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# Voluntary National Reviews Reports – What do they (not) tell us?

## CDP Subgroup on voluntary national reviews<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are an important innovation as a United Nations process for follow up to the adoption of development agendas. The paper analyses how countries addressed two key cross-cutting issues of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the VNRs submitted in 2018: leaving no one behind; and pursuing global partnership as means of implementation as well as how they addressed Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. While the VNRs contain already many interesting examples as basis for mutual learning and sharing of, the paper also identifies a need for more attention to these issues and more explicit discussions on strategies for their implementation.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development, SDGs, 2030 Agenda, voluntary national reviews, leaving no one behind, global partnership, education.

**JEL Classification:** F55, O1, Q01

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# 1 Introduction

Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are an important innovation as a United Nations process for follow up to the adoption of development agendas. Until now, the practice was to review implementation globally, primarily based on reports by the Secretary General. The 2030 Agenda introduces a new approach that is ‘country led’, and that ‘take(s) into account national realities’, recognizing that ‘country ownership’ is central to the implementation of the agenda (UN 2015, para 74). Moreover, the approach is to be voluntary, transparent and participatory as well as based on robust evidence. The process is intended to facilitate learning from national experiences and to promote accountability to citizens. The VNRs are central to this new approach. Presented at the annual high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) in the Ministerial segment, they provide an opportunity for countries to share their experiences in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Member States have shown great interest in the VNR process; 22 countries presented a VNRs in the first year (2016) of implementation, while 43 countries presented in 2017 and 46 in 2018<sup>1</sup>. The process has also generated interest on the part of stakeholders. While some are contributing to the preparation of VNRs, others are commenting on the reports. A growing debate has emerged on this new process and on ways to improve its effectiveness.

As an independent group with diverse expertise, and a mandate to play an advisory role to ECOSOC, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) hopes to contribute to this debate by undertaking an annual review of the VNRs. This report presents a systematic overview assessment of the contents of the 46 VNRs<sup>2,3</sup> presented in 2018 indicating general trends and highlighting interesting approaches taken in some countries. It builds on last year’s analysis by the CDP on the VNRs<sup>4</sup>. It focuses on two core objectives of the 2030 Agenda, namely: leaving no one behind and pursuing global partnership as means of implementation (SDG 17), as well as on quality education (SDG 4).

In order to complement rather than duplicate the reports issued by UN DESA, other UN bodies and civil society organizations<sup>5</sup>, this review focuses on the substantive content of the VNRs, and on selected themes of the 2030 Agenda. As explained further below, the analysis builds on a systematic content analysis of the VNRs. The purpose of the review is to provide an overview of trends in VNRs that would: identify some key issues in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and highlight diverse practices of countries to promote mutual experience sharing and learning across countries. This

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1 While there are four countries, namely Benin, Qatar, Togo, and Uruguay, that reported both in 2017 and 2018, the diversity in countries does not allow for a comparison across reporting years. Nevertheless, at times this analysis gives numbers of both years, in order to provide a reference point, where considered relevant.

2 See CDP report of the 20<sup>th</sup> session, E/2018/33 and CDP report of the 21<sup>st</sup> session, E/2019/33. Both available at [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/document\\_cdp/cdp-report/](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/document_cdp/cdp-report/)

3 The CDP is a subsidiary expert advisory body that, among other functions, provides independent advice to the United Nations Economic and Social Council on a wide range of emerging cross-cutting issues and on international cooperation for development.

4 CDP Subgroup on VNRs (2019) Voluntary National Review Report – What do they report? CDP Background Paper No. 46. Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/voluntary-national-review-reports-what-do-they-report/>; and other work on the topic of the VNR from the CDP can be found here <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/voluntary-national-reviews.html>.

5 For a synthesis of all VNRs, see UN DESA (2018). Synthesis of Voluntary National reviews 2018, available at [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/210732018\\_VNRs\\_Synthesis\\_compilation\\_11118\\_FS\\_BB\\_Format\\_FINAL\\_cover.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/210732018_VNRs_Synthesis_compilation_11118_FS_BB_Format_FINAL_cover.pdf). For civil society reports, see for example: Shannon Kindornay (2019) Progressing national SDGs implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2018, <https://ccic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Full%20Report%20Eng.pdf>, Partners4Review publication by Marton Szeker and Anna-Maria Heisig (2018) Voluntary National Reviews submitted to the 2018 High-level Political Forum – A Comparative Analysis, [http://www.partners-for-review.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/P4R-Comparative-Analysis\\_2018-VNRs-OCT-2018.pdf](http://www.partners-for-review.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/P4R-Comparative-Analysis_2018-VNRs-OCT-2018.pdf); ODI publication by Sarwar and Nicolai (2018) What do analyses of Voluntary National Reviews for Sustainable Development Goals tell us about “leaving no one behind”?, <https://www.odi.org/publications/11147-what-do-analyses-voluntary-national-reviews-sustainable-development-goals-tell-us-about-leave-no-one>.

review is only one part of CDP's work on the SDGs; in particular it complements the Committee's analysis of policies for 'leaving no one behind' and other policy issues related to the SDGs.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides some further background to the VNRs and, on this basis, briefly explains the scope and methodological approach of this analytical study. Sections 3 provides an overview on the importance countries assign to the various SDGs in their VNRs. Sections 4 to 6 present the results for the three themes chosen: leaving no one behind, global partnership and quality education. Section 7 discusses the findings and outlines some suggestions for steps for a way forward.

## 2 Background

### 2030 Agenda and the VNRs

The 2030 Agenda is an important achievement that sets out an ambitious and transformative agenda that responds to the complex challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though the Agenda is best known for the SDGs, it is a holistic concept and an agenda for sustainable development, not just a list of 17 goals. Because environment, economic transformations, exclusion and inequality are challenges in all countries regardless of the level of income, it is a universal agenda. Because these challenges are inter-related, it is an integrated agenda that needs to be seen as a whole, stating: "the interlinkages and the integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized" (2030 Agenda, preamble). And because it is a human centered agenda, based on a fundamental commitment to equality of human rights, inclusion is an essential over-arching goal.

For these reasons, this review focuses on the two cross-cutting themes 'leaving no one behind' and global partnership which are some of most important principles that are the core elements of the agenda, along with universality and commitment to human rights. To complement the cross-cutting perspective, the review also includes a focus on one individual SDG, namely SDG 4 on quality education.

The VNRs are a central element of the follow-up and review mechanisms of the 2030 Agenda as set out in the 2015 Declaration (UN 2015). The framework is built around a voluntary and country-led process that would: track progress on goals; be open and participatory for stakeholders; focus on people with particular attention to human rights and the people furthest behind; take a long-term perspective, and be rigorous and evidence based (UN 2015, para 74). The overall VNR process consists not only of the reports, but also of national consultation processes, regional meetings, main messages summarizing countries' key findings, as well as the presentation of the report at the HLPF. The VNRs are not conceptualized as an accountability mechanism among states; rather, the aim is to strengthen accountability to citizens as well as to facilitate the sharing of experience, including successes, challenges and lessons learned.

