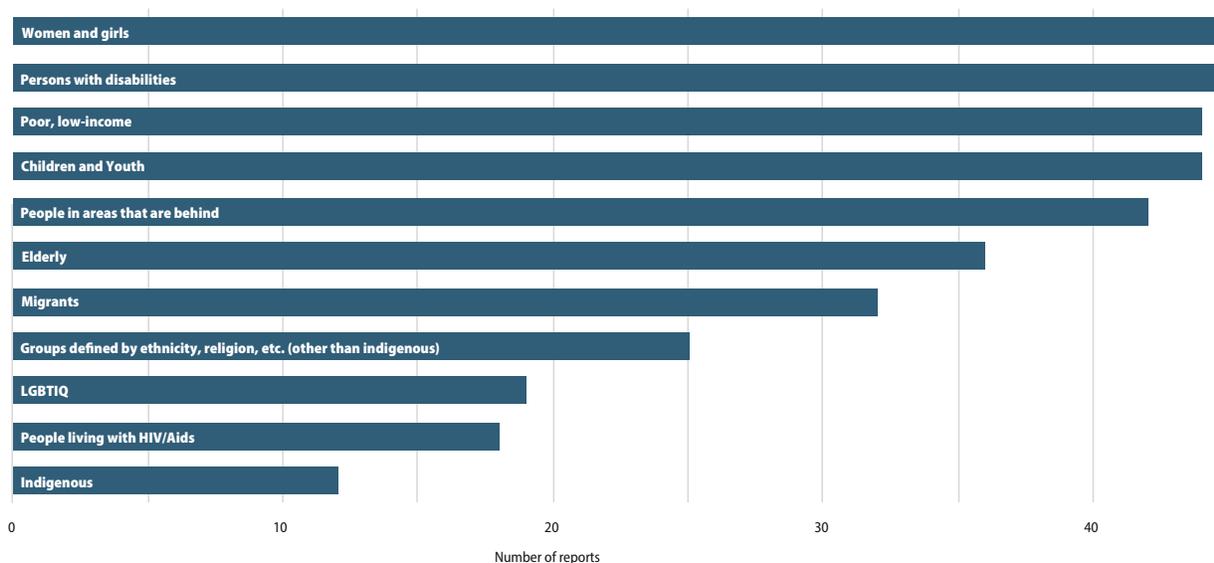
Most reports refer to persons with disabilities, women and girls, the poor and low-income groups, and older persons as groups that are vulnerable, at risk of being left behind or the targets of specific policies to avoid being left behind (figure 3.1). Several also refer to people in geographical areas that are further behind. Beyond these broad groups, VNRs reported on investments in disaggregated statistics and in new methodologies to be able to accurately identify the groups at risk of being left behind in their specific country contexts and thereby design policy interventions (examples in Box 3.1). Some reported on human rights-based approaches to the definition of indicators or data collection, others to how they are reflecting intersectionality or multidimensionality of deprivations. Figure 3.2 shows examples of groups that have been considered in the sections on leaving no one behind in the 2020 VNRs, beyond the most frequently mentioned, and broadly defined, categories.

How is the concept of leaving no one behind understood?

The content of the sections dedicated to “leaving no one behind” provide a snapshot of how countries understand the concept and what types of policies they consider as part of their strategies to fulfil it. The concepts and approaches most frequently quoted in the sections on leaving no one behind were human rights, equality, inclusion and addressing discrimination. Social protection or social security are referred to as not only an instrument but a right or a goal in themselves. While there are some references to international cooperation, most countries focus on the domestic aspects of leaving no one behind. Several countries associated leaving no one behind to the fulfilment of international and regional agreements and commitments such as the human rights and labour conventions, the Montevideo Consensus on

Figure 3.1

Groups most referred to in the VNR reports as being left behind, vulnerable, or the target of policies



Box 3.1

EXPERIENCES: IDENTIFICATION OF PEOPLE AT RISK OF BEING LEFT BEHIND

- **Argentina** included the entities responsible for reporting on the country's international human rights commitments in the design of indicators
- In **Kenya**, the identification of those at risk of being left behind was done jointly by Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and Kenya National Commission on Human Rights
- **Panama** calculated the Multidimensional Poverty Index at the township level, enabling identification of areas most left behind as well as vulnerable groups
- **Kyrgyz Republic** studied multi-dimensional data in a series of consultations, considering the intersectionality of discrimination, geography, socio-economic status and life-death indicators and fragility through which some groups or individuals confront multiple reinforcing disadvantages and deprivations

Population and Development, the Madrid International Action Plan on Ageing, the European Accessibility Act or the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

How countries define this concept in their national contexts can change over time as countries accumulate experience and mature their approaches. Finland, for example, stated that the concept of leaving no one behind had evolved since its first VNR, from a focus on supporting least developed countries in international cooperation to one that also encompasses leaving no one behind in their national policies.

Excluding action plans and legislation for specific groups, the most commonly mentioned policy or action areas in the leaving no one behind sections of the 2020 VNRs are social protection and data disaggregation and/or indicator design, followed by access to basic services and infrastructure, participation in decision-making, education or human capital development and promotion of employment (figure 3.3).

What aspects of leaving no one behind remain unexplored?

Issues that remain underexplored in the VNRs are how to put into practice the commitment to "reach the furthest behind first", how to not push people further behind, the relationship between climate change and environmental degradation and people being left behind, and the importance of productive capacities in strategies to leave no one behind:

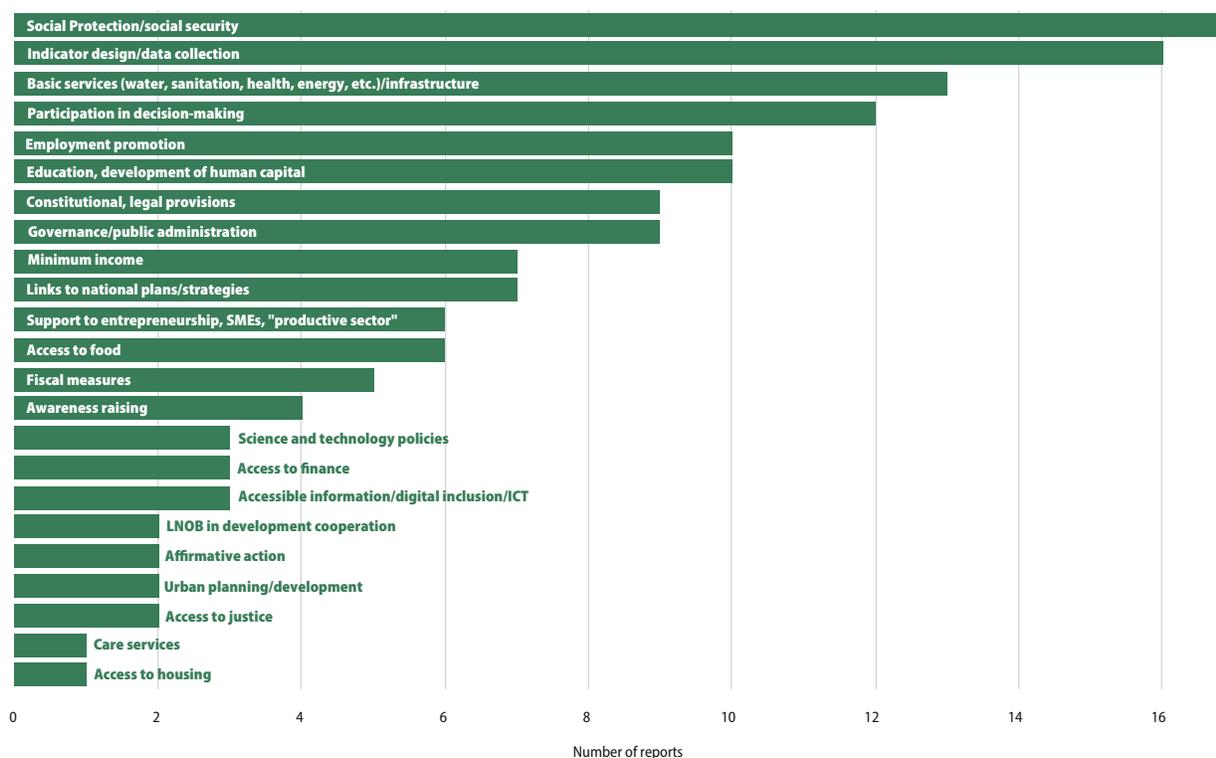
- Reaching the furthest behind first.** While several 2020 VNRs refer to the commitment to reach the furthest behind first, few outline their strategies to fulfil it. In most reports, references to

Figure 3.2
Specific groups identified in sections on "leaving no one behind" (beyond the categories in Figure 3.1)



Figure 3.3

Policies/action highlighted in sections on “leaving no one behind”



“reaching the furthest behind first” were limited to simply mentioning the phrase or to identifying the furthest behind within broader vulnerable groups. The latter is a critical first step, but greater reflection in the VNRs on the policy alternatives, trade-offs and associated dilemmas could help stimulate innovation and peer learning to advance the implementation of this commitment.

- ii. **Pushing no one behind.** While most countries mention measures they are taking to make the lives of the most vulnerable better, little attention is given to how to avoid making them worse off or pushing them back (Elson, 2018). There seems to be an underlying assumption in the VNRs that policy action can only produce positive outcomes – sometimes insufficient, sometimes underfunded, but generally in the right direction. The reality is that poorly conceived projects or regulation enabling certain types of investments without adequate and inclusive assessments of impacts can push people and communities behind. It is important for the VNRs to acknowledge this and report on how they are managing these trade-offs. The 2020 reports refer to efforts to avoid adverse impacts on the environment but not people and communities; and to what they are doing to avoid people being pushed back by COVID-19, climate change, disasters and health costs. They do not meaningfully reflect on how to avoid pushing people further behind by their own policies and investments or the regulation under which private investments are made. Among few exceptions, the input provided by CSOs to North Macedonia’s VNR noted that “institutions lack the capacity, expertise and knowledge to develop analysis and studies prior to policy changes in order to examine the impact of these novelties on society as a whole”; and Papua New Guinea acknowledged that resource extraction industries, which dominate their economy, have more negative social impacts on women.
- iii. **Acknowledging and addressing the fact that climate change and environmental degradation leave or push people behind.** Although many reports refer, especially in the context of SDG 13, to the socio-economic impacts of climate change, climate change mitigation, adaptation and resilience-building have not often been highlighted in connection with strategies to leave no one behind. Likewise, most reports refer to measures to contain environmental impacts but the connection with the concept of leaving no one behind is rarely made.

- iv. **Acknowledging and acting on the link between production structure and exclusion.** Few countries make a clear connection between the goal of leaving no one behind and policies to build productive capacities and move towards structural transformation (see chapter 5). One of the exceptions, Brunei Darussalam associated leaving no one behind to SDG 8 and measures in human capital development, economic diversification, MSME development, business environment, access to finance, literacy, supporting infrastructure and decent work.

In synthesis, there have been significant improvements in the treatment of leaving no one behind in the VNRs and there are experiences to draw from in terms of methods to identify specific groups at risk of being left behind and thereby tailoring policy to national and local circumstances. However, there has been little connection in the VNRs between the concept of leaving no one behind and the transformative, cross-cutting policy areas that would significantly and sustainably enable and provide resources for other areas more commonly and directly associated to leaving no one behind such as social protection and employment; and not enough discussion on the difficult policy trade-offs that need to be tackled head-on to ensure that development not only leaves no one behind but pushes no one behind.

Reference

Elson, Diane (2018). “Push No One Behind”, *Journal of Globalization and Development*, 2018, vol. 9, issue 2, 12.

