

**Key Messages, Opportunities and Common Challenges for
African Member States presenting
Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in 2021**

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Introduction

Among the 44 countries participating in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in 2021, 10 are African Member States. Of these, Angola is the only African country presenting a VNR for the first time this year. Cabo Verde, Chad, Madagascar, Namibia, Tunisia and Zimbabwe are presenting for the second time, while Egypt, Niger and Sierra Leone are presenting for the third time this year. Consequently, the VNR reports prepared by these countries are substantively very rich: Not only do they present a forward-looking picture in the context of the Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but they are also informed by the lessons learnt and experiences and best practices shared from the earlier rounds of VNRs. What follows is a very brief and non-exhaustive summary of common trends, opportunities and implementation challenges that are relevant to African Member States.

Common Themes - Challenges

Most of the African countries presenting their VNRs this year were registering robust **economic growth** prior to the pandemic. However, the economic recession that was induced by the COVID-19 pandemic manifested itself in a sharp contraction of GDP growth rates in 2020, e.g. 14.8% contraction of economic activity in Cabo Verde and 8.0% contraction in Namibia in 2020. In some cases, e.g. Chad, the adverse impact of the global economic downturn was compounded, by the ongoing fight against violent extremism as well as significant shortfalls in infrastructure, such as only 8.4% of the population having access to electricity.

Consequently, many African Member States reported increases in multi-dimensional poverty rates putting at risk the hard-fought sustainable development gains from the pre-pandemic period. This situation has created the need for further financing and debt relief initiatives to overcome the health crisis and to implement structural reforms in order to unleash economic growth and alleviate poverty with a view to achieving the SDGs by the target date of 2030.

By contrast, some countries were able to leverage the pre-COVID-19 strong growth performance in implementing structural reforms to strengthen the resilience of their economies. For instance, Egypt, which also suffered an adverse exogenous shock to its economic activity, was able to somewhat cushion the negative impact of the pandemic as one of the few countries in the region registering a positive growth rate in 2020. The structural reforms implemented elsewhere prior to the pandemic have also resulted in some gains in life expectancy and under-five mortality.

Some of the 2021 African VNR countries are resource-rich economies. Although some, such as Angola, were able to move into the classification of medium Human Development Index (HDI) countries, there has been limited progress in general to break the resource dependence, especially dependence on global oil prices. In some cases, the failure to overcome this dependence has led to delays in achieving milestones in graduating from the LDC status. Achieving adequate **economic diversification** also remains a challenge for Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Looking forward, the pandemic and the economic recession provides opportunities to implement structural reforms focused on reducing the size of the informal economy, achieving economic

diversification and transformation that would allow these countries to enter upstream in Global Value Chains (GVC).

In many African countries, however, the pre-pandemic growth failed to translate into shared prosperity, declining **poverty** and reduced **inequalities**. In this context, the VNR reports all address in detail the negative impact of the pandemic on socio-economic fundamentals of the region putting at risk the fragile progress in fighting against poverty and reducing income inequality as well as inequalities between men and women and those between urban and rural populations.

Many countries highlighted **women's and girls' empowerment** as the key to overcoming inequalities. Some of the VNR participants have aimed to address **gender equity** by promulgating laws for parity in political decision-making bodies as well as policies to address gender-based violence. However, school closures due to the pandemic have had a negative impact on **education-related goals**. These have also resulted in stalling, and in some cases reversal, of the gains to achieve gender parity in education and in the retention of girls from primary through secondary education.

Achieving **health-related goals** was already a challenge prior to the pandemic. For instance, progress has been uneven with respect to maternal and child mortality as well as in the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel. The pandemic intensified the strain on health care systems across the board and presented new challenges in the provision of vaccines and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health care workers. Although some countries, such as Cabo Verde, are explicitly targeting to vaccinate 70% of their population by the end of 2021 and aim to achieve full vaccination by the end of 2022, overall the vaccine coverage on the continent is insufficient and urgent action is needed to ensure the vaccines are available where they are needed the most. Looking beyond the pandemic, further commitments to provide universal basic health care and access to reproductive health and family planning services, as is being undertaken, for instance by the Government of Madagascar, will be crucial to achieve the health-related goals.