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs provide a universal framework but recognize that countries differ in their challenges and resources. Countries are therefore called upon to develop their nationally specific agendas. In this context, while guidelines for VNRs have been issued, they are intended to be flexible and allow for adaptation to national circumstances. Consequently, there is a considerable heterogeneity among VNRs with regard to thematic focus, the use of indicators, the details of policy descriptions and the inclusion of civil society or private sector perspectives, among others.

This paper presents overview trends in VNR reporting based on a content analysis of the 46 VNRs presented in 2018 that asked 'how are the VNRs addressing the three selected themes: leaving no one behind, global partnership and quality education. For each theme, we focused on the basic question: is the theme included, and if so, is there a strategy to address it? For each of the three themes we proceeded by an iterative search of material content, aided by word searches and focused reviews by multiple readers.

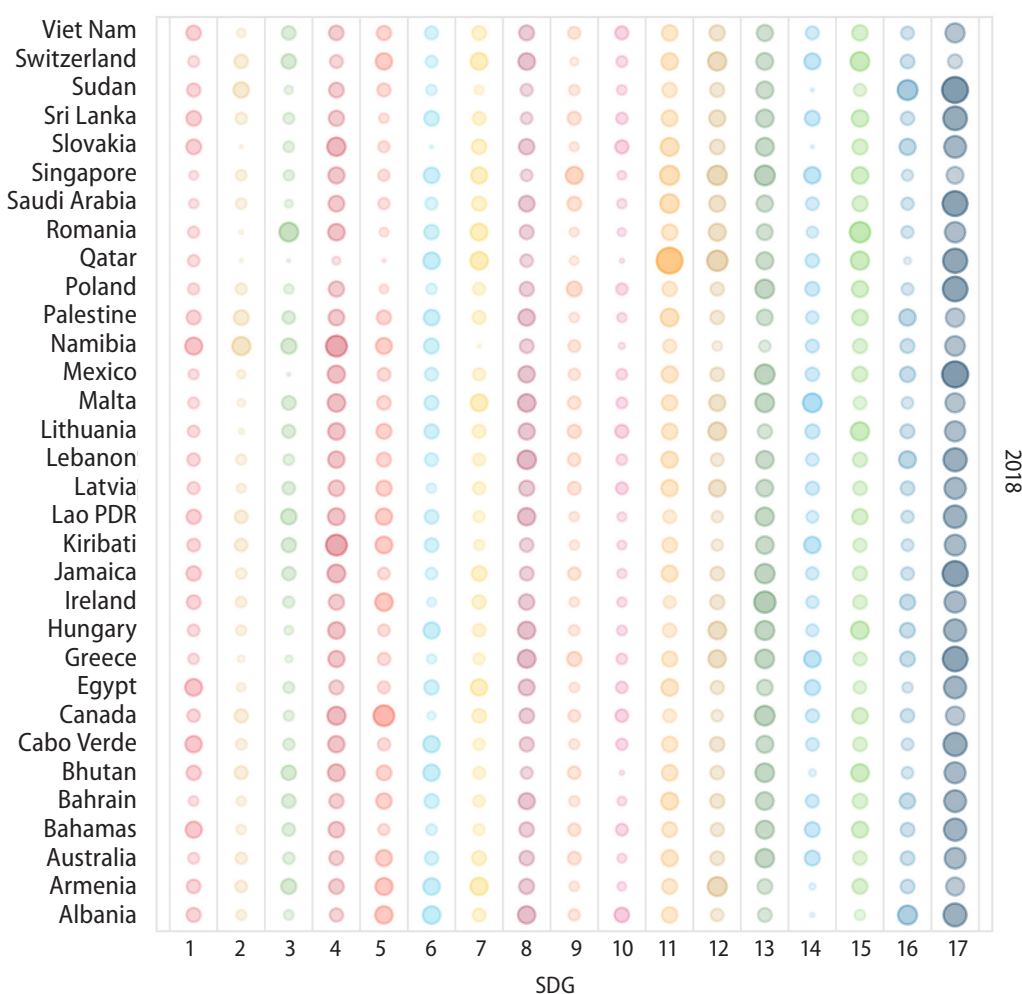
The scope of this analysis is limited to the content of the VNRs and therefore provides information about *stated policy positions and priorities*. Hence, it should not be seen as evaluations of policy impact. Even in cases where VNRs contain information on results and impacts on the basis of domestic policy evaluations, as a group, they do not observe any

uniform approach to assessments or reporting, which limits comparability. Furthermore, recognizing that VNRs are not comprehensive presentations of national policy approaches, the fact that the document does not mention how it addresses certain issues does not exclude the possibility that the issue is being addressed through other domestic, regional or international processes. Within these boundaries, this systematic and comparative overview of VNR reports provides insights on the treatment of, and priority given to, specific issues in the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

### 3 Importance assigned to individual SDGs

Before moving to the systematic content analysis on the three themes, we briefly consider whether VNRs are balanced with regard to the 17 SDGs or whether countries view some SDGs as more important than others. The integrated nature and the indivisibility of the SDGs could imply that countries pay roughly equal attention to each of individual SDGs. At the same time, priority setting according to national circumstances could imply that countries pay unequal attention to the individual SDGs. In addition, the fact that each HLPF includes some focus SDGs for its thematic review sessions could also bias the attention to SDGs in the VNRs, even though the VNR guidelines strongly suggest that countries report on all SDGs.