4 Strengthening partnerships and SDG 17⁴

There are two challenges in a comprehensive overview of how VNR reports cover the partnership goal – SDG 17 – in addition to the vast array of issues treated: first, that several issues included in the goal, such as those related to financing, debt, and trade, are often dealt with in parts of the report other than the SDG 17 section, so that a review of just those sections can miss important reporting on aspects that are central to the goal; and, second, that several of the SDG 17 targets contain more than one core issue, so that the fact that a country reported on a target does not mean it addressed all the central aspects of that target. Here we take “snapshots” from three different angles to identify the main issues under SDG 17 that are not being reported on: the content of SDG 17 sections; references to numbered targets (or indicators with data, based on the same dataset on which chapter 2 is based); and references to issues contained in the SDG 17 targets referred to throughout the reports.

What are countries focusing on when reporting on SDG 17?

Most countries referred, under sections dedicated to SDG 17, to ODA, international cooperation or aid; and various aspects of public domestic resource mobilization and fiscal policy. Just over half reported on multi-stakeholder partnerships and participation; improvements in public administration/governance/institutions or coordination and coherence in domestic policy; and trade. Other issues referred to in at least a quarter of the reports were the role of the private sector and measures to support it; foreign direct investment; debt; information and communication technologies (ICT); South-South, triangular, regional or cross-border cooperation; the role of remittances and diasporas; macro-economic stability, imbalances, challenge and policies; diversification and productive capacity; effectiveness in development cooperation; the role of development banks; science, technology and innovation (STI) or research and development (R&D) and international treaties and agreements (figure 4.1). Beyond those, the sections on SDG 17 are quite diverse, covering both issues contained in the SDG 17 targets and others that countries considered relevant to the overall goal of strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development. For example, countries addressed conflict and security, illicit financial flows, media and free press, humanitarian assistance, frontier technologies and informality, among many others.

Table 4.1

SDG 17 Targets (or respective indicators) least frequently referred to by number

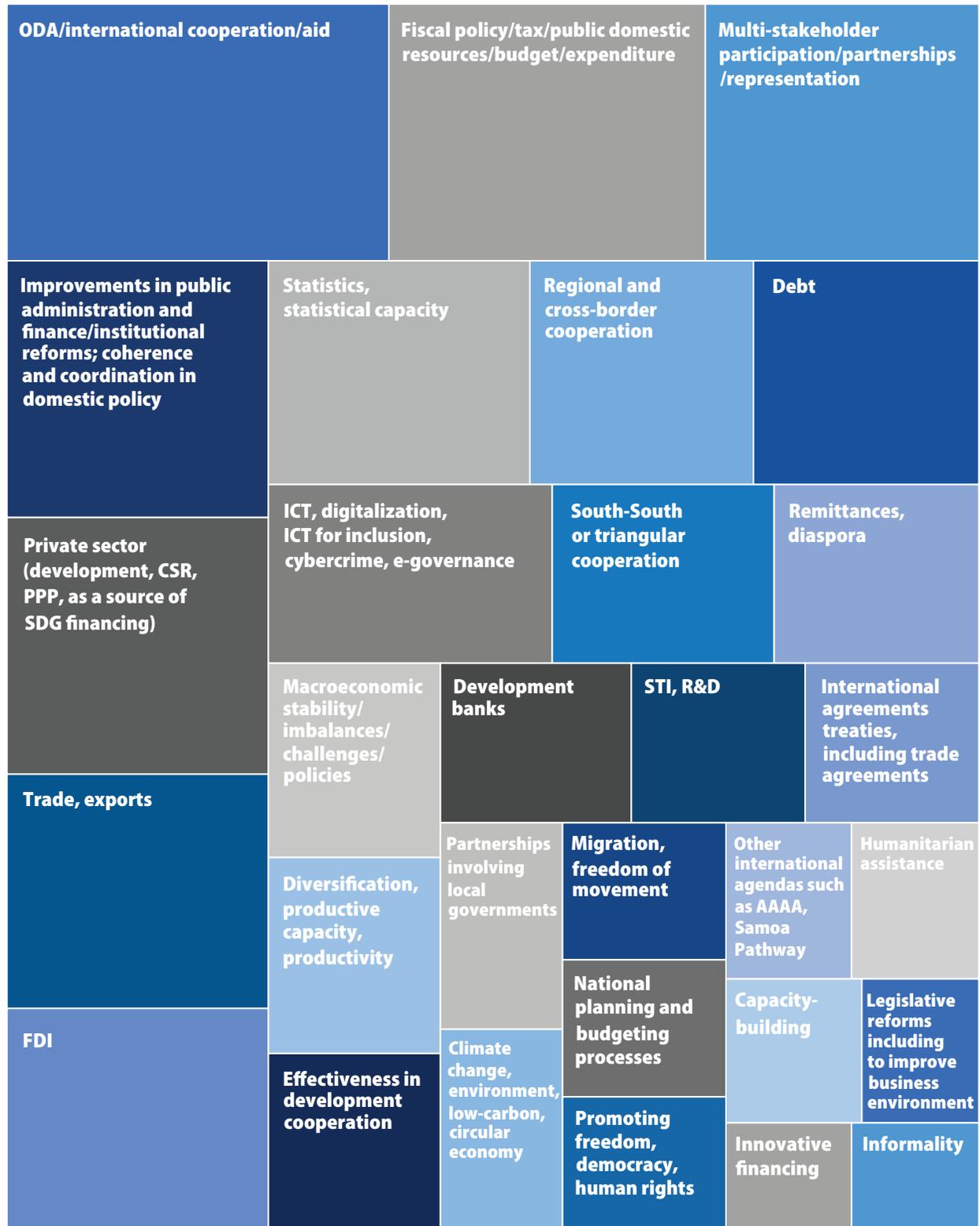
Target	
17.1	Strengthen domestic resource mobilization, including through international support to developing countries, to improve domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection
17.3	Mobilize additional financial resources for developing countries from multiple sources
17.6	Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism
17.8	Fully operationalize the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology

⁴ This section considers 43 of the 45 reports presented in 2020, except when referring to the analysis of numbered goals and targets, which considered all 45.

Figure 4.1

Issues most addressed in SDG 17 sections of the 2020 VNRs

(The size of the boxes reflects the number of reports addressing each issue/cluster of issues within the SDG 17 sections. All issues figured here were reported on by at least 5 countries.)

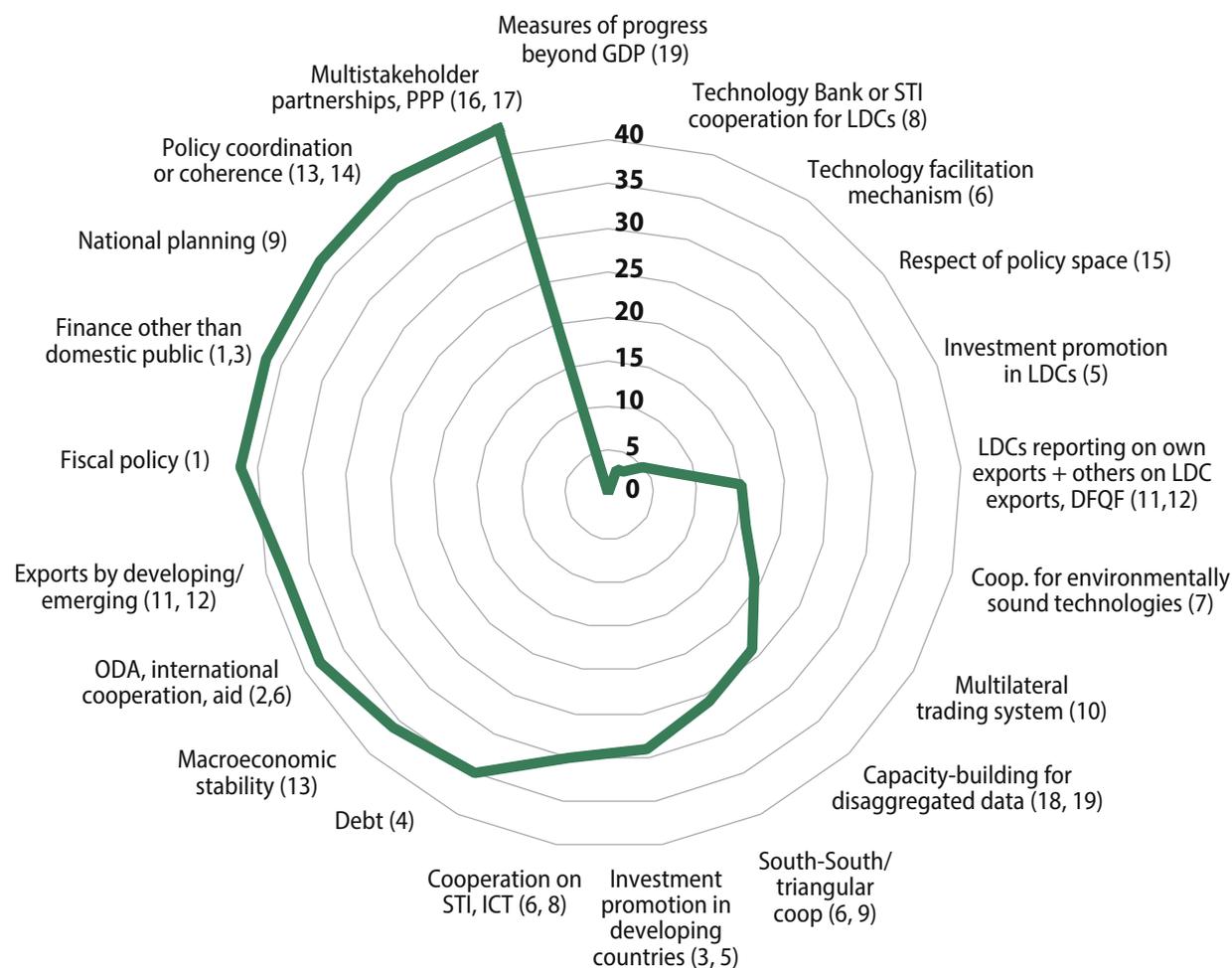


When reporting on SDG 17 targets and indicators referred to by number, the most frequently reported targets were those related to financing (17.1 and 17.3) (table 4.1). The second most frequently reported targets – 17.6 and 17.8 – might suggest that the issue of cooperation on science, technology and innovation, particularly with least developed countries, is a priority. However, an analysis of the content of the reports in regard to the latter suggests that important elements of those targets are left out. For example, while many countries report on information and communications technology (ICT), fewer refer to STI or cooperation on STI. The frequency with which 17.6 and 17.8 are reported could be influenced by the relative abundance of data on fixed Internet broadband subscriptions (an indicator of target 17.6) and the proportion of individuals using the Internet (the indicator for target 17.8) and does not reflect that cooperation in science, technology and innovation, particularly for LDCs, is a priority, as discussed below.⁵

Figure 4.2

Number of reports covering issues referred to in SDG 17 targets

(Target numbers are indicated in brackets)



⁵ The contrary happens to other targets. For example while several countries refer to policy coherence, very few refer to target 17.14 (“Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development”) by number, possibly because the indicator (“Number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development”) is not designed as something to be reported by a single country.

What is not being addressed?

Because several issues covered under the SDG 17 targets are found throughout the VNR reports, beyond the sections dedicated to that goal, and because several of these targets contain multiple issues, we have conducted a search for key terms in the full text of the reports, separating elements of some of the goals. This analysis, summarized in figure 4.2, generally confirms the more frequently addressed topics described above, but also reveals some important gaps. Some of the issues on the right side of this figure are admittedly narrower or more specific than the broad and overarching ones on the left, but they are also central to the concept of a global partnership for sustainable development as defined in SDG 17.

