

# Voluntary National Reviews: Synthesis of Main Messages

## 2022 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

### Secretariat Background Note

#### Introduction

During the July 2022 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), 44 countries will present their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Eleven are presenting for the first time,<sup>1</sup> 28 for the second,<sup>2</sup> three for the third,<sup>3</sup> and two countries are presenting for the fourth time.<sup>4</sup> This year, 21 countries are from the Africa region, nine are from Europe, seven are from Latin America and the Caribbean, and seven are from Asia and the Pacific.

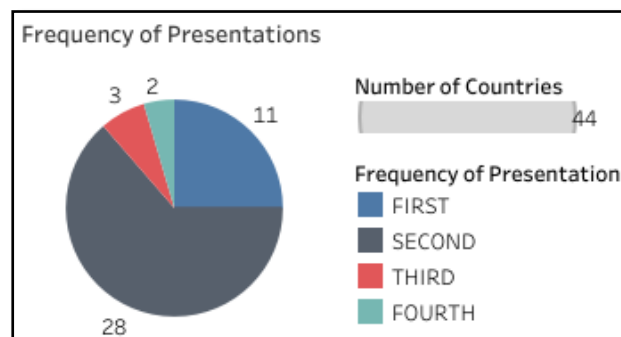


Figure 1 – Speaker Frequency



Figure 2 – Regional Representation

<sup>1</sup> Djibouti, Dominica, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Somalia, Suriname, Tuvalu.

<sup>2</sup> Andorra, Belarus, Botswana, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, El Salvador, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Greece, Italy, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lesotho, Liberia, Luxembourg, Malawi, Mali, Montenegro, Netherlands, Pakistan, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Sudan, United Arab Emirates.

<sup>3</sup> Argentina, Philippines, Switzerland.

<sup>4</sup> Togo, Uruguay.

After the July 2022 session, the HLPF will have heard 292 VNR presentations from 187 countries since reporting began in 2016 as mandated by the General Assembly and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (resolutions 67/290 and 70/1). [See Figures 1 and 2 for 2022 VNR speaker frequency and regional representation, respectively.](#)

This year's VNRs show the continuing international commitment to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There has been continuing progress in efforts to implement and integrate the SDG into national policies and plans, including those aimed at the recovery from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The VNRs reflect on progress towards the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs. They add valuable data to inform the HLPF on the successes and barriers to implementation. Many countries highlight efforts to align the SDGs with their national development plans, and to create multi-level stakeholder committees and platforms to aid in implementing the SDGs nationally and across communities. Stemming from the 2030 Agenda, multiple innovative solutions and policies are being implemented to stimulate progress in areas such as education, health, gender equality and inclusive economic growth.

African countries reporting this year highlight the potential to strengthen progress towards the SDGs across the region through integrating their implementation with Africa's Agenda 2063 (Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea Bissau). Progress is also possible at the national level, thorough a focus on localization of the SDGs and the implementation of comprehensive plans for the way forward such as Solidarity Côte d'Ivoire, Vision Djibouti, African Beacon of Prosperity (Ethiopia), Malawi 2063, Transformation Acceleration Plan (Gabon), and Emerging Senegal Plan.

All VNRs provide a clear picture of the impacts of the global shocks felt around the world, which have caused setbacks in progress toward the SDGs. Countries describe how the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the onset of multiple conflicts, have taken a toll on the economy, supply chains, energy, food security and people's well-being.

Despite these circumstances, the fact that 44 countries were able to collect, aggregate and analyze data and review their policies and institutions to prepare their VNR presentations for the 2022 HLPF demonstrates the continued appeal of the vision of the 2030 Agenda.

The data from this year's and previous VNRs aid in identifying potential growth areas and areas where urgent assistance is needed. The use of innovative platforms and the digitization of some public services during the pandemic have helped scale up use of technologies and promote further technological advances, not only for services such as education and other social services, but also in the use of data for VNRs and national policy making.

The VNR exercise creates channels for knowledge sharing. VNRs can help countries and their local communities to understand how they can "build back better", including by scaling up local initiatives to achieve the SDGs and adjusting national development policies and plans. Though the effects of the pandemic is still deeply felt, the momentum for advancing the SDGs has not been lost.

The present note summarizes the main messages of the 44 countries presenting a VNR at the 2022 HLPF. It aims to provide a background for the VNR presentations and discussions.