Table 2  
SDG scores by country and SDG in 2018 VNRs



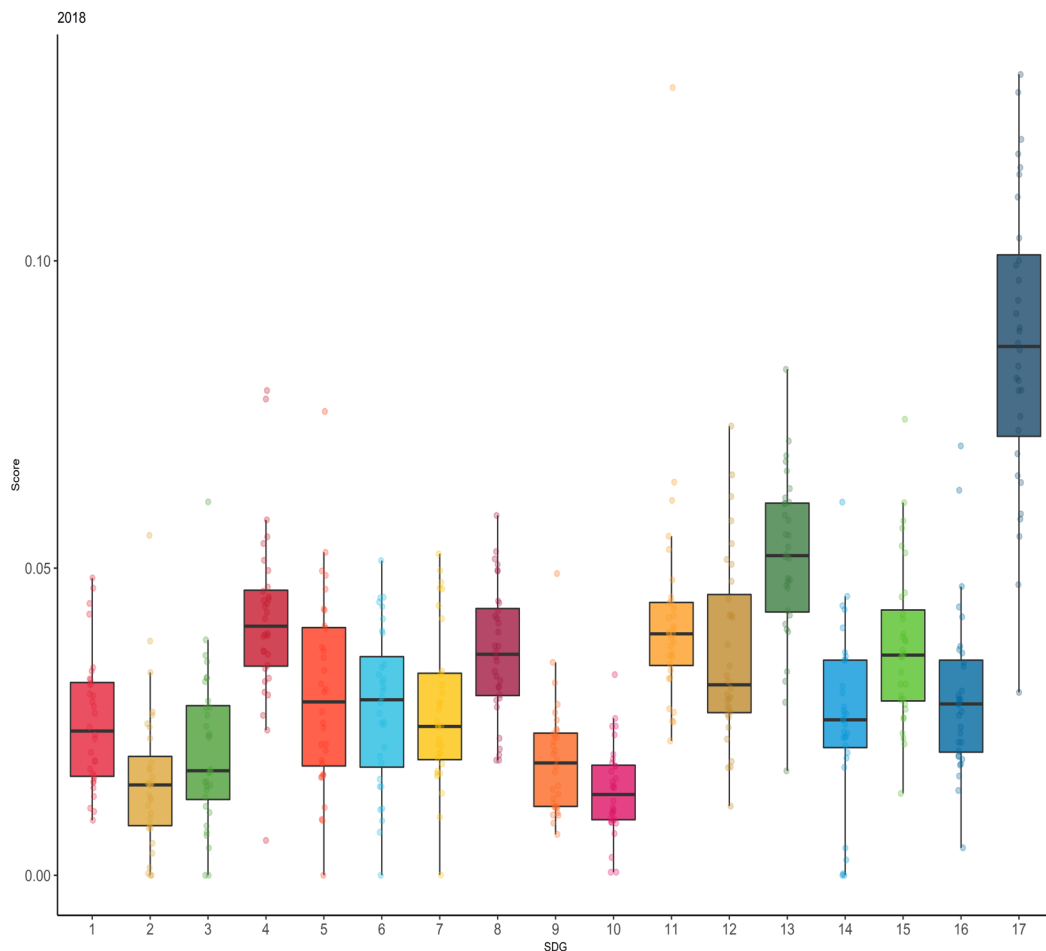
Note: Size and shade of the circles are proportional to the SDG score.

To gain some insights into this issue, we analyzed 36 out of the 46 VNRs presented in 2018<sup>6</sup> using machine learning. The algorithm considers the whole text of each VNR, excluding foreword and annexes, and calculates SDG scores that measures the relative focus countries assign to the different SDGs by comparing the VNR texts with representative United Nations reports and publications on each of the 17 SDGs. Hence, our SDG scores can be seen as a measure of how well the VNR reports align with the United Nations' understanding of the SDGs.

### Key findings

- SDG 17 finds most attention. This might reflect not only the breadth of SDG 17, but also that countries see global partnership as central to the 2030 Agenda.
- SDG 13 on climate change finds second most attention as measured by our SDG scores. This widespread recognition of the climate challenge needs to translate into action.
- Overall, SDG 10 has the lowest scores. Given that inequality is a key impediment for the 2030 Agenda, this is a highly concerning finding. It also calls for more in-depth analysis on how countries can tackle inequality.
- Focus in country reporting is very heterogenous, reflecting the variety of priorities and approaches at the country level.
- The focus SDGs for the 2018 HLPF (namely 6, 7, 11 and 15) found slightly more attention than in other years, but not necessarily more than non-focus SDGs.

Figure 1  
Boxplot showing the distribution of SDG scores in 2018 VNRs



<sup>6</sup> We used all reports available by June 2018 in English language from which the text could be extracted.

## 4 Leaving no one behind

In introducing the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, world leaders state:

*As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.*

How are countries implementing this pledge? To answer this question, we analysed the content of the VNRs with respect to:

- Whether they mentioned the commitment to leave no one behind;
- Whether and which type of strategies to implement the commitment;
- Whether they refer to the principles ‘reach the furthest behind first’ and ‘push no one behind’;
- What groups they specifically referred to in endeavouring to ensure that no one is left behind; and
- What are some of the interesting approaches that countries are taking to implement the commitment.

There are six main findings. **First**, while most countries mention the term “leaving no one behind” (41 countries, see also **table 2** (p.8) for country specific information), countries often remain vague on how to implement it in practice. This might imply that while states recognize the importance of the principle among countries, they face political or technical obstacles to implement it. For instance, there may not always be an understanding on how to translate the principle into concrete strategies and policies. Though the UN Chief Executives Board and other organizations have developed implementation guidelines, the principle is still relatively new and has not yet been fully developed (see CDP work, in particular Klasen and Fleurbaey, 2018). However, it is noteworthy that LNOB has been included in the VNR guidelines since 2018. These findings call for further sharing of information amongst countries on developing policies and strategies to implement the principle. Such work should be prominently discussed at the HLPF.

**Second**, **table 2** (p.8) and **figure 2** (p.9) reveal that social protection is the pervasive area of strategies mentioned to achieve the principle, while other policies are considered less often when it comes to the issue of LNOB. However, the CDP’s work on policy approaches to leaving no one behind concluded that targeted interventions are necessary to ensure many aspects of leaving no one behind, but that they can be ineffective if the principle of leaving no one behind is not reflected in strategic frameworks, in macroeconomic and fiscal policies and in integrated policies for productive capacity development.

### Singaporean Challenges and Opportunities in Tech:

Global structural shifts, rapid technological change and a move away from globalization, pose concerns for the Singaporean government. They see these challenges impacting their overall ability to grow and become more productive within their “small and open economy” (p.29). The Singapore government states, “new technologies can supplant entire industries and displace workers. This includes, for instance, robotics and artificial intelligence programs displacing routine jobs in manufacturing and services” (ibid.). They believe in providing opportunities to be leveraged to help Singapore citizens in the future economy. The opportunities they propose include in-depth skills, life-long learning, innovative and nimble businesses, connected and vibrant cities, continually renewal of oneself and a coordinated, inclusive and responsive Government (ibid.). Therefore, the government utilizes the opportunity to help their citizens grow, such as their elderly populations.

Elderly populations are of great concern to the Singaporean government. They currently have various initiatives to help support their aging citizens. These initiatives help their elderly population supplement their incomes and advance their skillsets. The goal of these initiatives is to “reduce inequalities and ensure social mobility”, directly related to stopping the displacement of older workers. For example, the Singapore government does this through the Workfare Training Support program aiming at encouraging skills upgrading (p.36).