The following are among un – or under-reported issues and clusters of issues under SDG 17 that are nonetheless critical to a successful global partnership for sustainable development:

- i. Support to least developed countries (LDCs): Twenty-five SDG targets refer to LDCs, a category of countries that the 2030 Agenda commits to give priority to.⁶ However well over half of the reporting countries, including five of the 14 LDCs, did not refer at all to LDCs, their own LDC status or international support measures for LDCs. Some of the targets that focus on LDCs, such as 17.5 (investment promotion in LDCs)⁷ and 17.12 (market access for LDCs) are among the least reported. Only four countries referred to the target of allocating 0.15-0.20 per cent of GNI in ODA to LDCs. One was an LDC, Nepal, acknowledging a small increase in ODA to LDCs in 2019 but stressing that development partners were nowhere near the target. Only three non-LDCs (Finland, Morocco and Russian Federation) referred to duty-free, quota-free market access for LDCs. Even when countries report on targets that include support to LDCs they often leave out the LDC component. For example, 21 countries refer to SDG 17.8 but only one of those (Nepal) mentions the Technology Bank. While some LDCs refer to initiatives related to science, technology and innovation, very few refer to international partnerships for capacity-building in this area.
- ii. Cooperation on technology: Targets 17.6, 17.7 and 17.8 refer to different aspects of cooperation in technology. While several countries refer to technology in general and to these targets (as noted above, 17.6 and 17.8 are among the most referred to by number), in many cases this is to report national initiatives rather than cooperation, or cooperation on environmental issues but not technology transfer. There is very little on the transfer and dissemination of environmentally sound technology; on a global technology facilitation mechanism; and on cooperation for enabling technologies, all issues specifically mentioned in the targets. In terms of references to numbered targets, 17.7 (“Promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favourable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed”) is among the least reported, and much of the reporting under 17.6 and 17.8 is limited to the indicators on broadband subscriptions and proportion of individuals using the Internet.
- iii. Measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product: SDG target 17.9 refers to “building on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product” (in addition to statistical capacity-building in developing countries). While reports include many different indicators, including the SDG indicators themselves, of sustainable development, none of the reports prominently discuss this issue of developing a metric to comprehensively reflect sustainable development.

⁶ 1a, 2a, 3c, 3d, 4b, 4c, 7b, 8.1, 8a, 9.2, 9a, 9c, 10a, 10b, 11c, 13b, 14.6, 14.7, 14a, 17.2, 17.5, 17.8, 17.11, 17.12, 17.18.

⁷ Nepal is among the only ones to touch explicitly on the issue of FDI in LDCs. As well as reporting on its own measures to attract FDI, it states that “*There are no specific investment promotion measures for LDCs adopted by the development partners. We urge all the partners, both from the north and the south, to increase them with promotional measures such as mitigation of risks and concessional measures to promote FDI going to these vulnerable countries.*”

Table 4.2

SDG 17 Targets (or respective indicators) least frequently referred to by number

Target	
17.5	Adopt and implement investment promotion regimes for least developed countries
17.7	Promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favourable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed
17.12	Realize timely implementation of duty-free and quota-free market access on a lasting basis for all least developed countries, consistent with World Trade Organization decisions, including by ensuring that preferential rules of origin applicable to imports from least developed countries are transparent and simple, and contribute to facilitating market access
17.13	Enhance global macroeconomic stability, including through policy coordination and policy coherence
17.14	Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development
17.15	Respect each country's policy space and leadership to establish and implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development

Finally, although international cooperation and measures to promote its effectiveness are widely addressed in the VNRs, the reports do not suggest that the processes leading up to them have tackled its deeper challenges and limitations. Some countries enunciate some of these challenges. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, notes that “technology transfer so far has been done almost exclusively in the context of private initiatives, based on private profitability and not social benefits”, with access to telecommunications technology remaining highly unequal. Liberia noted that despite multiple forms of aid received, the collapse of the health care system with the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) outbreak “brought into question the efficacy of these forms of aid in building critical systems for the country; and highlights the urgent need for a new partnership model for ODA”. Greater space for the discussion of these topics during the VNR processes and among peers at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) could mobilize innovation around these issues.

Appendix 4.1

Figure 4.a SDG 17 targets referred to by number (continued)

	Goal 17	17.1	17.2	17.3	17.4	17.5	17.6	17.7	17.8	17.9	17.10	17.11	17.12	17.13	17.14	17.15	17.16	17.17	17.18	17.19	Total	
Papua New Guinea																						1
Peru*																						0
Russian Federation																						11
Samoa																						0
Seychelles*																						0
Slovenia*																						0
Solomon Islands																						1
Syrian Arab Republic																						0
Trinidad and Tobago																						13
Uganda																						4
Ukraine*																						0
Uzbekistan																						1
Zambia																						4
Total	42	23	8	21	16	4	19	4	21	8	6	6	5	5	3	4	8	6	14	13		

* Country did not report on any target by number.

Appendix 4.1

Figure 4.b Issues contained in SDG 17 targets, referred to in VNR texts

Issues	Fiscal policy	Other sources of finance	ODA, international cooperation, aid	National planning	Debt	South-South or Triangular cooperation	Investment promotion in developing countries	Investment promotion in LDCs	Technology Bank or STI cooperation for LDCs	Technology facilitation mechanism	Cooperation on STI, ICT	Cooperation for environmentally sound technologies	Multilateral trading system	Exports of developing countries/ emerging economies	Exports of LDCs	Macroeconomic stability	Policy coordination or coherence	Policy space	Multistakeholder partnerships, PPP	Capacity-building for disaggregated data	Measures of progress beyond GDP	
Targets	1	1,3	2,6	9	4	6,9	3,5	5	8	6	6,8	7	10	11,12	11,12	13	13,14	15	16,17	18,19	19	
Micronesia																						
Moldova, Rep. of																						
Morocco																						
Mozambique																						
Nepal																						
Niger																						
Nigeria																						
North Macedonia																						
Panama																						
Papua New Guinea																						
Peru																						
Russian Federation																						
Samoa																						
Seychelles																						
Slovenia																						
Solomon Islands																						
Trinidad and Tobago																						
Uganda																						
Ukraine																						
Uzbekistan																						
Zambia																						
Totals	42	42	38	42	35	26	29	7	3	3	30	16	19	38	15	36	43	5	43	24	0	

5 Structural transformation for higher productive capacity in the 2020 Voluntary National Reviews (Trudi Hartzenberg, Ksenija Ivanovic, Kori Udovicki and Rolph van der Hoeven)

Introduction

One of the main elements that distinguishes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development from the Millennium Development Goals and the Millennium Declaration is that the former refers to structural transformations necessary to reach the goals. Paragraph 27 of the SDG declaration states⁸:

“(...) All countries stand to benefit from having a healthy and well-educated work force with the knowledge and skills needed for productive and fulfilling work and full participation in society. We will strengthen the productive capacities of least developed countries in all sectors, including through structural transformation. We will adopt policies which increase productive capacities, productivity and productive employment; financial inclusion; sustainable agriculture, pastoralist and fisheries development; sustainable industrial development; universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy services; sustainable transport systems; and quality and resilient infrastructure”.

These transformations can be grouped under two umbrella goals –the transformation of production structures that accompanies the increase of productive capacity needed for development and poverty reduction; and the transformation of production and consumption patterns to make them environmentally sustainable. The two should go hand in hand, neither can be neglected, but they are distinct transformations. We focus here on the former. Our aim is to examine how countries are presenting their developmental transformation narrative in the 2020 VNR reports. We search for evidence in the reports of specific intent to achieve economy-wide transformation of production structures that will enhance productive capacity for development and poverty reduction, and analyse how countries reflect the connection of this kind of transformation to the achievement of the SDGs. Because a search directed at identifying transformation for environmental sustainability would have required a different, if partly overlapping set of terms, we exclude references that exclusively refer to that kind of transformation. We consider 43 of the 45 reports.⁹

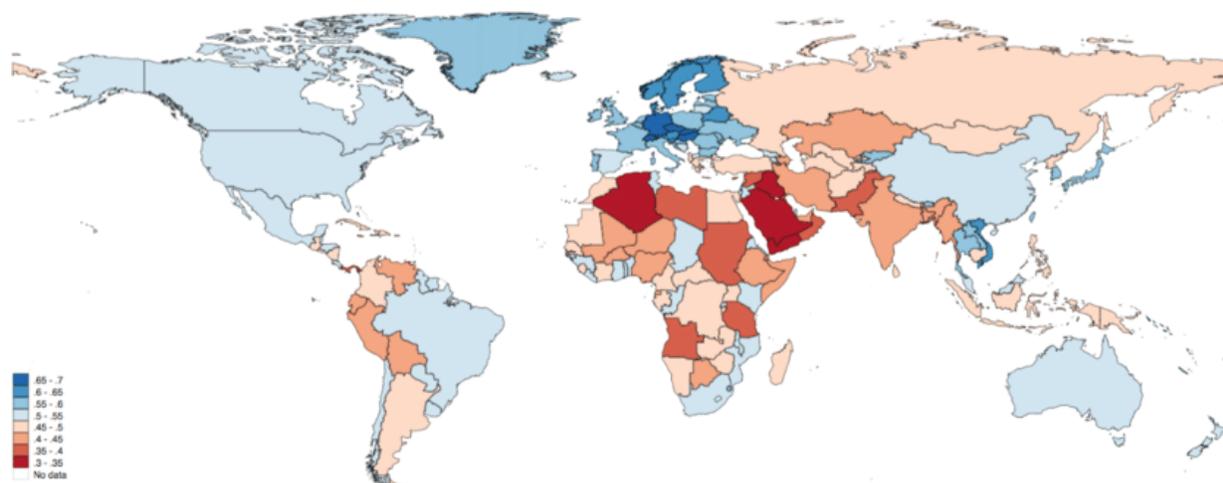
Gauging and reporting on structural transformation

Structural transformation is a widely used term and is subject to many interpretations. Lin et al. (2019) and Monga et al. (2019) define five main features of structural transformation (a term they use interchangeably for structural change: “(i) a steadily declining share of agriculture in economic output and employment; (ii) a rising share of urban economic activity in industry and modern services; (iii) an increasingly sophisticated share of manufactured goods in production and exports; (iv) migration of rural workers to urban settings; (v) and a demographic transition that typically involves a spurt in population growth before reaching a new equilibrium.(p49)”. On the basis of these features, they constructed an Inclusive Structural Transformation (IST) Index. This index tracks the structural characteristics of the economy by ensuring that the comparisons between countries account for differences in the level of development and evaluates how well a country scores given its available resources. Figure 5.1 indicates, for 2015 (the year the SDGs were adopted), a wide variation in performance in terms of the IST, with uniform patterns in developed economies but larger variation in developing countries at different levels of development. Given the challenges for many countries, and especially for developing countries, might countries facing these challenges give due attention to structural transformation that is bound to accompany a desired increase in productive capacity in their VNRs?

⁸ It is noteworthy that the “Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF)” ([17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf](#)) invite reporting countries to not only report on the goals themselves but also on policy measures and structural changes countries undertake to achieve the SDGs.

⁹ A language analysis of the two reports in Arabic under the applied methodology involved additional complexities.

Figure 5.1

Map of the IST index in 2015

Note: The colour blue denotes countries that perform better than average and red those that perform below average. The darker the colour, the more above/below average the score.