## COVID-19 impacts, recovery plans, and strategies

The majority of VNR countries report on the adverse effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on education, health and health services, gender equality, and the economy. The VNRs stress the importance of creating more resilient nations that are prepared to better absorb and respond to global shocks. The lessons learned from the pandemic emphasize the importance of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda to ensure a sustainable recovery.

The economic shocks felt around the world due to COVID-19 impacted every sector. They affected vulnerable communities the most. Multiple countries experienced a reduction in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate, which negatively impacted the social situation (Andorra, Gambia, Ghana, Grenada, Jordan, Montenegro, Philippines, Ethiopia, and Eswatini). Due to the lockdowns during the pandemic, countries with a large tertiary sector and those heavily dependent on tourism or oil exports felt greater effects compared to countries with more diverse economies (Andorra, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon). For many countries, COVID-19 exacerbated high levels of poverty, unemployment, unsustainable debt burdens, widening inequalities and inflation (Andorra, Argentina, Gambia, Lesotho, Montenegro, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Eswatini). Implementing SDGs strategically has become more difficult with greater percentages of a country's GDP being spent on the COVID-19 response. Countries saw a significant reversal of gains made in previous years on many SDGs (Ghana, Philippines, Equatorial Guinea, Jordan, Lesotho, Malawi, Philippines). Those most vulnerable to these fallouts are often women and children, including due to the reduction in the income of some households (Greece, Gambia).

With the spread of COVID-19 and its major impacts on the economy, countries experienced worrying impacts in the education sectors. With the deterioration of in-person learning, countries have experienced loss in learning, lower enrollment and increased dropout rates (Lesotho, Gabon). There have also been issues with accessibility for vulnerable students, which have had a greater impact comparatively on adolescent girls, exposing gaps within the education system (Lesotho). A rise in reports of gender-based violence and early marriage demonstrate the deeper impacts of the pandemic on women and girls, especially those already in vulnerable situations and rural communities (Sudan, Cameroon).

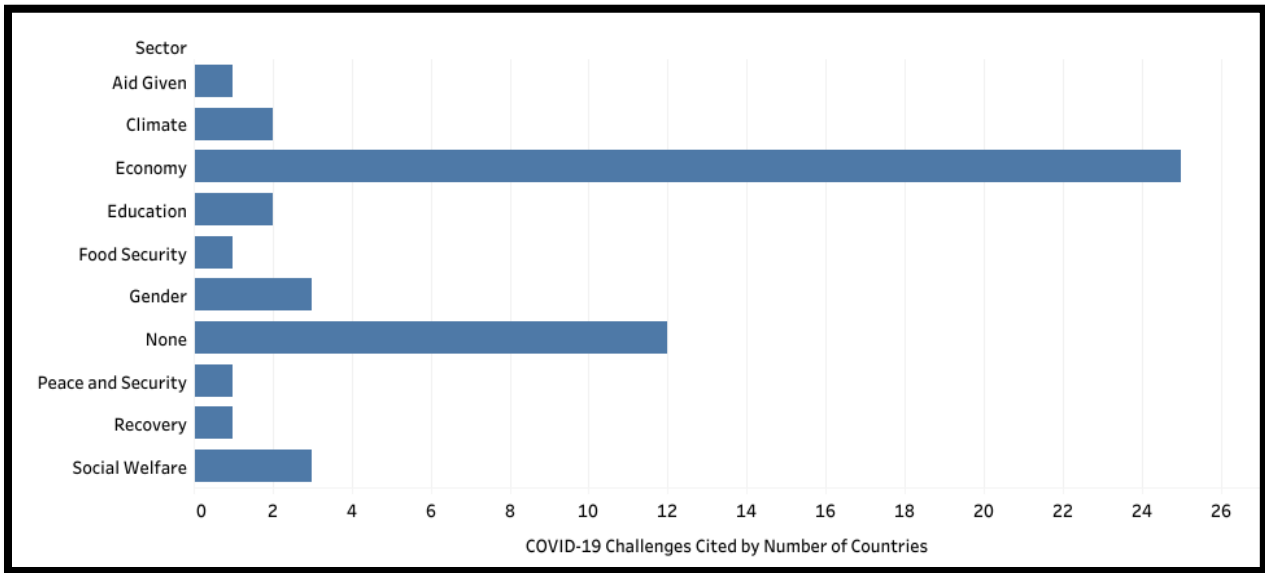


Figure 3 – Frequency of COVID-19 Challenges

As they embark in a fragile recover from the pandemic, countries are implementing innovative solutions and policies to “build back better.” Although they are facing challenging situations, many have been implementing government stimulus packages, cash transfer programs, debt moratoriums for businesses, and national plans to combat the deteriorating social situation (Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Dominica, Senegal). Malawi identified the need for investments in several socio-economic sectors so as to support a faster recovery from the pandemic through its Socio-Economic Recovery Plan (SERP). In Italy, scientific knowledge is being use to improve response plans and contribute to policy coherence under the National Action Plan (NAP). In Ghana, considerable amounts of financial resources are allocated to combat the negative effects of the pandemic and increase vaccine access and equity under the Ghana Cares program. These are only a few examples of how the VNR countries are accelerating actions to ensure the well-being of their citizens and ease the impacts of COVID-19 to the greatest extent possible.