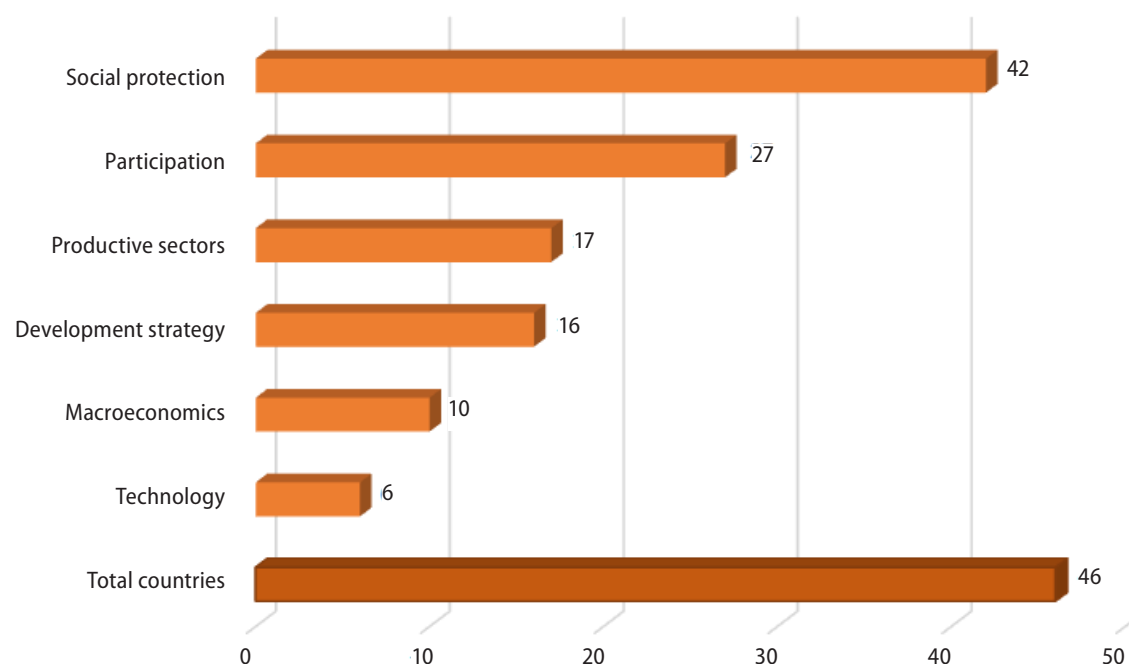
Table 2  
Strategies and targeted groups related to leaving no one behind

Country	LNOB mentioned	LNOB Related Strategies & Action Plans						LNOB Cross-Cutting Issues		LNOB Groups Not To Be Left Behind								
		Social protection	Participation	Productive sectors	Development strategy	Macroeconomic	Technology	Reach the furthest behind first	Push no-one behind	Women/girls	Children/youth	Disabled	Elderly	The poor	Race/ethnicity/religion	Refugees/migrants	Geographical inequalities	LBGTQAI
Albania																		
Andorra																		
Armenia																		
Australia																		
Bahamas																		
Bahrain																		
Benin																		
Bhutan																		
Cabo Verde																		
Canada																		
Colombia																		
Dominican Republic																		
Ecuador																		
Egypt																		
Greece																		
Guinea																		
Hungary																		
Ireland																		
Jamaica																		
Kiribati																		
Lao PDR																		
Latvia																		
Lebanon																		
Lithuania																		
Mali																		
Malta																		
Mexico																		
Namibia																		
Niger																		
Paraguay																		
Poland																		
Qatar																		
Romania																		
Saudi Arabia																		
Senegal																		
Singapore																		
Slovakia																		
Spain																		
Sri Lanka																		
Palestine																		
Sudan																		
Switzerland																		
Togo																		
UAE																		
Uruguay																		
Viet Nam																		
Totals	41	42	27	17	16	10	6	20	5	45	43	41	38	31	29	26	25	8



Figure 2

## Policy areas through which countries report to address LNOB issues



Note: The numbers, shade and size of the boxes all represent how many VNRs make reference to the respective groups in the context of LNOB.

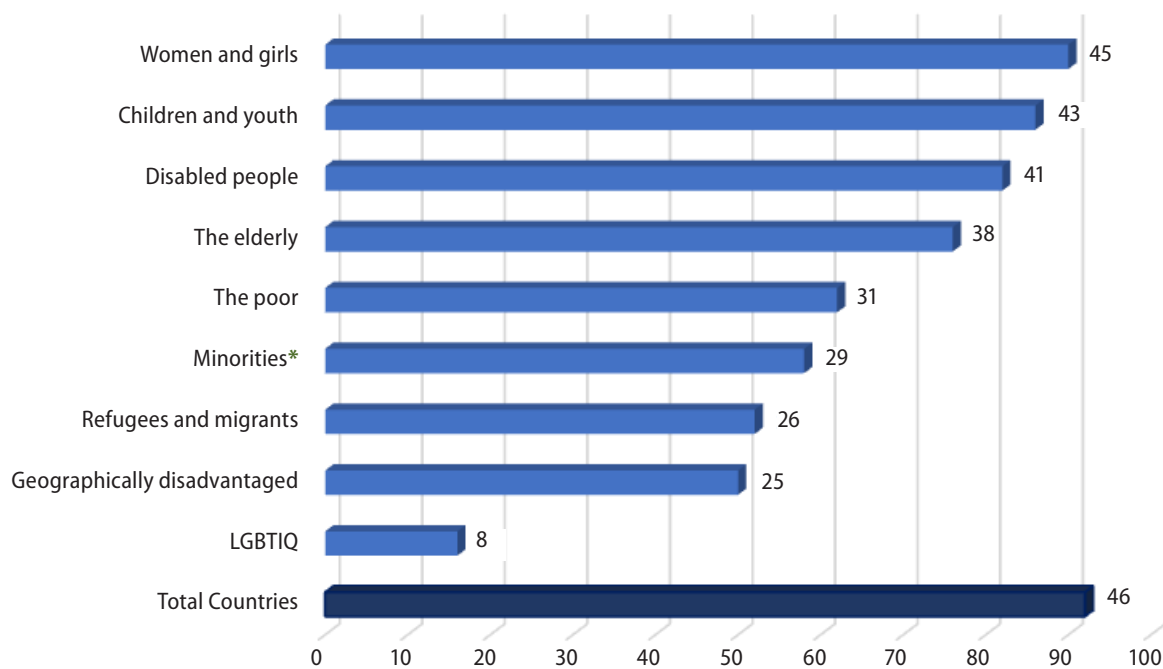
Hence, the fact that macroeconomic policy rarely appears to be linked to leaving no one behind (with only ten countries explicitly mentioning strategies and action plans in this regard), despite its crucial role, could indicate that the potential of using this policy area for ensuring LNOB has not been incorporated at the national level in most countries. While the number of countries that report on including LNOB groups (in particular women and children/youth) in their decision-making processes increased (to 27 countries, from 5 countries who reported in 2017), it remains striking that only few countries explicitly mention the need to improve participation of other LNOB groups in decision making processes, though this has been identified as a root cause for being left behind. Whereas, technology as means towards sustainable development is generally embraced, very few VNRs focus on technology for potentially marginalized groups. **Singapore** stands out as a country reflecting also on the risk that new technologies may disrupt industries and displace workers.