Source: Lin, J.Y., C. Monga, and S. Standaert, (2019) 'The Inclusive Sustainable Transformation Index' in *Social Indicators Research* (2019) 143:47–80., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-018-1977-1>; Monga, C. and S. Standaert (2019) *Measuring Structural Change*, In Monga, C. and J.Y. Lin, *The Oxford Handbook of Structural Transformation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198793847.013.15

Based on the accepted premise that productive structure is central to the extent to which the SDGs can be met, and that to move ahead production structure must change, we aimed at identifying the extent to which the 2020 VNR reports reflected an intent by the respective national governments to promote structural transformation and to increase productive capacity (Udovički, 2020). Through qualitative data analysis and with the help of research software described below, we identified the context in which key words appeared.

The results indicate that 37 of 43 analysed reports refer to production structure change, including the most frequently present term “diversification”. However, only 16 reports make references that show an intent to effect a comprehensive economy-wide transformation (“strong” mentions). There are also an additional 13 reports showing economy-wide change intent, but with a weaker, or at least less clear, transformational intent. They refer to policies to effect production diversification or industrialization, but in a more limited context, with no evidence of a comprehensive transformational vision. The remaining eight VNRs refer only to structural change within isolated sectors or make abstract references for which a clear scope or intent could not be ascertained. The latter can most frequently be found in the preambles to the reports or introductions to chapters. These limited results suggest a disconnect between the ambition to meet the SDGs and the attention given to the type of developmental transformation that could drive and sustain SDG implementation in the long run.

The search process

To arrive at a meaningful concept of “structural transformation” we searched in the 2020 VNR reports for a number of terms and analysed the immediate contexts in which they appear (“quotes”) to determine how relevant these terms were in indicating structural transformation. In addition to searching for “structural transformation” per se, we searched for another 9 terms (with subvariants), listed in the rows of Table 5.1. The term “diversification” had the most mentions (105), and most frequently indicated economy-wide structural change (38). The term “structural transformation” appears in only 14 quotes that refer to development (and in two instances there are mentions specifically referring to environmental

sustainability which, as indicated we do not consider in this analysis). However only five quotes indicate an intent to pursue economy-wide structural change; the others mostly appear in general contexts. Weaker terms, such as “change in structure” or “sustainable production” were also searched. However, terms such as “industrial” or “agricultural”, which were used prolifically, were not pursued.

Table 5.1

Search terms and context statistics, number of quotes

	Contexts										
	Economy-wide changes				Targeted	Undetermined	Sustainability/Environment	Sub-total w/o environment	Total		
	Strong		Weak								
	Broad policy docs ^a	Factors of change ^b	Diversification ^c	Industriali-zation ^d	Sectoral strategies ^e	Poverty reduction ^f	Abstract ^g	Policy docs ^h	Environmental ⁱ	Subtotal w/o environment	Total
Diversification/Diversify	6	3	29	0	22	9	17	5	14	91	105
Industrialization/Development of industry	1	5	0	4	8	1	9	2	3	30	33
Sectoral composition/structure/development	0	2	1	0	5	3	1	12	0	24	24
Structural transformation	5	0	0	0	0	2	4	3	2	14	16
Industry policy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	2
Sustainable production	0	1	0	0	3	1	2	2	6	9	15
Product(ion/ive) structure	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2	2
Structur(e/al) changes/ change of structure	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2	2
Industr(y/ial) composition/structure	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
Total	12	11	30	4	40	16	36	26	25	175	200

^a Broad strategies with a clear transformational intent.

^b Investment in production inputs and other factors of change, e.g. infrastructure

^c References to diversification without explicit connection to any other context.

^d Mentions of industrialization as a goal per se.

^e Strategies aimed at developing a specific sector (e.g. by increasing productivity or diversifying products and services).

^f Strategies/actions with the goal of poverty alleviation (e.g. creating new jobs to reduce poverty within a specific population group) and fostering inclusiveness.

^g Aspirational/vague quotes without a clearly identifiable scope or intent

^h Policy documents with and unclear scope.

ⁱ Quotes about structural transformation focusing exclusively on environmental goals.

The columns in Table 2.1 show the “contexts” in which these terms appear, and they are ordered by “strength”, i.e. the extent to which they are indicative of a comprehensive change in production structure. An example of a **strong economy-wide quote** is from the VNR for the Republic of India:

“The strategy is focused on making a transformative transition to ‘clean, inclusive, sustained and sustainable growth’. The strategy document has identified 41 sectors – each mapped to the relevant SDGs – where the transformation is targeted. Providing a sense of priority, the sectors have been grouped into four clusters: drivers, infra-structure, inclusion and governance. The ‘drivers’ centre upon performance boosting economic initiatives across various sectors, widening and diversifying labour participation and upgrading the science, technology and innovation ecosystem.”

By contrast, an example of a **weak economy-wide reference** is found in the VNR of the Republic of Liberia:

“To support economic diversification, Liberia has passed into law Special Economic Zones (SEZ) aimed at attracting investments to improve value addition on raw materials.”

An example of a **strong sector-specific quote** is found in Uzbekistan’s VNR:

“Implementation of reforms and implementation of comprehensive diversification measures and modernization of industries in recent years have contributed to ensuring effective structural changes in the development of the industrial sector economy. As a result, the share of gross value added (GVA) in manufacturing industry in the GVA of sectors of the economy in 2015-2019 increased from 14.9% up to 21.5%”

After discarding mentions that do not reflect the kind of structural change in focus (for example, when “change of structure” is in fact referring to crop diversification with regard to SDG 2, or institutional structure), and appearances in headings, titles or quotation of targets, we were left with 200 relevant quotes in which one or more of the search terms is mentioned one or more times. These include 25 cases in which the reference is exclusively to increasing environmental sustainability. These are excluded from further analysis.¹⁰

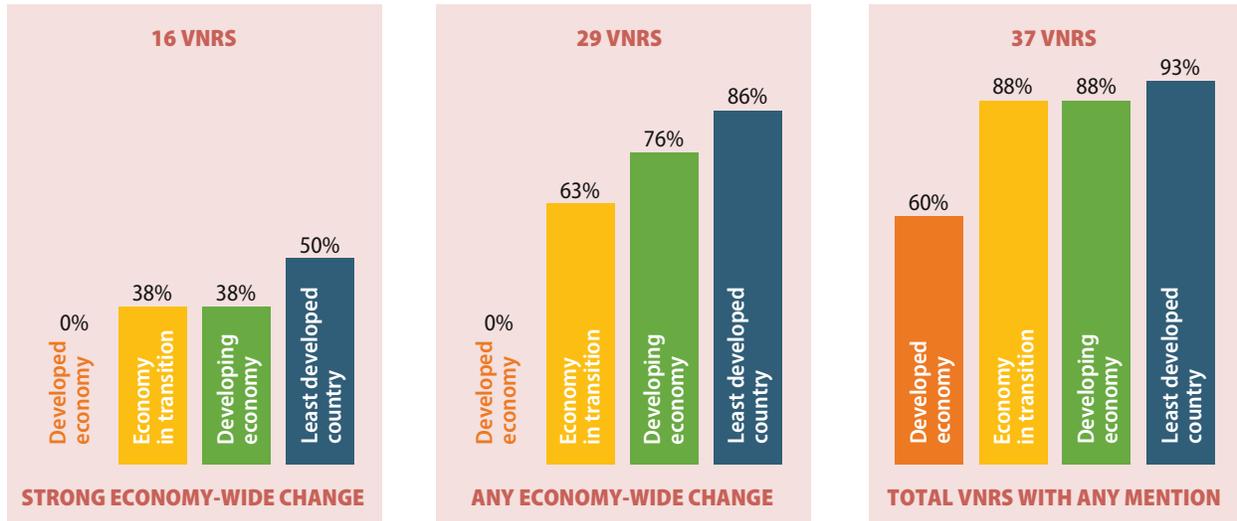
¹⁰ The search and analysis strategy is described in more details in a methodological appendix available upon request.

Summary of results and recommendations

The strength of references found in the VNRs of countries grouped by development level is shown in Figure 5.2.¹¹

Figure 5.2

References to production structure changes in 2020 VNRs: Count of VNRs by “strongest” reference present



There is a rather firm inverse relationship between countries' development level and their references to structural change, and this is not surprising. Ninety-three per cent of LDC reports make at least some kind of reference to structural change (with 50 per cent making a strong reference) while only 60 per cent of developed country reports make any kind of reference, with none making a strong reference. This inverse relationship also holds when the frequency of economy-wide weak reference mentions is counted. By contrast, the share of reports with mentions that are purely sector specific, or purely undetermined is directly proportional to level of development (Table 5.2). Since least developed countries have a longer way to go in building their productive capacity to catch up with more advanced countries in development terms, they can be expected to more consistently have the intent to adopt measures and implement initiatives to achieve structural transformation. Advanced countries, on the other hand, may need more limited transformation to reduce inequality and poverty, or to enhance social cohesion and inclusion. Their structural transformation needs are much weaker than those of LDCs.

In Table 5.3 we present the count of quotes by context type for every VNR. The VNRs with higher total counts of economy-wide references tend to have more other references (including sector-specific) too. The correlation between the number of economy-wide and the number of other references per country is 0.57. Countries in transition are most likely to have sector-specific mentions reflecting a desire to diversify and raise the productivity of manufacturing. We expect that if searches containing sector-specific terms such as “agriculture” or “energy” had been used, least developed countries (LDCs) would have had more mentions under these headings too.

¹¹ Countries' classification by development level is in line with the United Nations' *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2020* report (United Nations, 2020); “developing economy” refers to those other than LDCs. Please see the statistical annex for classification criteria.

Table 5.2

Count of VNRs by strongest mention contained, as a percentage of development group total^a

Country classification	Number of countries	Context				Total
		Economy-wide change		Targeted ^c	Undetermined ^d	
		Strong	Weak ^b			
Developed economy	5	0%	0%	20%	40%	60%
Economy in transition	8	38%	25%	25%	0%	88%
Developing economy	16	38%	38%	6%	6%	88%
Least developed country	14	50%	36%	0%	7%	93%
Grand Total, mentions	43	36%	29%	9%	9%	82%

^a Two reports in Arabic were excluded from the analysis. This table does not include references to transformation for environmental sustainability.