Regarding COVID-19 vaccines, countries are investing in domestic vaccine production such as under the National Vaccine Institute in Ghana. Some countries are partnering with the private sector to mobilize resources to purchase vaccines (Lesotho), accelerating vaccinations as soon as vaccines are available (Philippines) and enacting social programs that provide free vaccines (El Salvador). Vaccines are provided to refugees in Jordan.

On the road toward recovery, some countries are supporting others by providing resources for vaccines and related facilities; donating vaccines, supplies medical aid and proving other support (Latvia, United Arab Emirates and others), demonstrating international solidarity. Those combined national actions contribute to reducing the impacts of global vaccine inequity.

### Progress in between VNRs and long-term visions:

In the 2022 cycle, countries conducting VNRs for the first time express their commitment to implementing the SDGs and look forward to the peer-learning process enabled by the VNRs (Eritrea, Somalia).

The 33 countries conducting their second, third, and fourth VNR report on the impact of the previous VNR(s) and the measures they have taken since then to improve the implementation of the SDGs and integrate the goals into their national policies and institutions. The two countries (Togo, Uruguay) conducting their fourth VNR this year highlight progress in education and skills development, gender equity initiatives, and sustainable climate protection programs.

Overall, with the majority of countries this year reporting for the second time, most VNRs reflect on progress and steps taken to improve the implementation of the SDGs and close the gaps identified in the first review. These countries signal their unwavering commitment to sustainable development despite ongoing crises. They prioritize the inclusion of SDGs into their national development strategies (Cameroon, Mali, Sudan, Greece, Sri Lanka). Various initiatives are being implemented to ensure inclusive stakeholder engagement in elaboration and implementation the countries' long-term vision (Andorra, Ethiopia, Gambia, Italy). Countries stress the importance of partnerships, notably for promoting innovation and improved strategies, policies and results-based management (Jamaica). Some second VNRs also highlight long-term objectives such as graduating to middle-income country status (Malawi, Côte d'Ivoire).

VNR countries share their vision for deepening the integration of the SDGs in their strategies and address development gaps identified in earlier VNRs or through national monitoring. Efforts include the Emerging Senegal Plan (ESP), African Beacon of Prosperity (Ethiopia), Vision Djibouti, Greek Recovery and Resilience Plan, and the European Union accession process (Montenegro). Intra-country development plans are also mentioned, which identify measurable targets and identify accelerators that can contribute to addressing poverty and inequality (Côte d'Ivoire) and promote gender-responsive strategies (Botswana).

The VNRs also provide examples related to monitoring and financing SDG progress. Commissions have been created in Argentina to implement and monitor the effectiveness of policies aimed at achieving the SDGs. Belarus has launched a national SDG reporting platform to track 229 of 267 international indicators and to improve accessibility to data. Special budgets have been appropriated for SDG initiatives to scale up resources towards specific sectors in both Ethiopia and Kazakhstan. These initiatives show the usefulness of the VNR.

It is anticipated that the presentation of the VNRs in July 2022 will also call attention to the impacts that global shocks continue to have on developing countries in particular, and the setbacks caused by ongoing conflicts. Those compound the existing challenges, including poverty, educational gaps, gender inequality, and economic decline that hinder countries' efforts to attain the SDGs and their ambitious national development agendas.

### Existing and new and emerging challenges:

Countries are coping with existing and emerging challenges while experiencing recurring global shocks due to the pandemic and other factors. Sustaining SDG progress from previous years and containing and addressing negative impacts on the SDGs has become difficult, while challenges are expanding and creating setbacks in multiple sectors. The VNRs this year highlight the impact of high poverty rates, GDP contraction, food insecurity, gender-based violence, and vulnerability to the effects of climate change.

They show that most countries are dealing with a complex and interrelated set of challenges. Despite such difficulties, however, the VNRs also report successful advancements in agriculture, diversified education services and social protection programs, as well as tax base optimization (Gabon) and legislation to counter domestic violence (Lesotho).