**Third**, less than half (20 out of 46) of the VNRs presented refers to the commitment to reach the furthest behind. Even fewer provide concrete examples how to reach them first, before less marginalized groups, with **Bahamas** a being a noteworthy example. Hence, reaching the ‘furthest behind first’ appears to be a significant challenge for policy makers requiring new policy measures to reach populations hardest to reach as well as new criteria for resource allocation amongst competing priorities. Related to this, only five countries refer to the principle of ‘pushing no one behind’. The CDP had highlighted in its work the risk that in many contexts people are actively pushed behind, thereby increasing rather than reducing the number of those left behind.<sup>7</sup>

**Fourth**, among the groups that receive special focus so that they are not left behind, women receive the most attention (addressed by 45 out of the 46 countries reviewed), followed by children and youth (43 countries) and persons with disabilities (41 countries). This could indicate more widespread awareness of specific challenges faced by these more

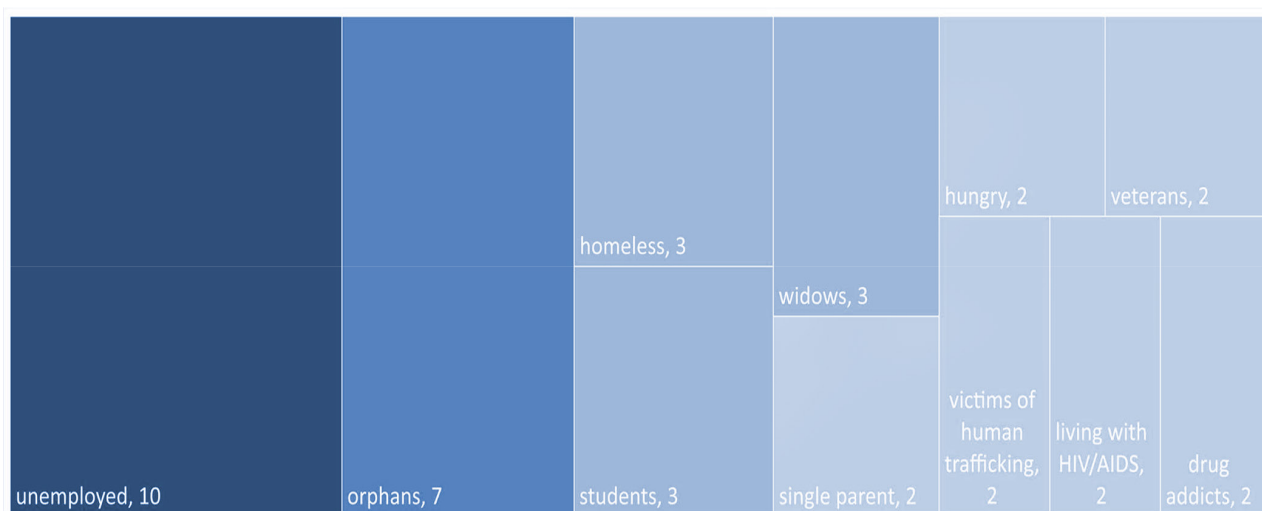
<sup>7</sup> See CDP reports 2018 and 2019, opus cited, and in particular Diane Elson, 2018, CDP Background Paper No.43, *Push no one behind*. Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/leaving-no-one-behind.html>.

Figure 3

**Groups mentioned in VNR reports as being addressed by countries' policies**

\* Include racial, ethnical, religious and indigenous groups.

Figure 4

**Heatmap of groups identified by countries as (possibly at risk of) being left behind**

Note: The numbers, shade and size of the boxes all represent how many VNRs make reference to the respective groups in the context of LNOB.

established groups compared to other groups. It is worth mentioning here, that compared to the VNRs of 2017, the number of countries that mentioned children and youth in this context went up considerably (from 31 to 43 countries). As groups such as indigenous people or ethnic minorities are often regarded as particularly at risk of being left behind, the relatively scarce attention to them in many VNRs could indicate that reaching those furthest behind still constitute a challenge. **Figure 3** (p.11) gives an overview of more traditional LNOB groups that received particular attention by countries in their policies.

However, it is worth mentioning that countries are, in comparison to the VNRs submitted in 2017, increasingly identifying other groups (at risk of being) left behind, such as unemployed, homeless/slum dwellers and informal sector workers, **see figure 4** (p.11). This can be seen as evidence that countries are increasingly trying to translate the principle into action.

**Fifth**, the countries that mention explicit LNOB strategies or ways in which they address LNOB within other key policy areas may already provide useful lessons for other countries. **Table 2** (p.8) also shows which countries are mentioning the principle of LNOB, which strategies they mention in the context of leaving no one behind and who are the groups they are addressing.

**Sixth**, but not least, very few countries consider policies towards the rich and powerful for implementing the principle of leaving no one behind. In its work on LNOB, the CDP has stressed that it is not enough to address inequality by focusing on those left behind at the bottom. Equally important, the concentration of wealth, income and decision-making power at the top needs to be addressed. However, the 2018 VNRs show only limited reflection on inequality at the top. While all reports refer in some way to poverty and exclusion of those at the bottom, inequality itself is seldom addressed as a priority. **Bhutan** highlights the problem “that in a rapidly growing economy, inequality may bring great divides in our society between the rich and the poor.” **Mali** also recognizes that “inequality is not just a problem of the people below the poverty line but of the entire population”, whereas **Lithuania** explicitly emphasizes the importance to “enhance the social responsibility of people with the highest income”.

## 5 Global partnership

Means of implementation and global partnership are an integral part of the concept of sustainable development, at least in the context of the United Nations. Part of the 2030 Agenda is a separate goal for means of implementation and the global partnership (SDG 17) as well as specific targets within the other sixteen SDGs (e.g. target 1.a. on resource mobilization for poverty reductions in developing countries, in particular LDCs). SDG 17 contains 19 different targets in the following areas: finance, technology, capacity building, trade, policy coherence and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

The analysis here focuses on the explicit treatment of SDG 17 in the VNRs, leaving references to global partnership in the discussion on the other sixteen SDGs for possible future work. More precisely, the analysis is based on reviewing sections in VNR reports dedicated to SDG 17 and sections dedicated to global partnership and/or means of implementation. It covers all 19 targets; if appropriate it further distinguishes (for analytical purposes only) between actions primarily aimed at ensuring progress within the country and actions aimed at ensuring progress in (other) developing countries<sup>8</sup> or between different aspects of the targets. The analysis distinguishes between references to targets, the use of indicators (either official global SDG indicators or nationally adopted indicators) to monitor these targets, and concrete actions or strategies aimed at reaching these targets.

<sup>8</sup> As mentioned in section 4 on LNOB, this principle has an international dimension, with LDCs typically identified as countries most at risk of being left behind. Several member states, mostly developed countries, include information in their VNRs on how they intend to ensure that no country is left behind. A systematic analysis of such information could be addressed in future work.

**Table 3** (p. 14) below shows the findings per target, specifying whether it relates to merely a reference to targets (R), the use of indicators (I) and/or concrete actions (A/AI).<sup>9</sup> What becomes apparent is that mere references to targets dominate (41 of 46 VNRs), while indicators and specific actions or strategies to reach the targets are mentioned far less (by 23 and 25 VNRs respectively).<sup>10</sup> Instances where indicators of targets were mentioned alongside concrete actions were rather few, although more than in 2017 VNRs (eleven times, only five in 2017).