^b Excludes countries that have quotes in the “Strong” category

^c Excludes countries that have quotes in the “Economy-wide change” category

^d Excludes countries that have quotes in the previous categories

Table 5.3

Count of all mentions by VNR and context

	Number of countries	Contexts									Total
		Economy-wide changes				Targeted	Undetermined	Environmental			
		Strong		Weak							
	Broad policy docs	Factors of change	Diversification	Industrialization	Sectoral strategies	Poverty reduction	Abstract	Policy docs	Environmental		
Developed economy	5	0	0	0	0	3	0	4	3	3	13
High-income	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	5
Austria	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Estonia	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
Finland	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Slovenia	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Upper-middle-income	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	3	1	1	8
Bulgaria	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	3	1	1	8
Economy in transition	8	2	1	4	0	11	2	6	5	3	34
Upper-middle-income	4	2	0	2	0	4	0	2	3	1	14
Armenia	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	4
Georgia	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
North Macedonia	1	1	0	1	0	3	0	1	0	0	6
Russian Federation	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	4

Lower-middle-income	4	0	1	2	0	7	2	4	2	2	20
Kyrgyz Republic	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	1	5
Moldova , Rep. of	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	3
Ukraine	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	3
Uzbekistan	1	0	0	2	0	3	1	1	1	1	9
Developing economy	18	5	4	16	0	11	7	14	7	14	78
High-income	4	2	0	5	0	4	0	4	3	3	21
Brunei Darussalam	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	5
Panama	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	3
Seychelles	1	1	0	3	0	3	0	1	0	1	9
Trinidad and Tobago	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	4
Upper-middle-income	6	2	3	4	0	2	1	5	1	7	25
Argentina	1	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5
Costa Rica	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Ecuador	1	1	0	4	0	1	1	5	1	5	18
Peru	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Samoa	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lower-middle-income	7	1	1	7	0	5	6	5	3	4	32
India	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	2	6
Honduras	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
Kenya	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Micronesia	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	4
Morocco	1	0	0	1	0	2	2	0	0	2	7
Nigeria	1	0	0	3	0	1	1	1	2	0	8
Papua New Guinea	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
Least developed country	14	5	6	10	4	15	8	12	11	5	76
Lower-middle-income	5	3	4	5	2	7	4	3	2	5	35
Comoros	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	4
Bangladesh	1	0	4	2	1	4	3	3	0	2	19
Democratic Republic of the Congo	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Solomon Islands	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Zambia	1	1	0	2	1	3	0	0	0	3	10
Low-income	9	2	2	5	2	8	4	9	9	0	41
Benin	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Burundi	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	0	8
Gambia	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	4
Liberia	1	0	0	2	0	3	0	1	1	0	7
Malawi	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	2	1	0	6
Mozambique	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	3
Nepal	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	4
Niger	1	0	0	1	0	2	0	4	0	0	7
Uganda	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Grand Total	43	12	11	30	4	40	16	36	26	25	200

In conclusion, the use of terms referring to structural change, and the breadth of the references, most frequently reflects emphasis on changes in production structure, especially production diversification, in countries' development strategies (e.g. Bangladesh, Ecuador, Zambia). The strong inverse relationship between countries' development level and their references to structural change, is notable. As noted earlier, some reference to structural change is made in 93 per cent of LDC reports, compared to 60 per cent of developed country reports. This is not an unexpected finding. LDCs with weakly diversified economies and nascent industrial sectors can be expected to have a concerted focus on structural change, while this may well no longer be a priority for developed countries.

The VNRs present an opportunity for countries to link their structural transformation narrative to the achievement of the SDGs. However, even countries where structural change efforts are comprehensive and central to the country's development effort (e.g. Bangladesh), or that have explicitly recognized the critical linkage between transformation of production structure and SDG outcomes in their VNRs (Zambia) did not systematically present the transformation effort and/or expected effect of the transformation on the various SDGs where this is relevant.

We note that in some countries the critical linkage between production structure and SDGs was well elaborated in their VNRs (e.g. Finland and Austria), but with emphasis on the relationship between production structure and knowledge/ education and environmental sustainability rather than on structural transformation in a developmental sense, which is the focus of our analysis. Looking ahead, countries, especially developing and least developed countries, may want to consider crafting their VNRs around their structural transformation narrative, including details of the transformative policies, expected impact on goals and targets and how the issues of sustainability are incorporated. Policies specifically aimed at specific goals and targets can be elaborated against this backdrop for a comprehensive account of how the country plans to drive the desired developmental change.

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6 A critical reading of SDG 5 chapters of Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports (Maria Loskutnikova, Elizaveta Smorodenkova and Natalya Volchkova)

In this paper, we summarize and analyse countries' reports in terms of their strategies for dealing with the obstacles on the way to achieve SDG 5 ("Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"). We start by highlighting general findings from reading and tabulating Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports presented in 2020 and then proceed to discuss several features of reporting which arise from the analysis of the texts and data in the framework of economic literature. We also report on how countries perceive gender-specific problems of the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Highlights of SDG 5 coverage in the 2020 VNRs

Our corpus includes 43 reports – the 32 reports made available in English and 11 reports that were translated automatically from Spanish or French, recognizing this might introduce some inaccuracy in interpretation. Our study does not include the two reports that were submitted in Arabic by Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic. Thirty-five of the 43 reports have a chapter dedicated to SDG 5. Only three countries ([Argentina](#), [Papua New Guinea](#) and [Ukraine](#)) report on all SDG 5 targets. Twenty-eight other countries address some of the SDG 5 targets. The remaining 12 countries do not discuss targets at all. Sixteen countries present a comparative evaluation of their current situation with that of peers. For instance, [Austria](#) acknowledges that it still has a high gender pay gap in comparison with other European countries, at 19.6 per cent (2018), while [Finland](#), shows that it moved from third to fourth place on the equality index of European Institute for Gender Equality due to slow development.

Detailed within-country heterogeneity of gender inequality is presented in 12 reports: [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), [Finland](#), [Georgia](#), [India](#), [Mozambique](#), [Niger](#), [Papua New Guinea](#), [Peru](#), [Republic of Moldova](#), [Solomon Islands](#), [Uganda](#), and [Zambia](#). While discussing regional distribution of gender inequality, India emphasises that poverty is an important determinant of gender inequality; it affects women more than men as women have limited access to important resources such as food and nutritional security overall, health care and public services. Regional heterogeneity of gender inequality therefore strongly correlates with poverty distribution across Indian states.

Figure 6.1 below represents intensity of reporting on key issues of gender equality. We collected this information by counting references contained in each VNR report on different aspects of gender inequality studied in the literature. The list of topics we counted in the reports is presented in Appendix 3.1.

The most frequently covered topic in almost all reports are gender-related harmful practices, i.e. violence, domestic abuse, and forced early marriages. The second most addressed gender topic is fair access to the labour market, including gender pay gap, maternity leave, occupational segregation, and others. Almost as common as labour market inequality is the issue of fair representation of women in public and government bodies.

Surprisingly, fewer countries report on the educational gender gap, covered in only slightly more than half of the reports. At the same time, some countries ([Burundi](#), [India](#), and [Kenya](#)) devote significant attention to this problem and consider incorporating gender consideration in curriculum and implementing actions to increase women's participation in the fields of maths and science. [Kenya's](#) report outlines a STEM Mentorship programme "aiming at increasing female enrolment into engineering and applied science courses and taking up science-based professions."

Another topic especially important for researchers, though found in 20 reports only, is how to ensure the availability of data disaggregated by gender and promote research that allows impact evaluation of policies dealing with gender inequality. For example, [Bangladesh](#) announces that by 2021, 2023, 2025, 2027 and 2030 the publicly available data would

cover 80, 110, 130, 160 and 200 global indicators of SDG respectively. In 2020 only 61 indicators were available, 60 were partially available, and the remaining 111 could not be estimated because of lack of data. According to the plan, by 2030, there will be only 30 partially available indicators and only 2 will still be unavailable. Samoa states that availability of data is crucial for the efforts to put a spotlight on the gender inequality issue: *“A significant development is the Samoa Bureau of Statistics and UN partners’ collaboration to identify and collect sex disaggregated data including collecting of some of very needed data on domestic and intimate partner violence for the first time in the DHS-MICS 2019 survey.”*

Sixty per cent of reports discuss the relationship between SDG 5 and other goals. The most goals most commonly related to SDG 5 are SDG 3 (“Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”), SDG 10 (“Reduce inequality within and among countries”), and SDG 16 (“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”).

While reading about SDG 5 in the 2020 VNR reports, we came across a number of interesting, sometimes unconventional practices and measures. We collected some of them in Appendix 3.2 and believe that it is important to create a knowledge hub specifically aimed at collecting countries’ experiences in dealing with different aspects of gender inequality. Given limited policy space and research, the exchange of information and practical experiences becomes of utmost importance.

Partnership in dealing with gender inequality

Unlike other SDGs on which many countries’ reports indicate engagement in partnerships with other countries and groups of countries, partnership in dealing with SDG 5 is not very often mentioned in the reports. We find evidence of partnership only in 10 reports out of 43. This could be attributed to a lack of conventional knowledge on how to improve on gender equality or to important nation-specific aspects of gender inequalities.

Countries which do report on partnerships reveal another feature: unlike other kinds of support, which are often unidirectional efforts, the critical feature of these partnerships is its bidirectional nature. Given very limited experience and knowledge about efficacy of policies to deal with gender inequality, countries share their own experiences and learn from the experiences of others. In their reports, [Austria](#), [Brunei Darussalam](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Estonia](#), [Finland](#), [Russian Federation](#), and [Slovenia](#) provide information on their engagement with other countries to support efforts to address this problem. At the same time [Austria](#), [Brunei Darussalam](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), [Estonia](#), [Micronesia](#), and [Republic of Moldova](#) also report receiving support for SDG 5 from other countries.

For instance, [Austria](#) actively participates in EU processes related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. As an EU Member State, Austria belongs to the most important actor in worldwide development cooperation. The country is pursuing a strategy for implementing the 2030 Agenda in development cooperation, which was jointly developed with all relevant ministries and stakeholders. Supporting and assisting women is among six thematic priorities in this strategy, and the empowering of women is an especially important issue.

Along with various domestic actions aimed at the empowerment of women, [Brunei Darussalam](#) participates, at the international level, in the Commonwealth and the Non-Aligned Movement Institute for the Empowerment of Women. The government also works with the UN Women under the ASEAN framework to obtain technical assistance on innovative programmes and strategies to promote women’s empowerment and gender equality. Through these participations, Brunei Darussalam has benefitted from knowledge and experience sharing, capacity-building and learning from best practices which further strengthen the government’s efforts to promote and protect women in the country and globally.

Internationally, [Bulgaria](#) is a leading nation in the international project “Female Leaders in Security and Defense”¹², implemented within NATO. Domestically, the project “Participation of Women in Engineering and Technical Areas

¹² The project aims to enhance the capabilities and effectiveness of the Armed Forces by utilizing all human potential and integrating gender equality in the planning, development and training of forces.

Criteria/ Country	7. Harmful practices	1. General	2. Labor market	8. Public policy and governance	5. Education	6. Laws and norms	12. Connect SDG5 with other goals	3. Enterprership	4. Corporate governance	10. Data/Research	9. LGBT	13. SDG5 in the pandemic	11. Partnership	14. Land ownership
Nepal														
Niger														
Nigeria														
North Macedonia														
Panama														
Papua New Guinea														
Peru														
Republic of Moldova														
Russian Federation														
Samoa														
Seychelles														
Slovenia														
Solomon Islands														
Trinidad and Tobago														
Uganda														
Ukraine														
Uzbekistan														
Zambia														
Number of reports out of 43	43	42	40	37	35	29	27	23	21	20	18	14	10	10
Percentage	100.0%	97.7%	93.0%	86.0%	81.4%	67.4%	62.8%	53.5%	48.8%	46.5%	41.9%	32.5%	23.3%	23.3%

In **Estonian** development cooperation, women's empowerment is one of the cross-cutting themes, and several projects are aimed directly at improving the position of women in the economy and in society. Currently, the Estonian NGO Mondo is dealing with the issue of domestic violence in Georgia. The project aims to improve the life and experience of female victims of domestic violence in the Samegrelo region near the Abkhazian border in Georgia. *"The project activities will improve the capacity of the local partner organization to provide psychosocial support services in the women's shelter and day center. They will also improve their capacity in the field of social entrepreneurship and identify opportunities to start a business."*

Gender bias in the COVID-19 crisis

The year 2020 brought a new reality to all countries and, in dealing with the epidemic of COVID-19 almost all countries used lockdowns of different coverage, severity and duration. Businesses adjusted to both demand and supply shocks through job cuts, remote employment and other ways of survival in unusual circumstances. Emergency state support in different forms and amounts was distributed but was not enough, even in rich countries, while in poor countries business was largely left to fend for itself. The unusual features and circumstances of this crisis have very strong gender inequality implications. Economic literature documents these implications in a number of dimensions. A new term – "shecession" – was invented to emphasize the bias of the 2020 recession to female unemployment and hardship (Alon et al., 2021). Unlike "regular" recessions, women's employment has been more severely affected as (1) social distancing measures have a greater impact on sectors (health care and education) with high female employment shares and (2) closures of schools and day-care centres and the inability of grandparents to provide childcare services increase child care needs. These negative consequences are likely to persist after the crisis, as returns to accumulation of labour market experience are significant. Adams-Prassl, Boneva, Golin, and Rauh (2020) find that women are significantly more likely to lose their jobs compared to men in the United States and United Kingdom, and there is also a large gender gap in respondents' ability to work from home. Foucault and Galasso (2020) find that women stopped working more than men during the pandemic in a number of countries including Austria, Canada, Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden.