Many VNRs focus on the challenges created by the negative impact of the pandemic on the overall national economic situation. They refer to economic vulnerabilities, high dependencies on some economic sectors and reduction in exports (Argentina, Andorra, Equatorial Guinea). The economic downturn has increased the number of firms closing in some countries (Ghana, Gambia). The human impact and deteriorating social situations of many communities are notable as well. Poverty continues to be a major challenge, with multiple countries reporting increases or stagnation of poverty eradication targets (Latvia, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Montenegro, Senegal, Somalia, Eswatini). The growing incidence of poverty in rural areas is also reported, with varying impacts on different types of communities (Lesotho, Malawi, Montenegro).

Increased monitoring within countries has enabled better and more detailed tracking of progress and gaps in realizing the SDGs. The data reflects an uptick in gender disparities in education (Lesotho, Mali), increases in the occurrence of gender-based violence and early marriages (Botswana, Lesotho). Although there are initiatives toward equity and inclusivity, countries have not yet achieved the desired results of these policies (Senegal, Montenegro, Botswana). Similar setbacks and barriers are also observed among youth in terms of education and economic impacts (Mali, Lesotho, Botswana, Somalia). Displacement due to security crises has also increased (Mali)

The 2022 VNRs report that food insecurity is increasing due to reduced farm outputs, inflation, disruptions in ecosystems and the environment due to climate change as well as unsustainable production and consumption (Switzerland, Gambia, Malawi, Somalia). In recent years, some countries have seen an increase in droughts, erratic rainfall trends, reduction in biodiversity, floods, and locust swarms that depreciate crop yields and affect the livelihoods of those dwelling in rural communities (Gambia, Somalia).

The VNRs underscore the criticality of the climate change crisis, not only in terms of food insecurity but also regarding the negative impacts on the environment from rising temperatures and changing weather patterns. Countries continue to cope with the impacts of climate change and struggle to take measures to reduce carbon emissions. Due to the impacts of recurring natural disasters, some countries must allocate efforts and resources toward recovery (Dominica). The redirection of resources to address the impact of climate change creates a heavy burden for vulnerable countries (São Tomé and Príncipe, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Eswatini). Some raise alarm with regard to accelerating soil and forest degradation, rising sea levels, and increases in extreme weather incidents such as cyclones and hurricanes (Lesotho, Montenegro, Netherlands, Eswatini). The effects of climate change are felt in key sectors in vulnerable countries hindering their initiatives to advance the SDGs. Rural poor and those who derive their livelihoods from the exploitation of natural resources are particularly impacted (Lesotho).

In response to these challenges, some countries are redirecting more resources toward policies and activities to accelerate sustainable development. This is exemplified by programs such as offering diversified education products supporting the different needs of learners (Botswana), actions to address deforestation (such as implementing the Green Legacy Initiative in Ethiopia), and developing a multidimensional poverty index to better inform intervention measures and tackle group-based inequalities (Jamaica). VNRs also report on successful solutions to improve gender equality, leveraging

digital technologies in education, debt relief, and mobilization of partnerships (Jamaica, Lesotho, Somalia, Ghana). See Figure 4 for the frequency of challenges broken down by regions.