Overall, the **table** (p. 14) shows a limited coverage of SDG 17 in the VNR reports. This indicates that countries still make only scant use of the VNR reports for sharing experiences in implementing SDG 17. However, it would be premature to conclude that this indicates a lack of commitment to concrete action on means of implementation and global partnership. As discussed in section 2, there is no mandatory requirement for countries to report on any of the targets in the VNRs. This is particularly relevant here because for many of the targets under SDG 17, other global mechanisms and review mechanisms exist. Thus, some countries might have chosen to report on SDG 17 in different institutional contexts, despite the explicit mandate of the HLPF to annually review SDG 17. Moreover, many countries make explicit references to assisting (other) developing countries or to assistance received within other parts of the VNR (such as poverty eradication). Hence, the limited emphasis could indicate that cooperation targets within the first 16 goals find stronger uptake in the VNRs than the stand-alone SDG 17. The finding in section 3 that overall, SDG 17 receives relatively more attention than any other single SDG would be in line with such explanation. However, additional analysis would be required to establish this claim.

A second key finding is the variation in coverage across targets, **see table 4** (p.15). The target on investment promotion regimes for LDCs (17.5) is referenced by merely one country, while the target on policy space and leadership (17.15) is only referenced by three countries (up from no reference in 2017 VNRs). Environmentally sound technologies (17.7), another “orphan target” in 2017, was at least mentioned six times in 2018. Thus, targets that can be considered “orphan targets” in 2018 include investment promotion regimes for LDCs (17.5), implementation of duty free and quota free market access for LDC (17.12) and policy space and leadership (17.15). However, there are also targets that received more attention, the best coverage among the targets are domestic resource mobilization (17.1), additional external financial resources (17.3), as well as partnerships (17.17). Notably, these targets received the most attention in areas of domestic and national strategies. These targets refer to aspects that relate to within-country policies and commitments. Moreover, within targets, specific aspects often receive less attention than more generic aspects. For example, within target 17.8, there are fifteen references to the aspect of domestic ICT use, but only one mentioning of the technology bank and two references to ICT use in other countries. This is also prevalent within the target 17.1, as this target received the most mentions of any SDG 17 indicator, for domestic resource mobilization (DRM) at 27 mentions. However, there were only two mentions for both the support received and the support provided within DRM. Finally, for SDG 17.18., statistical capacity-building, there were 18 mentions for domestic capacity building. However, there were limited mentions, four and three respectively to capacity building received and capacity building provided; furthermore, there were only six mentions for the need for disaggregated data.

For targets that received better, while still rather limited coverage, the VNRs overall provide interesting examples that could be a basis for mutual learning. For example, **Mexico** has five emblematic actions for SDG 17 that use partnerships with various organizations and countries to promote the advancement of various LNOB groups. For example, one emblematic action mentions, “**Mexico** has an Action Plan under the framework of the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children. This initiative is promoted by a variety of actors, including governments, international organizations and civil society, and aims to reduce child abuse and exploitation” (p.84). **Sri Lanka** and **Saudi Arabia** stand

<sup>9</sup> Both single references to R, I and A, as well as a combination thereof (IA) are displayed in an additive manner in **table 3** (p. 14). For example, the row on actions (A) denotes the total number of VNRs that include the description of actions undertaken or envisaged by the country with respect to these targets.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the analysis did not cover statistical annexes that are part of some VNRs. Including those would raise the instances of indicators related to SDG 17.

Table 3

References to all SDG 17 targets by type<sup>a</sup>

				Types of References		
Reference (R) Only	Indicator (I)	Action (A)	A+I			
7	10	8	2	Domestic	17.1 Domestic resource mobilization	Finance
2	0	0	0	Support received		
2	0	0	0	Support provided		
1	12	0	1		17.2 ODA targets	
14	3	4	3	Inflows mobilized	17.3 Additional external financial resources	
5	3	2	1	Outflows mobilized		
1	0	0	0	Support provided/required	17.4 Debt	
6	9	0	0	Domestic efforts		
1	0	0	0		17.5 Investment promotion regimes for LDCs	
6	1	1	1	Support received	17.6 STI cooperation	Technology
4	0	1	1	Support provided		
1	0	2	0	Other cooperation		
1	0	0	0	UN Mechanisms		
5	0	1	0		17.7 Promote ESTs	
1	0	0	0	Technology bank	17.8 Technology bank; ICT use	
5	5	2	3	Domestic ICT use		
2	0	0	0	ICT use in other countries		
8	0	0	0	Received capacity-building	17.9 Capacity building	Capacity building
8	1	2	1	Provided capacity building		
2	0	1	0	Other capacity building		
1	0	1	0	Capacity building on national planning		
9	0	0	0		17.10 Multilateral trade	
6	3	4	2	Own exports	17.11 Increase exports	Trade
4	0	1	0	Developing countries' exports		
4	0	0	0		17.12 DFQF	
4	0	0	0	Global macroeconomic stability	17.13 Global macroeconomic stability	Policy coherence
2	1	0	0	Domestic macroeconomic stability		
13	0	0	0		17.14 Policy coherence	
2	1	0	0		17.15 Policy space and leadership	
8	2	5	0		17.16 Global partnership	
12	0	8	0	National partnerships	17.17 Partnerships	Multi-stakeholder partnerships
2	0	1	0	Support to partnerships abroad		
13	1	4	0	Domestic capacity building	17.18 Statistical capacity-building	
4	0	0	0	Capacity building received		
2	1	0	0	Capacity building provided		
6	0	0	0	Data disaggregation		
1	4	0	0		17.19 New measures of progress	
175	57	48	15	Totals		

<sup>a</sup> For readability purposes, the formulations of the targets were shortened by the authors. The Annex provides a full list of targets and indicators for reference.

Table 4

References to all SDG 17 targets (by country)

[illegible]

out as the only two countries to provide detailed descriptions of an increase in their own exports (17.11). Three countries, **Kiribati**, **Lao** and **Senegal**, stand out as they provided approaches to their inflows mobilized through additional external financial resources (17.3). Finally, **Lithuania** stands out as the only country to discuss examples for ODA targets (17.2); when twelve countries only highlighted this target using indicators (I).

The presence of “orphan targets” (in particular 17.5 and 17.15) within SDG 17 in the VNRs is a cause for concern. International fora such as the HLPF, where SDG 17 is discussed every year, could provide a good platform to do so and encourage states to address these targets more adequately in the future. However, it could also be the case that the formulation of certain targets is not very conducive to be utilized in reporting processes such as the VNRs. Moreover, the finding could also indicate that for some aspects of SDG 17, dedicated follow up mechanisms are more suitable than reporting through VNR processes. Consequently, it may be worthwhile to analyse in more detail whether the limited attention to certain targets under SDG 17 is a reporting issue or whether it reflects a low priority attached to them.

## 6 Quality Education (SDG 4)

While SDG 4 (“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”) is one of the focal goals of the 2019 HLPF, all but two countries reported on this topic also in their VNRs in 2018. Most reports with a chapter on SDG 4 are substantial and include a statistical overview, a list of developments and legislative efforts, major challenges and approaches to tackle the most burning issues. A few countries touch upon the issues of quality education in their reports, albeit do not include a corresponding chapter or section.