Figure 6.2

Countries that indicated that the COVID-19 crisis is affecting achievement of SDG 5 or reinforcing gender inequality



Another aspect of gender inequality which worsened during the pandemic is domestic violence (Piquero et al. 2020; Leslie and Wilson 2020). In particular, Leslie and Wilson (2020) show that the number of domestic violence calls in United States had increased by 7.5 per cent during March through May of 2020. Importantly, the increases in reported domestic violence incidents appear to be driven by households without a previous history of domestic violence.

In many VNR reports submitted in 2020, countries expressed concerns about damage to the progress on SDG 5 due to the pandemic. Fourteen of the 43 countries (30 per cent) emphasized the importance and development of SDG 5 in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic. **Argentina, North Macedonia, Ecuador, Honduras, Micronesia, Republic of Moldova** and **Uzbekistan** mention that women are likely to suffer more from the pandemic due to increase in domestic violence. For example, **Argentina** states that the confinement in homes caused a significant increase in calls to hotlines and femicides. The suspension of the functioning of the judicial system made access to justice for victims of violence almost impossible. A decrease in labour force participation and an increase in unemployment was mentioned by **Uzbekistan, Argentina** and **Nepal**. In particular, Uzbekistan mentions that women may be pushed out of the agricultural sector due to disruption

of regular migrant workers' routes: men cannot go abroad for work, thus women face tougher competition for jobs. The increase in unpaid family work performed by women was discussed by [Honduras](#), [Gambia](#), [Kenya](#) and [Nepal](#).

However, very few countries report any measures to deal with the increase in gender inequality caused by the pandemic. [Burundi](#) aimed at obtaining a gender-sensitive COVID-19 response by ensuring that the risks and the needs of girls and women were taken into account when proposing support measures. [India](#) reported on extending cash relief for women: "Cash relief has been extended to more than 200 million women bank account holders to meet the hardships of the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic". The [Republic of Moldova](#) provided recommendations for specialists as well as victims of violence to ensure development of effective support measures aimed to deal with violence in the context of the pandemic.

Interestingly, Alon et al. (2020) discuss potential positive implications of COVID-19 pandemic for gender equality, i.e (1) adoption of flexible work arrangements; and (2) potential for erosion of social norms that dictate unequal distribution of labour in household and child care between men and women. However, none of the 2020 VNRs mentioned potential positive effects of COVID-19 on gender equality.

Addressing the causes of gender inequality

While in general the 2020 VNRs addressed all the important aspects of the problem of gender inequality, the critical issue is whether countries consider and adopt relevant policies to deal with it. To ensure sustainable movement toward gender equality, it is necessary to implement policies that address the underlying causes of this type of inequality. It is not easy to identify the roots of a very complex problem that has biological, economic, social, historical, psychological and other dimensions.

The economic aspect of gender inequality considers gender gaps in labour market participation, wages, entrepreneurship, career advancements, education and some others. Several strands of research identify the reasons and mechanisms, which contribute to the gaps. The following factors affect women's labour-force participation and are important drivers of gender gap decline in recent years in developed countries:

- greater availability of market substitutes for home work and improvements in household technology (Greenwood, Seshadri, and Yorukoglu 2005);
- development and dissemination of birth control pills (Goldin and Katz 2002; Bailey 2006);
- gender role attitudes (Cotter, Hermsen and Vanneman 2011; Fortin 2015; Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan 2015).

Factors that influence the gender gap in wages include:

- gender differences in work experience, including shorter hours, lesser experience, workforce interruptions, etc. (Mincer and Polachek 1974; Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz 2010; Gayle and Golan 2012; Goldin 2014);
- introduction of contraception (Bailey 2006; Bailey, Hershbein, and Miller 2012);
- motherhood (Becker 1985; Albanesi and Olivetti 2009; Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007);
- gender differences in occupations and sorting across firms (Levanon, England, and Allison 2009; Card, Cardoso, and Kline 2016);
- gender differences in hierarchy within firms (Gayle, Golan, and Miller 2012);
- social norms and gender identity (Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan 2015);
- labour-market discrimination (Ashenfelter and Hannan, 1986; Black and Strahan, 2001).

Summing up the findings of the literature on gender wage gap Blau and Kahn (2017) concluded that while convergence between men and women in education and experience had significant explanatory power for explaining the narrowing of the gender wage gap in the past, as the gap has diminished different factors have gained importance, including labour-market experience, workforce interruptions and shorter hours in high-skilled occupations, gender differences in occupations and industries, and differences in gender roles and the gender division of labour.

The main roots of gender inequality in developing countries were analysed by Jayachandran (2015). She provides evidence that there are cultural norms (in areas such as China, India, North Africa, and the Middle East) that exacerbate favouritism toward males. These cultural systems, which align sons ahead of daughters, have led to the existing male-skewed gender ratio and low female employment in some countries. Another factor is that women's wages grow because of the sectoral shift toward services and increased female education, which cause women to re-enter the workforce. The author confirms the important role of legislative changes, which ensure gender equality in basic rights.

Some VNRs address these causes and mention adoption of some gender-progressive policies. For instance, **India** reserved a number of political seats for women and **Nepal** adopted "*the inclusive constitution and mandatory provisions for representation of all minority groups, which led to a strong representation of women and all marginalized groups in the highest legislative body, the Federal Parliament, as well as at the provincial and local governments and legislative bodies*".

Beaman et al. (2012) emphasizes the importance of role models for women, which helps break stereotypes and opens new pictures of the world for women. Changing women's attitudes needs to be one of the targets of policies aimed at closing gender gaps. We find this approach in VNRs as well, for example in **Trinidad and Tobago**: "*The First Citizens Bank (FCB) of Trinidad and Tobago has invested heavily in empowering the women and girls of Trinidad and Tobago to fulfil their potential at home, at work, and in wider society. For the last seven years, FCB has hosted an annual women's conference across the Caribbean, with the aim of inspiring, motivating and teaching women to live a more purpose-driven life*". Another example of a gender-focused programme is the Pink Reign Programme, which was initiated by Trinidad and Tobago in 2019 "*to facilitate the development of women and girls, and to raise awareness about the opportunities and benefits associated with participation in sports and physical activities*". **Kyrgyzstan** reports on the need for systemic changes in governance and public attitudes to gender aspects to progress toward gender equality. One of the next planned steps is to implement "*a course on women's rights and gender equality as a compulsory subject in the training programs for civil servants*".

However, overall, only 17 out of 43 VNRs indicate the importance of social norms or gender attitudes as an underlying reason for gender inequality and only five propose some measures to gradually change social norms.

The impact of the unequal division of unpaid work on the gender gap in labour market participation also is considered only in half of the VNRs (21 out of 43). In that regard, **Bulgaria** emphasizes that "*women still have less free time than men. They are extremely occupied with childcare and the care for adult and dependent family members.*" **Bangladesh** discusses the underlying reasons for inequality and argues that it is important to address them in order to eliminate the problem. According to the **Samoa** Labour Force Survey (2017), women make up a large portion of the informal sector and undertake around 60 per cent of unpaid domestic care work. However, we find little evidence that countries adopt policies specifically aimed at dealing with this problem.

Conclusions

Our analysis shows that the majority of VNR reports provide information on observed gender inequalities in various dimensions in their respective countries (gender violence, gender wage gap, gender educational gap, fair representation of women in public and government bodies, etc.). Countries also report on actions to mitigate these consequences. At the same time there is a clear gap between the policy scope and the underlying causes, which define gender inequalities in different societies.

Even though women's labour force participation is converging to that of men in many developed countries, women still perform a disproportionate share of unpaid work and childcare. In developing countries, the situation is often much

worse. The majority of VNR reports mention observed outcomes and consequences of gender inequalities, but unobserved causes are often dismissed. In order to ensure sustainable progress toward gender equality, more efforts should be channelled toward identifying the true roots of this problem and designing policies to address it.

For this, it is important to allocate more resources toward research on gender gaps, proper data collection and policy effectiveness analysis, to ensure the access to this research to all countries, promote more partnership among countries of different levels of development and background to learn from partners' experiences. International organizations with solid research departments should invest more in accumulation and global sharing of knowledge and data. Reports of countries on their experiences with respect to SGD 5 might be a good starting point for this endeavour.

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Appendix 3.1 Set of criteria used to analyse SDG 5 in the 2020 VNRs

- General Information on SDG 5
 - Chapter on SDG 5 is presented
 - All targets of SDG 5 are mentioned
 - Some targets of SDG 5 are mentioned
 - International comparisons of gender inequality are presented
 - Regional comparisons of gender inequality are presented
- Gender Inequality in the Labour Market
 - Gender pay gap is mentioned
 - Actions to decrease gender pay gap are mentioned
 - Actions to deal with occupational segregation are mentioned
 - Family planning methods are mentioned
 - Maternity/parental leave is mentioned
 - Actions to improve quality of childcare are mentioned
 - Barriers to inclusivity in the employment market are mentioned
- Actions to empower immigrant women immigrant or women of specific geographical or ethnic background are mentioned
- Affirmative actions are mentioned
- Actions to improve economic empowerment of women and girls are mentioned
- Unpaid work in the household is mentioned
- Gender Inequality in Entrepreneurship
 - Gender gap in entrepreneurship is mentioned or is a concern
 - Actions to decrease gender gap in entrepreneurship are mentioned
 - Gender gap in access to credit or generally to financial market is mentioned or is a concern
 - Actions to decrease gender gap in access to credit or generally to financial market are mentioned
- Gender Inequality in Corporate Governance
 - Gender gap in corporate governance is mentioned
 - Actions to decrease gender gap in corporate governance are mentioned

- Gender Inequality in Education
 - Gender inequality in education is mentioned
 - Actions to promote gender equality in education are mentioned
 - Report mentions incorporation of gender thinking in curricula
 - Actions to increase women's participation in the field of maths and science (STEM subjects) are mentioned
 - Awareness or actions about future of female participation in labour market because of AI or robotizations (future of work) are mentioned
- Legal Progress towards Gender Equality
 - Report mentions absence of law that insures women's rights to inheritance and ownership or employment
 - Report mentions amendment or adoption of laws that are aimed to decrease discrimination in labour market or education
 - Social norms which prevent gender equality are mentioned
 - Social norms which prevent gender equality are mentioned; actions or inclinations toward them are discussed
 - Online gender-based abuse is mentioned
- Harmful practices
 - Actions to protect women from violence, domestic abuse are mentioned
 - Actions to protect women from violence on job, schools, sexual harassment are mentioned
 - Prostitution is mentioned or is a concern
 - Actions to protect women in prostitution are mentioned
 - Forced early marriages of women are mentioned
 - Actions to deal with early marriages of women are mentioned
 - Human trafficking is a concern or is mentioned
 - Actions against human trafficking are mentioned
- Gender Inequality in Public Policy and Governance
 - Fair representation of women in public and government bodies is mentioned
 - Quotas for the underrepresented gender in public governance are mentioned
- LGBT
 - LGBT rights are mentioned
 - Social attitudes towards LGBT people are mentioned
 - LGBT inclusive education embedded in the curriculum is mentioned
- Data and Research on Gender Inequality
 - Report mentions promotion of empirical academic research on implementation of gender equality legislation
 - Collection of gender disaggregated data is mentioned
 - Report mentions creation or improvement of the system for managing statistics regarding the types of violence
- Partnership to eliminate/decrease Gender Inequality
 - Report mentions that country helps to decrease gender inequality in other countries
 - Report mentions that country receives support from other countries to decrease gender inequality
 - Connections of SDG5 with other goals are mentioned
- SDG5 in the COVID-19 pandemic
 - Consequences of COVID-19 on gender inequality or actions to deal with them are mentioned
- Gender Inequality in Land Ownership
 - Gender gap in land ownership is mentioned
- Interesting Policies or Measures to deal with Gender Inequality

