

The Committee for Development Policy (CDP) has analyzed the voluntary national reviews (VNRs) annually since 2017.¹ 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 tell us and don’t tell us about the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and thus contributing to continuously improve the VNRs as instruments to advance implementation of the Agenda. This document suggests points for consideration by the governments and other stakeholders participating in the 2021 VNRs.

- **There have been notable improvements in the VNRs over time, and the 2020 reports show a number of positive developments and initiatives. However, they 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.**
- **It is encouraging that increasing attention has been given to the pledge to leave no one behind and to inequalities, including gender inequality. However, treatment of these issues still suggests a focus on targeted action rather than transformational strategies addressing the structural determinants of inequalities and exclusion. Relatively few reports reflected meaningfully on the distributional and gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its containment measures, and while gender is addressed by all countries, few report on actions to address the structural determinants of gender inequality such as legal or social norms that limit access to land or finance or determine the distribution of the burden of unpaid care work. Very little attention has been given to inequality between countries.**
- **The most commonly unreported goals in the 2020 VNRs are those most closely related to environment, sustainability and climate change, and inequality. This is inconsistent with the concept of sustainable development and the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs.**
- **Few of the countries presenting VNRs for the second or third time in 2020 referred to how the previous VNR’s conclusions were fed back into policy improvement. For the reviews to become an effective instrument in accelerating SDG implementation, more attention should be given to process and feedback loops: the reviews as a process, including to how they feed back into policy and to the engagement of non-state actors, including through shadow reports.**

The Committee for Development Policy (CDP), a subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), advises the Council on a wide range of development issues. Among other activities, it submits annual contributions on the Council’s themes and is the body in charge of recommending the graduation of countries from the least developed countries (LDC) category. Its 24 members are nominated in their personal capacity by the Secretary-General. Membership is geared to reflect a wide range of development experience as well as geographical and gender balance. More information at <https://cdp.un.org>. CDP members that participated in

It is encouraging that almost all 2020 VNRs referred to the pledge to leave no one behind, which was not the case when the reviews started in 2016 (figure 2). Approximately 70% of reports 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

While there is relevant content on leaving no one behind throughout the reports, the content of the sections dedicated to the topic provide a snapshot of how countries understand the concept and what types of policies they consider as part of their strategies to fulfill it. The words in figure 3 summarize the concepts and approaches most frequently quoted in the sections on leaving no one behind, with human rights, equality, inclusion and [addressing] discrimination at the top. Social protection or social security are referred to as not only an instrument (see below) 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 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.

One issue that is relevant to the concept is the economic

The analysis on gender compared the content of a set of VNRs with the SDG 5 targets and the issues most prominently associated with gender equality in a specialized literature review. Of 43 reports analyzed, 35 have a chapter dedicated

More countries addressed inequality in 2020 than in previous years (as reported in CDP, 2019). Forty of 45 reports directly addressed SDG 10 and several addressed inequality in connection with other goals and themes. However, few countries refer to structural changes to redress increasing income inequality, whether in regard to the COVID-19 related effects or pre-existing trends such as the growing inequality between incomes from capital and labor. This stands true also for references to inequality in parts of the reports dedicated to other goals. As also shown in the 2020 Voluntary National Reviews Synthesis Report (UNDESA, 2020), most action reported to address SDG 10 refers to targeted schemes and projects rather than clear and comprehensive strategies and policies. In many cases action on poverty, education or gender is reported as action on inequality.

that refer to inequality within countries is target 10.3, which refers to eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation. 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

Most countries reported on SDG 12 or referred to sustainable consumption and production and some referred to how the concept had acquired a central position in their development strategies (Slovenia, for example – Box 4). However, 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 aspects of the 2030 Agenda. The targets least reported on are possibly where the most important potential for transformation and the greatest challenges lie: 12a (support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production) and 12c (rationalizing fossil fuel subsidies). Even for the targets most frequently reported on – 12d (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 Ireland, 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, for example:

- 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 impacts 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 labor-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 12a – 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) in global markets with scarce attention to sustainability and to accountability by transnational corporations.

Committee for Development Policy (2020, 'Development Policy and Migration after COVID 19', Policy Note, first publication' in May 2022,