In order to gain insights into priorities countries report within SDG 4, we developed a set of more specific education topics that can be broadly organized into the key aspects quality of and access to education. The detailed coverage of most relevant topics reported for SDG 4 in the VNRs is provided in **table 5** (p.18). Overall, it is noteworthy that a majority of countries (29 out of 46 VNRs) discuss both issues of access and quality of education. Six countries focus on quality education only, while two VNRs only refer to issues related to access to education. The remaining nine VNRs reference up to two issue areas but lack systematic focus on either access or quality and SDG 4 in general. Also, the focus on SDG 4 differs across countries. Two countries, **Greece** and **Ireland**, are exceptional with the discussion of all targets of SDG 4. Commonly, countries list only those targets which are considered most relevant to their economies. Here the developing countries tend to focus on guaranteeing and improving access to education, providing opportunities for receiving primary and secondary education by all groups of populations, and in particular, the poor and girls. In this regard, **Cabo Verde** gives subsidies to poor families for preschool education of their children and **Lao PDR** links low sanitary and water conditions in school with poor attendance by girls. In certain countries, however, it is reported to rather be boys who are left behind the secondary education in a comparison to girls, for instance in **Armenia** and **Cabo Verde**.

At the same time, developed countries, especially the **EU member countries** presenting VNRs, focus on specific problems such as relative performance of teachers and students, contents of the curriculum and its interrelation with the labor market and the overall demands of the technology economy. For example, **Denmark** provides a statistical appendix with a survey data analysis on the profiles of average school grades and on computer skills of school students. Many **European countries** discuss their results in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and focus on the relative success of students in math, natural sciences and computer science. The issue of poverty as an obstacle for obtaining high quality education is mentioned in the reports of high-income countries primarily with respect to immigrant families, ethnic minorities or indigenous groups (e.g. Roma minorities in a number of **European countries** or indigenous population in **Canada** and **Australia**). Common instruments to tackle poverty as an obstacle to school attendance include free meals or full-day school models (**Lithuania**, **Sri Lanka**, and **Greece**). In **Hungary**, schools with a high drop-out rate receive a financial subsidy.

Inclusiveness of education (largely addressed by programs for disabled and handicapped), issues of life-long learning and vocational training, as well as digital education are well covered in reports by the high and upper middle-income

Table 5  
Quality and access to education as addressed in 2018 VNRs

Country	Quality											Access						
	Quality education in Development Strategy	Quality of education as concern	Teaching and learning quality	Digitalization of teaching technologies	Curriculum adjusted for modern economy	STEM subjects and computer skills	Education in sustainable development	Bridge between training and labor market	Vocational education/training	Adult learning/lifelong learning	Early learning	Primary school participation	Survival in secondary school	Unequal geographical access	Access of poor to education is prioritised	Inclusive education: actions	Inclusiveness of education is emphasized	Access to education in Development Strategy
Albania																		
Andorra																		
Armenia																		
Australia																		
Bahamas																		
Bahrain																		
Benin																		
Bhutan																		
Cabo Verde																		
Canada																		
Colombia																		
Dominican Republic																		
Ecuador																		
Egypt																		
Greece																		
Guinea																		
Hungary																		
Ireland																		
Jamaica																		
Kiribati																		
Lao PDR																		
Latvia																		
Lebanon																		
Lithuania																		
Mali																		
Malta																		
Mexico																		
Namibia																		
Niger																		
Palestine																		
Paraguay																		
Poland																		
Qatar																		
Romania																		
Saudi Arabia																		
Senegal																		
Singapore																		
Slovakia																		
Spain																		
Sri Lanka																		
Sudan																		
Switzerland																		
Togo																		
UAE																		
Uruguay																		
Viet Nam																		
Totals	16	9	11	18	13	18	14	21	24	17	25	14	14	10	9	25	22	14



countries. A few countries expand inclusiveness of education to cover older people (**Romania**) or people with disadvantaged backgrounds (**Hungary**). As regards the programs for disabled, most countries target children and youth. **Bahamas** may be a rare example of educating adults with disabilities.

The issue of vocational training to better meet the needs of the modern economy through education is addressed by countries of different income level. Some countries present their approaches to bridge the gap between training and labor market, namely dual education – an opportunity of college students to acquire practical experience at companies (**Kiribati, Slovakia and Hungary**).

The challenge of inadequate financing for education is primarily mentioned in reports by the **developing countries**. Many **donor countries** note their regional and international projects and commitments, along with support of international scholars.

Overall, this shows that there is a positive trend towards focusing and reporting on both quality and access issues, with many countries that provide useful examples on concrete policies. Countries also openly discuss challenges and solutions to address those. However, the fact that around a fifth of the VNRs do not offer systematic focus on either access to or quality of education is concerning and shows that there still needs more attention to this important SDG by some countries.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper undertook a content analysis of 46 VNRs presented in 2018 focusing on the themes of ‘leaving no one behind’ and means of implementation and the global partnership (SDG 17), as they are among the most important principles that are the core elements of the 2030 Agenda. To complement this cross-cutting perspective, the review also includes a focus on one individual focal SDG of this year’s HLPF, namely SDG 4 on quality education.

The analysis aimed to identify key aspects reflected in the VNRs that may require special global attention and to provide evidence of good practices and other valuable experiences that could be utilized to share lessons learned and promote mutual learning.

The paper identifies some interesting presentations in VNRs to facilitate mutual learning. It also presents broad trends in the way that three core themes are addressed.

Regarding **leaving no one behind**, most reports acknowledge this principle, countries often remain vague in discussions on strategies towards implementing it. Among the groups at risk of being left behind, women and children/youth were most commonly mentioned, followed by persons with disabilities. Less attention was given to exclusion for status as indigenous people, ethnic/religious minorities and migrants. Less than half of the VNRs examined do address the priority to the furthest behind. Compared to 2017, where none specifically mentioned this priority, this is a positive development. However, even fewer provide concrete examples how to reach them first, before less marginalized groups. Hence, reaching the ‘furthest behind first’ appears to be a significant challenge for policy makers requiring new policy measures to reach populations hardest to reach as well as new criteria for resource allocation amongst competing priorities. Related to this, only five countries refer to the principle of ‘pushing no one behind’. The CDP had highlighted in its work the risk that in many contexts people are actively pushed behind, thereby increasing rather than reducing the number of those left behind. While, social policy approaches are again most common amongst policy approaches mentioned, approaches to integrate leaving no one behind into macroeconomic, technology and productive capacity building feature less in the VNRs. The fact that macroeconomic policy rarely appears to be linked to leaving no one behind, despite its crucial role, could indicate that the potential of using this policy area for ensuring LNOB has not been incorporated at the national level in most countries. While the number of countries that report on including LNOB groups (in particular women and children/youth) in their decision-making processes increased, it remains striking that only few countries explicitly mention the need to improve participation of other LNOB groups in decision making processes, though this has been

identified as a root cause for being left behind. Whereas technology as means towards sustainable development is generally embraced, very few VNRs focus on technology for potentially marginalized groups. This may call for further work and sharing of experiences in effectively translating leaving no one behind into development strategies and frameworks, particularly in conjunction to considering the findings of the CDP policy work in this area<sup>11</sup>.