Appendix 3.2 Specific policies and measures some countries adopt to improve on SDG 5

Brunei:

- “The Authority for Info-Communications Technology Industry of Brunei Darussalam (AITI) has implemented several programmes to nurture an interest in ICT in early stages, which can lead to the pursuit of ICT studies at the secondary and post-secondary levels and ultimately lead to greater workforce participation by women”.
- A leading ICT private company, Dynamik Technologies has launched program named eBunda in Brunei. eBunda is aimed at women who temporarily interrupt their careers to give birth to children. This program helps women to continue learning by providing “access to e-learning opportunities to build awareness on issues such as health, environment, business and finance”.
- “In May 2020, AITI, Women Techmakers Brunei and Google Developers Group Brunei collaborated to host a free online seminar in conjunction with ‘International Girls in ICT Day’. The seminar featured women data scientists and software developers, both local and international, as speakers. Amongst the topics covered were machine learning and data analytics”.

Argentina:

- Further steps are made to implement the Micaela Law that establishes mandatory training on gender and violence against women for all workers who perform duties in the public service at all levels and hierarchies in the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches.

Austria:

- The project ‘TRAPEZ – Transparent Pension Future’ is introduced and is supported by studies and collaborations with businesses. Its aim is to help to ensure that women in old age have economic independence by heightening awareness of the factors/decisions that affect the gender gap in pensions and identifying possible counter-strategies.
- “In order to promote equality between women and men on supervisory boards, the Act on Equality between Women and Men on Supervisory Boards (GFMA-G) requires listed companies and companies with more than 1,000 employees to have a minimum of 30 per cent women and 30 per cent men on their supervisory boards”.
- “At least one gender equality target must be specified for each subdivision during the budgeting process – including associated figures and measures”.

Estonia:

- “To support the implementation of the changes in the law, the media campaign “Grow Together” was implemented at the end of 2017, the aim of which was to draw attention to the important role of the father in raising children, and to encourage fathers to take parental leave”.

Finland:

- The Ministry of Finance has developed a gender-aware budgeting in one of its projects. The next goal is “to introduce gender impact assessment and gender-aware budgeting as permanent features of state and municipal administration”.

Georgia:

- “The changes to Gender Equality Law in 2016 made it mandatory for gender equality councils to be created at local elected councils and a gender advisor to be appointed at each local executive’s/Mayor’s office”.

Nepal:

- Starting from 2016/17 Nepal assigns SDGs codes to all the national programs and projects. “The National Planning Commission (NPC) annually maps out where the public investment aligning with the SDG goals are allocated by the respective line ministries, and validates them with Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) projection. The method of SDGs budget tagging is based on the program’s primary contributions to the respective SDG goals”.

Uganda:

- “The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has organized trainings for district-level officials on gender and equity planning and budgeting”.

Uzbekistan:

- All normative legal acts are subject to gender expertise.

7 Reducing inequality should be a top priority during the COVID-19 pandemic, but isn't: SDG 10 in the 2020 Voluntary National Reviews (Rolph van der Hoeven and Leticia Merino)

According to the CDP's analysis of the 2018 voluntary national reviews (VNRs) (CDP subgroup on voluntary national reviews, 2019), SDG 10 ("Reducing inequality within and between countries") was the most under-reported of the SDGs that year. In 2019, on the other hand, it was reported on by almost all countries. This was possibly an effect, at least partially, of SDG 10 having been among the focus goals of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) that year (CDP subgroup on voluntary national reviews, 2020).¹³ A review of the 2020 of VNRs shows that of 45 reports submitted, 40 mention SDG10. More reports referred to SDG 10 than to SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15 – the goals most closely related to the environmental dimension of sustainable development –; the same number referred to SDG 6; and fewer referred to SDG 10 than to all the others (see figure 1.1). All reports referred to income inequalities, even when they did not address SDG 10, recognizing the importance of addressing this issue also as a means to achieve other SDGs (UNDESA, 2020).

Although the somewhat increased attention to income inequality can be seen as an improvement, the fact remains that those SDGs that carry over the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) still dominate in most VNRs. MDGs preceded the SDGs and were concentrated almost exclusively on social issues rather than on the broader issues of inequality and economic, social and environmental structural changes which characterize the SDGs. That inequality still gets insufficient attention in the VNRs remains worrying, especially in the gruesome times of the COVID-19 pandemic (see section 5) and the social and economic consequences thereof (CDP, 2020). Research done months into the crisis but before a prediction of its end was possible showed that income inequality in low-, middle – and high-income countries was increasing. According to the ILO (2021), poor workers were becoming poorer as some 600 million people worked in sectors which were hardest hit and that pay poorly; the informal sector, in which many of the poor work, lacking any protection and public support, was severely hit. Moreover, the generation gap was increasing with more younger workers being excluded from the labour market and having to work in precarious conditions. Relatively privileged workers, on the other hand, were better sheltered from the COVID-19 economic fallout. Furthermore, as the value of global stocks soared after an initial brief dip, the rich, and especially the superrich were getting richer.

Do the VNRs suggest that action is being taken to redress the structural determinants of inequality?

The increase in income inequality with the COVID-19 crisis aggravates a pre-existing trend of increased inequality between income from capital and income from labour and a pre-crisis increase in precarious employment, which resulted in greater household income inequality. In this respect it is useful to recollect what happened to income inequality after the 2008 recession, when poor and unorganized groups both in developing countries and in developed countries were thrice affected. Firstly, because they did not profit from the economic boom preceding the crisis; secondly because they profited less from income support after the crisis; and thirdly because they suffered more from economic slowdown when restrictive monetary and fiscal policies were prematurely introduced in 2011. For most countries this resulted in a further decline in the labour share in national income and worsening of income inequality (van der Hoeven, 2019). Some countries have been able to contain this trend through taxation and transfers, but in most cases, this was not sufficient. To avoid repeating the mistakes of 2008, governments must foster structural changes to redress the growing inequality between incomes from capital and labour, and to stimulate sustainable growth. Do the 2020 VNRs suggest that countries are moving in that direction?

The 2020 VNRs give a mitigated picture. An overview of the references to targets by number (or, alternatively, to at least one of their indicators and corresponding data) (see chapter 2) shows that the target in SDG 10 most reported on was

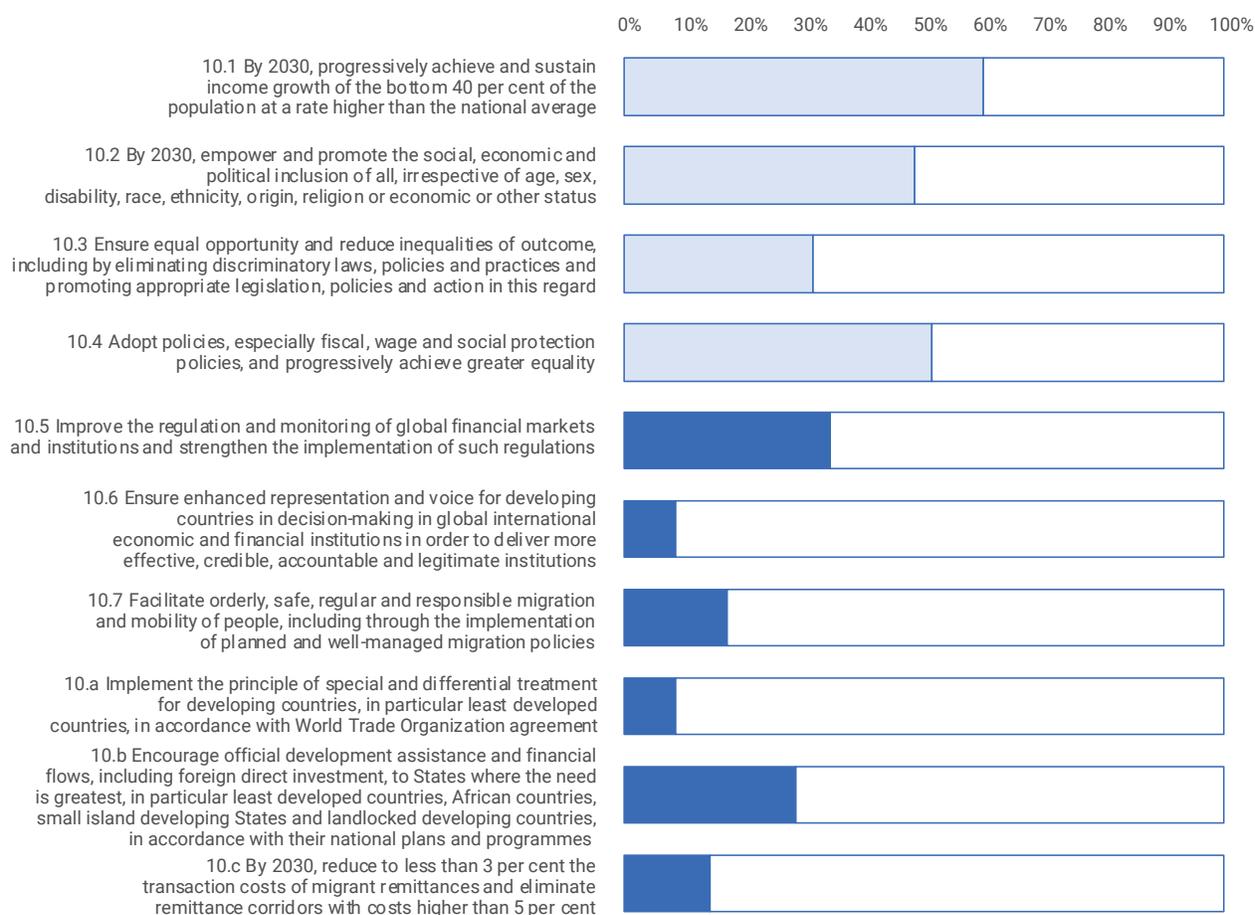
¹³ In 2020 the HLPF did not have focus goals.

10.1. This is considered a weak target (van der Hoeven, 2019). The targets that have a bearing on fostering structural changes to reduce income inequality namely target 10.4 (improving fiscal, wage and social protection policies,) and target 10.5 (regulation of national and global financial markets), while not the least reported on, were referred to by number in less than half of the VNRs (Figure 7.1).¹⁴ The target least reported on among those that refer to inequality within countries is target 10.3, which refers to eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation. It is therefore of no surprise that special schemes and projects (including those to reduce gender inequalities), rather than a clear policy stance on reducing income inequality, dominate action reported on SDG10 in the overview report of the 2020 VNRs (UNDESA, 2020). Moreover, countries that addressed income inequality and SDG 10 in the context of other SDGs did not focus systematically on structural changes needed to reduce income inequality.