The adverse impacts of **climate change, deforestation, land degradation and droughts** also prevailed as common themes in the VNRs. For instance, Cabo Verde experienced devastating droughts in three of the past five years. Angola and Madagascar also emphasized climate-related challenges, including cyclones and droughts reversing the gains in the preservation of biodiversity and leading to net losses in land degradation. Namibia recognized persistent drought as one factor in its economic slowdown but also highlighted significant efforts to combat poaching of rhinos and elephants through enhanced institutional coordination. Egypt issued in 2020 its first green bond, which is also the first in the MENA region, not only diversifying the tools for financing for sustainable development at its disposal, but also contributing to the push towards “greener” public projects.

Some of the African VNR countries have accentuated the fiscal and budgetary pressures due to the necessity to increase investments to overcome the pandemic and the consequently economic downturn. This inevitably worsens the over-indebtedness of the lower- and middle-income

countries on the continent. Therefore, it is critical to achieve at least some form of **debt forgiveness** to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of the concerted investments required to achieve the SDGs in the common quest to leave no one behind. The VNR report of Cabo Verde drew attention to the special needs of SIDS, calling for the creation of a special SIDS Compact for the financing of sustainable recovery as well as the creation of an international commitment on “Post-COVID-19 economic recovery and sustainable financing in SIDS”.

Some of the African VNR Member States underlined the interwoven nature of the SDGs and that focusing on strengthened implementation of certain Goals can engender accelerated implementation in a number of other Goals. Sierra Leone highlighted its “accelerator Goals” approach, whereby enhanced attention to **SDG 4 (education)** and **SDG 16 (justice)**, as informed by the national development context, are intended to provide the most weight towards socioeconomic transformation. With regards to SDG 16, Egypt launched the second National Anti-Corruption Strategy to promote transparency and integrity and complemented it with electronic Government payment and contracting systems.

In the same vein, in the aftermath of the pandemic, many of the African Member States highlighted the importance of **digital economy**, especially in the context of the necessity to bridge the digital divide. This will facilitate provision of basic services, including health care and education, more widely available and enable a more inclusive participatory approach across all segments of the society.

Last, but not least, **data** issues were explicitly addressed in almost all VNR reports. The collection of timely and reliable statistics is a crucial enabler for evidence-based policy making. Some countries, e.g. Chad, have implemented a dedicated National Strategy for Statistics Development (2018-2021) aiming to achieve concrete results in improving decision making capacity. These efforts tie in with the UN Secretary-General’s call for a data revolution as a key enabler of sustainable development.

Looking forward: Opportunities

Multi-sectoral COVID-19 emergency and recovery plans will be crucial to implement in the post-pandemic world. In some cases, this may require social protection through targeted financial transfers to the poorest and most vulnerable segments of the societies. This will also require support from Africa’s development partners. Such support must certainly address the debt sustainability issue head-on, including in some cases through debt relief or cancellation. Development partner assistance can also take the form of technical support, especially in terms of capacity building, and solidarity in making vaccines and quality health care available for all.

At the national level, African countries can enhance efforts to fight Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs), mobilize greater amounts of domestic resources and enhance investment inflows to help close financial shortfalls. Where possible, African countries can also expand social protections systems. Namibia provides an example, through introducing the Social Protection Policy in 2021 and establishing a number of social assistance programmes that target the poor and vulnerable.

Many African VNR countries have already made significant progress to domesticate the SDGs by integrating them into their National Development Plans and consulting with a wide range of national stakeholders (such as in Zimbabwe's Whole of Government and Society Approach), as well as creating synergies thanks to the joint implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063. This will be a major strength to build on in shaping the new normal of the post-pandemic world. For instance, thanks to these, the recovery and the economic transformation can be greener and focus on more sustainable investments, e.g. on unlocking the renewable energy potential of the continent. Furthermore, the trend towards localization of the SDGs, as exemplified by Egypt's projects aimed to take the SDGs to the local governments' level and Sierra Leone's revitalized district development coordination structures that integrate chiefdom and village-level planning, is a promising development to underpin the achievement of the global and regional development goals.