The analysis on **SDG 17** on global partnership and means of implementation showed that this is an issue that receives scant attention in the VNRs. The reference is general and does not address specific targets or indicators. Moreover, there are several “orphan targets” – notably policy space and leadership, investment promotion regimes for LDCs, and implementation of duty free and quota free market access for LDC – that are mentioned each by up to three countries only. Further work would be required to establish whether this reflects a missed opportunity to utilize the VNR process of the HLPF as a platform to share experiences in implementing SDG 17 or a lack of implementation of certain aspects of this key goal.

As regards **addressing quality education (SDG 4)**, a key finding is that a majority of countries (29 out of 46 VNRs) discuss both issues of access and quality of education. However, the focus on SDG 4 differs across countries. Commonly, countries list only those targets which are considered most relevant to their economies. VNRs of developing countries tend to focus on guaranteeing and improving access to education, providing opportunities for receiving primary and secondary education by all groups of populations, and in particular, the poor and girls. Developed countries, in particular the **EU member countries** presenting VNRs, focus on specific problems such as relative performance of teachers and students, contents of the curriculum and its interrelation with the labor market and the overall demands of the technology economy. However, there is no clear divide between developed and developing countries as regards their focus on either access to or quality of education. It is positive that many VNRs report on both quality and access issues, with many countries that provide useful examples on concrete policies. Nevertheless, more attention and reflection on SDG 4 is needed, in light of the fact that around a fifth of the VNRs do not offer systematic focus on either access to or quality of education.

This analysis of overall trends in VNR content can complement more in-depth analysis of policy approaches for implementation of the SDGs. While the VNRs are intended to enable mutual learning, the HLPF process of presentations are less a process of monitoring than one that generates healthy competition amongst countries to produce higher quality reports that share relevant details on their experience and good practices. This report is intended to foster such healthy competition by indicating ways in which the substantive content of the VNRs could be strengthened.

<sup>11</sup> The work is available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/2018/leaving-no-one-behind/>.

## Annex – SDG 17: full list of targets and indicators

### Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Finance<sup>a</sup>

<b>17.1</b> Strengthen <i>domestic resource mobilization</i> , including through international <i>support</i> to developing countries, to improve domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection	<b>17.1.1</b> Total government revenue as a proportion of GDP, by source <b>17.1.2</b> Proportion of domestic budget funded by domestic taxes
<b>17.2</b> Developed countries to implement fully their official development assistance commitments, including the commitment by many developed countries to achieve the target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income for <i>official development assistance (ODA/GNI)</i> to developing countries and 0.15 to 0.20 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries; ODA providers are encouraged to consider setting a target to provide at least 0.20 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries	<b>17.2.1</b> Net official development assistance, total and to least developed countries, as a proportion of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee donors' gross national income (GNI)
<b>17.3</b> Mobilize <i>additional financial resources</i> for developing countries from multiple sources	<b>17.3.1</b> Foreign direct investment (FDI), official development assistance and South-South cooperation as a proportion of total domestic budget <b>17.3.2</b> Volume of remittances (in United States dollars) as a proportion of total GDP
<b>17.4</b> Assist developing countries in attaining long-term <i>debt sustainability</i> through coordinated policies aimed at fostering debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring, as appropriate, and address the external debt of highly indebted poor countries to reduce debt distress	<b>17.4.1</b> Debt service as a proportion of exports of goods and services
<b>17.5</b> Adopt and implement <i>investment promotion regimes</i> for least developed countries	<b>17.5.1</b> Number of countries that adopt and implement investment promotion regimes for least developed countries
<b>Technology</b>	
<b>17.6</b> 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	<b>17.6.1</b> Number of science and/or technology cooperation agreements and programmes between countries, by type of cooperation <b>17.6.2</b> Fixed Internet broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, by speed
<b>17.7</b> Promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of <i>environmentally sound technologies</i> to developing countries on favourable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed	<b>17.7.1</b> Total amount of approved funding for developing countries to promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies
<b>17.8</b> Fully operationalize the <i>technology bank</i> and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the <i>use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology</i>	<b>17.8.1</b> Proportion of individuals using the Internet

continued

<sup>a</sup> Source: UN Statistics Division, 2018, Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, retrieved on 26 June 2018 from [https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/Global%20Indicator%20Framework%20after%20refinement\\_Eng.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/Global%20Indicator%20Framework%20after%20refinement_Eng.pdf)

<b>Capacity-building</b>	
<b>17.9</b> Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted <i>capacity-building in developing countries</i> to support national plans to implement all the Sustainable Development Goals, including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation	<b>17.9.1</b> Dollar value of financial and technical assistance (including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation) committed to developing countries
<b>Trade</b>	
<b>17.10</b> Promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable <i>multilateral trading system</i> under the World Trade Organization, including through the conclusion of negotiations under its Doha Development Agenda	<b>17.10.1</b> Worldwide weighted tariff-average
<b>17.11</b> Significantly <i>increase the exports</i> of developing countries, in particular with a view to doubling the least developed countries' share of global exports by 2020	<b>17.11.1</b> Developing countries' and least developed countries' share of global exports
<b>17.12</b> Realize timely implementation of <i>duty-free and quota-free</i> 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	<b>17.12.1</b> Average tariffs faced by developing countries, least developed countries and small island developing States
<b>Systemic issues</b>	
<i>Policy and institutional coherence</i>	
<b>17.13</b> Enhance <i>global macroeconomic stability</i> , including through policy coordination and policy coherence	<b>17.13.1</b> Macroeconomic Dashboard
<b>17.14</b> Enhance <i>policy coherence</i> for sustainable development	<b>17.14.1</b> Number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development
<b>17.15</b> Respect each country's <i>policy space and leadership</i> to establish and implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development	<b>17.15.1</b> Extent of use of country-owned results frameworks and planning tools by providers of development cooperation
<i>Multi-stakeholder partnerships</i>	
<b>17.16</b> Enhance the <i>Global Partnership</i> for Sustainable Development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in all countries, in particular developing countries	<b>17.16.1</b> Number of countries reporting progress in multi-stakeholder development effectiveness monitoring frameworks that support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals
<b>17.17</b> Encourage and <i>promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships</i> , building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships	<b>17.17.1</b> Amount of United States dollars committed to (a) public-private partnerships and (b) civil society partnerships
<i>Data, monitoring and accountability</i>	
<b>17.18</b> By 2020, enhance <i>capacity-building support</i> to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts	<b>17.18.1</b> Proportion of sustainable development indicators produced at the national level with full disaggregation when relevant to the target, in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics  <b>17.18.2</b> Number of countries that have national statistical legislation that complies with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics  <b>17.18.3</b> Number of countries with a national statistical plan that is fully funded and under implementation, by source of funding
<b>17.19</b> By 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop <i>measurements of progress</i> on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries	<b>17.19.1</b> Dollar value of all resources made available to strengthen statistical capacity in developing countries  <b>17.19.2</b> Proportion of countries that (a) have conducted at least one population and housing census in the last 10 years; and (b) have achieved 100 per cent birth registration and 80 per cent death registration