The targets in SDG 10 that refer to inequality between countries have received even less attention than the targets that refer to inequality within countries. Targets 10.6 (enhanced representation and voice for developing countries) and 10.a (implement special and differential treatment for developing countries) are among the least referred to by number, overall.

Figure 7.1

Number of 2020 VNR reports that referred to each SDG 10 target (or at least one of its indicators) by number (of a total of 35 countries that referred to any SDG target by number)



¹⁴ One of the indicators of target 10.4, indicator 10.4.1, refers to the labour share of GDP. However, of the 19 countries that reported on target 10.4, only 10 refer to this indicator and provide data.

Have countries reported progress on reducing inequality?

Beyond the review of references to numbered targets, an analysis of the text of 43 VNRs shows that many of the countries that addressed SDG 10 did not report on actual progress on the goal and its targets, presented data without reference to a baseline or lacked up-to-date data, making it difficult to determine country's assessments of their progress. Analysis of information reported in reference to targets 10.1 and 10.2 shows a mixed picture (see table 4.1), including different assessments between the government and civil society in the case of Finland.

Table 7.1

Progress on inequality, reported in the 2020 VNRs

	References to income changes	References to changes in consumption/expenditure	Gini index
Reduced inequality	Estonia Kyrgyz Republic North Macedonia Niger Panama Slovenia	Georgia Morocco Nepal Panama Samoa Uzbekistan	North Macedonia Morocco Nepal Slovenia Uzbekistan
No significant change in inequality	Austria Comoros Costa Rica Finland (government assessment) Russian Federation		Argentina Honduras Russian Federation
Increased inequality	Argentina Bangladesh Bulgaria Democratic Republic of the Congo Finland (civil society assessment) Honduras Malawi Republic of Moldova Mozambique Ukraine	Ecuador	Bangladesh Democratic Republic of the Congo Malawi Micronesia Mozambique Samoa Uganda

Conclusions

Limited reporting on SDG 10 targets that are critical to redress the structural determinants of income inequality and limited evidence of progress on the issue of inequality, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic impacts, do not provide an optimistic picture. If national and international policies are not drastically changed, the trends of a declining wage share and worsening income inequality will continue in a post-COVID-19 world. Achieving the SDGs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic will require placing inequality at the centre of national and international development policy. Future VNRs should report on how countries integrate inequality concerns in policy-making, what actions they are taking to redress the structural determinants of inequality, and how they are measuring progress on reducing income inequality.

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8 Pandemic preparedness and consequences for SDGs (Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Haya Hadad)

Introduction

The VNRs analysed here were presented at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July 2020, under the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic that had emerged at the beginning of the year. The pandemic disrupted implementation of the 2030 Agenda across all the SDGs and reversed progress in many. These consequences stem not only from the health effects of the spread of COVID-19, but also from the socio-economic impacts of the public health measures to contain transmission, and the global economic recession that was triggered. They are multifaceted, have complex ramifications, and are reshaping the prospects for a more sustainable and equitable world.

As the 2020 Sustainable Development Goals report states, “the crisis has touched all segments of the population, all sectors of the economy, and all areas of the world” (United Nations, 2020). Yet the effects are not felt equally and in the same ways. Historically, marginalized and vulnerable populations have been hit hardest by pandemics and other crises. This pandemic is no different; it is now widely acknowledged that COVID-19 is widening inequalities within and between countries due to the structural vulnerabilities, thus reversing the ambition of SDG 10 to reduce inequalities within and between countries (Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, 2021; IMF, 2020).

Disproportionately higher COVID-19 case and death rates have been recorded amongst low income households, migrants, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities. This is explained by the social determinants of health such as lack of access to healthcare, occupational concentration in work that cannot be moved online, or living and working in cramped living conditions, among many other factors. These populations are also vulnerable to the disruptions of the lockdown and the global recession that have multiple socio-economic ramifications. Women have been particularly affected due to gendered institutions and norms, including loss of employment and income, increase in the burden of unpaid care work, rise in domestic violence, and pressures on mental health (UN Women, 2020). Such consequences have spillover effects on their empowerment from paid work, voice and agency in the household as well as the well-being of their families (ILO, 2021; UN Women, 2020).

Amongst countries, the geography of COVID-19 was unexpected, with high income countries experiencing the highest rates of mortality and morbidity. With the exception of a few countries, low and lower middle income countries – including LDCs – managed to contain the spread of the epidemic through 2020. However, the pandemic is widening inequalities amongst countries as the poorer countries are severely affected by the global economic recession, particularly due to global demand contraction, fall in commodity prices, and sharp declines in certain sectors such as tourism and garments (CDP, 2021; UNCTAD, 2020). These countries are less able to cope with the disruptions. For example, the priority on COVID-19 has meant neglect of other essential health services; vaccination against childhood diseases was halted in 70 countries (The Lancet Editorial, 2020). They are less able than the high-income countries to cushion the impact with stimulus and social protection measures, and are facing increasing debt burdens, while support from the international community has been limited. Moreover, as the pandemic continues into 2021, low – and middle-income countries are increasingly vulnerable to the emerging risks of new variants in the absence of access to vaccines. Thus, many countries that had managed to contain COVID-19 relatively well during 2020 – such as India, Malaysia, Viet Nam – are seeing a surge of cases in mid-2021. These outcomes reveal gaps in the SDG partnership goal (SDG 17) in responding to the new context of the pandemic.

In these and many other ways, the Covid-19 crisis has set back the prospects for advancing the SDG agenda. Countries face not only setbacks but reversals, undoing gains made over the decades; for example, for the first time after decades of decline, absolute poverty is expected to increase by some 88 to 115 million people (World Bank, 2020). Prospects for SDG implementation are uncertain in a post-pandemic economy. Restructuring has historically tended to put a stress on low-wage workers and low-income countries that lack the agility to adapt (Stiglitz, 2020). For example, automation could shrink employment opportunities for low-wage and low-skilled workers in industries such as textiles that are particularly

important in low – and middle-income countries (Tejani and Fukuda-Parr, 2021). A long-term scenario analysis shows an increase of extreme poverty by 44 million people by 2030 (UNDP, 2020).

How countries reassess their priorities and adapt their strategies will be a central question for the VNRs presented in 2021 and beyond. Here we analyse those presented in July 2020, which were prepared at the onset of the outbreak in early 2020, reviewing whether the reports included pandemic preparedness as an SDG priority; and how they reported on the consequences of the pandemic on the 2030 Agenda, particularly with respect to the key issues of equity, inclusion and sustainability discussed above.

Pandemic preparedness and target 3.d

Though COVID-19 caught countries by surprise, the risk of a new, deadly and infectious disease has been a growing concern in the international community, particularly after the experience of 2005 avian flu and the 2009 H1N1 outbreaks. Since the late 1990s, the World Health Organization (WHO) and other health authorities repeatedly issued alerts of a global threat and the critical importance for countries to be prepared to respond rapidly in case of an outbreak. Strengthening pandemic preparedness has therefore been one of the top priorities in the global health agenda and was included in the SDG framework. Target 3.d, one of the 13 targets under goal 3 aims to: “Strengthen the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks”, and is monitored by two indicators that are related to the implementation of International Health Regulation (IHR) capacity and health regulation preparedness, and the spread of antimicrobial resistance. While all 196 state parties have been reporting regularly to the IHR, only 10 of the 45 VNRs examined mentioned target 3.d. However, more than half of the reports – 27 out of 45 – mentioned the need to build public health infrastructure (see figure 8.1).

	Questions		Issues addressed					
	Does the report discuss the pandemic's impacts on achievement of the 2030 Agenda?	Does the report refer to target 3.d?	Controlling the contagion	Overall economic impact	Strengthening health infrastructure	Disproportionate socio-economic losses amongst vulnerable groups	Gendered effects	Disproportionate COVID deaths and cases amongst vulnerable groups
Niger								
Nigeria								
North Macedonia								
Panama								
Papua New Guinea								
Peru								
Russian Federation								
Samoa								
Seychelles								
Slovenia								
Solomon Islands								
Syrian Arab Republic								
Trinidad and Tobago								
Uganda								
Ukraine								
Uzbekistan								
Zambia								
Totals	44	10	41	41	27	25	14	5

Pandemic consequences on SDGs

Figure 5.1 provides an overview of the issues that were raised or neglected in the VNRs examined. All but one of the 44 reports reviewed discusses the COVID-19's consequences on the SDGs. Most countries focus on the public health measures taken to contain the pandemic such as lockdowns and emphasize socio-economic measures to address the socio-economic consequences, particularly stimulus measures; employment trends and social protection measures. Yet, few countries argue the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups such as women, children and migrants. Reports reviewed consistently focus on key public health measures taken to contain the infectious spread (41 out of 45), and on economic and employment consequences (41 out of 45). Attention to the unequal consequences of the pandemic was much less consistent. Only a few countries discussed issues such as the disproportionate consequences for marginalized groups in terms of morbidity and mortality (5 out of 45), loss of livelihoods (25 out of 45) and the gendered impact of the pandemic and its containment measures (10 out of 45). In general, VNRs with strong emphasis on the principle of leaving no one behind also referred to the unequal effects of the pandemic.

While the full extent of the consequences was not known at the time of their writing, a number of reports provide important reflections on the complex ways in which the pandemic could reshape the challenges of building a more inclusive and sustainable future, as well as the ways that the different elements of SDG agenda is also instrumentally valuable in mitigating the consequences of the pandemic.

Some VNRs drew attention to the gendered effects of the pandemic, particularly those that also emphasized the commitment to leave no one behind. They highlighted the disproportionate effects on women with respect to loss of income and employment, increase in care work, as well as increase in gender violence. They also highlight the inter-connectedness of the SDG goals and targets, and how one target affects the achievement of others. The VNR of Argentina describes how the pandemic, gender violence, and access to justice are inter-connected, stating:

“The pandemic showed the fragility of the tools we have to prevent another pandemic, that of gender violence. The suspension of the judicial system and the territorial complaint centres made it almost impossible for victims of violence to access justice and to implement protection measures against perpetrators. The confinement in homes, added to these measures, caused a 39% increase in calls to hotlines. There was an increase in femicides (the highest number of them within the home). We consider urgent the provision of specific funds to face this problem.”¹⁵

Some VNRs reflect on the fact that the social and economic changes brought about by the pandemic had positive consequences for the environment. VNR of Peru states:

“On the other hand, as a consequence of the Covid-19, the environment seems to benefit as a result of the measures of social isolation and reduced mobility of people, so much so that between March 16 and April 15, more than 1.2 million tons of CO₂e were avoided in electricity generation and transportation. 97% of the electrical energy consumed in the country in the quarantine period has been generated from renewable sources”¹⁶

Others emphasize that times of crisis are also times of opportunity, seeing the pandemic as a wakeup call to the urgency and importance of implementing the goals, and the costs of inaction. Bulgaria, Zambia, Peru and Nigeria discuss how policy responses to the pandemic support SDG implementation. The Bulgarian VNR in particular describes in detail how the measures introduced in response to the pandemic, to support public health and counter broader socio-economic consequences, including social protection for the vulnerable, employment retention, access to paid leave, support to the elderly and people with disabilities, contribute to a number of SDGs.

These issues, as well as strategies to ensure equal treatment and leaving no one behind in access to vaccines and health-care, will require attention in VNRs over the coming years.

¹⁵ Translated from Spanish using an automated translation tool.

¹⁶ Translated from Spanish using an automated translation tool.

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