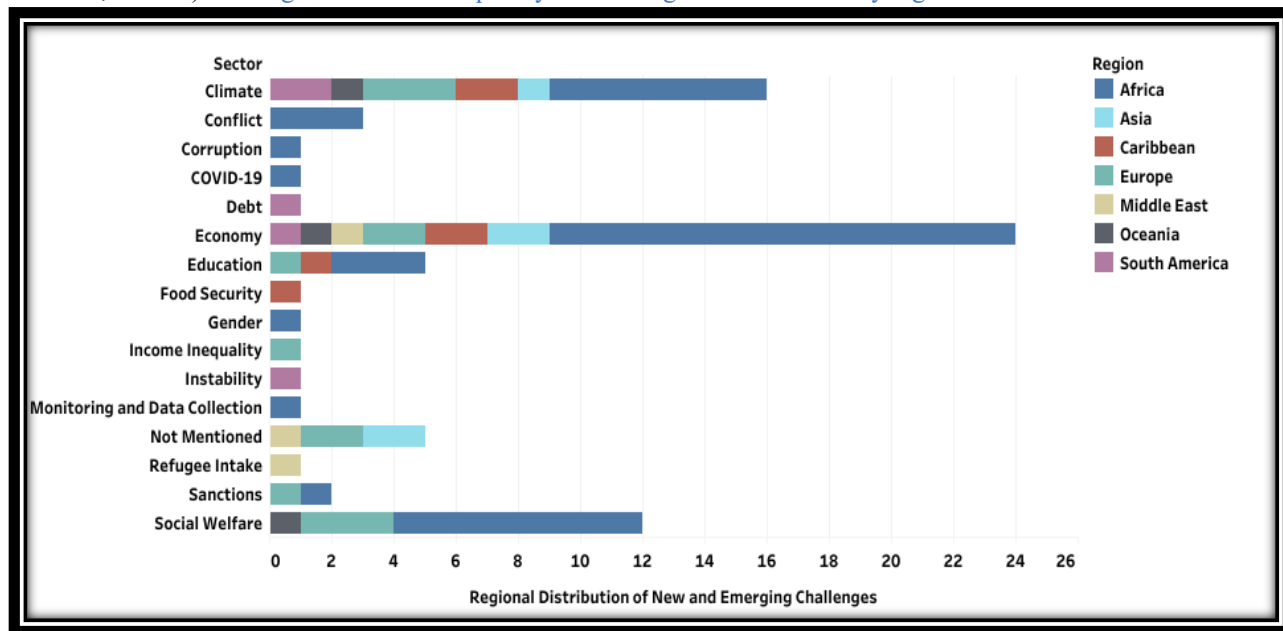


Figure 4 – Regional Challenges

### Sub-national reviews:

There is an increase in countries' efforts to engage local authorities and a more diverse sets of stakeholders in the implementation of the SDGs. This includes working towards more inclusive data collection to more accurately gauge community level needs and challenges. VNRs that have involved local reviews of progress and actions present an in-depth view of the state of the country's progress. They allow to identify local actions that can be scaled up and inform national policy shifts toward more sustainable development.

It is encouraging that the number of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) is increasing. A growing number of countries report linking VLRs to their VNRs, recognizing that the inclusion of sub-national data improves the analysis and report of the VNR.

To increase engagement of local governments and other stakeholders, the use of national surveys and digital tools has been promoted in various countries, along with the creation of dedicated institutions (Andorra, Argentina, Philippines, Switzerland, Pakistan). Engaging local governments brings countries closer to multi-level governance and helps to ensure policy coherence (Italy). Countries also report that subnational seminars and discussions on the VNR have helped to identify priority areas for the implementation of the SDGs (Kazakhstan). Localization of the SDGs also allows countries to pilot projects in specific areas to ascertain the likelihood of success on a larger scale (Côte d'Ivoire). Countries who have had success with sub-national reviews in the past continue to use them in their VNR reporting process (Sri Lanka). Other countries intend to build on local engagement and partnerships (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Eswatini).

## Conclusion

The 2022 VNRs reflect the HLPF theme of “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. They also focus on building resilience against global shocks, which is highly relevant in the current difficult international environment. Many VNRs report not only on setbacks and challenges, but also on achievements at the national level.

These initiatives and accomplishments will support knowledge sharing at the HLPF. Although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically slowed down progress toward many SDGs, the resilience shown by countries and their determination to continue to track progress and meet the SDGs augur well for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as our roadmap out of the crises.

The “SDG Moment” to be convened by the Secretary-General during the General Assembly in September 2022 will provide additional space to discuss progress, results, gaps, and challenges to realize the long-term vision of the 2030 Agenda.

Preparations for the September 2023 SDG Summit should build momentum for renewed efforts to reach the SDGs at national, regional and international levels, engaging governments and all stakeholders.

## Guiding questions for reflection

- How has the work of institutions entrusted to promote and review the implementation of the 2030 Agenda evolved? Can it be improved? How far have the SDGs been incorporated into the work of various ministries and institutions?
- Has your government incorporated the SDGs in your national plans and policies, developed a dedicated strategy, or both?
- What are the critical challenges your country is facing in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda? Did you succeed in overcoming such a major challenge, and if so, how?
- Have the SDGs been incorporated into the budget?
  - Do you have, or will you, elaborate on an Integrated National Financing Framework?
- What new and emerging issues have impacted the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, besides the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the areas where more assistance or new partnerships are needed to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and how can the HLPF help?
- What lessons have you learned in preparing your VNR?
  - Did you decide to adjust some policies or institutions or create new ones?
  - What innovations have helped to overcome the challenges of COVID-19 and its restrictions for conducting your VNR?
  - How have you used data and indicators?