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What are the Voluntary National Reviews (still) not telling us?

*CDP members**

ABSTRACT

This paper is the fifth in a series of annual analyses of voluntary national reviews (VNRs) conducted by the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) and examines the VNR reports presented at the 2021 High Level Political Forum (HLPF). It consists of an introductory chapter with general conclusions and recommendations for consideration by governments and other stakeholders participating in future VNRs; and follows with a short series of authored thematic chapters. The document revisits issues addressed in the previous editions, such as the pledge to leave no one behind, inequalities, gender equality, COVID-19 and pandemic preparedness, and SDG 17, but also adds a new chapter on the environment. In doing so it identifies issues that are absent or under-reported in the VNRs while critical for the success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The overall conclusion is that while there are important improvements and positive developments in the VNRs over time, there remains a significant gap between the ambitions of the 2030 agenda and the policies, strategies and actions reported in the VNRs. The deep transformative change that is envisioned in the agenda and required to meet the SDGs is not evident in the VNRs.

Keywords: Sustainable development, SDGs, 2030 Agenda, voluntary national reviews, leaving no one behind, global partnership, inequality, gender inequality, COVID-19, environment

JEL Classification: F55, O1, Q01

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CONTENTS

I	Introduction and Overview	3
II	Pandemic preparedness and consequences for the SDGs.	6
III	Leaving no one behind	10
IV	SDG10 Reduced inequalities	15
V	SDG5 Gender inequality	22
VI	Partnerships for the goals and SDG 17	31
VII	Under-reported goals and targets	33
VIII	Environment	36

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I What did the 2021 Voluntary National Reviews (still) not tell us?

I.1 Introduction and Overview

“We can’t lose more ground. It’s time to rescue the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] and give sustainable development a fighting chance. For people. For planet. For our common future.”

- António Guterres in statement to Group of Friends Event on 2030 Agenda, May 2022

The launch of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 represented a commitment to transforming our world and achieving a better and more sustainable future for all. A plan of action for people, planet and prosperity, the Agenda seeks to eradicate poverty, strengthen peace, human rights and freedoms and put humanity on a sustainable and resilient path. Today, as we approach the halfway mark of the implementation period, it is clear that we are not on course for this transformation. Evidenced by the failure to meet the climate crisis, the unequal distribution of vaccines during the COVID pandemic, the increase in income inequality, the current food and energy crises and continued denial of basic human rights it is clear that the whole agenda is at risk if an urgent change in course is not made.

It is against this backdrop that the United Nations Committee for Development Policy (CDP) presents this paper, the fifth in a series of analyses of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that the Committee has conducted since 2017 (CDP subgroup on voluntary national reviews, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). The VNRs are the cornerstones of the formal follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda and every year a group of countries present their review at the ministerial segment of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). The CDP analysis explores how these VNRs succeed as tools of learning from the experience of others in the implementation of the agenda. It provides points for consideration by governments and other stakeholders participating in the VNRs, with recommendations for how the role of the VNRs as an effective instrument in accelerating SDG implementation can be enhanced.

This document examines the VNR reports presented in 2021. It analyses the reports of 41 countries¹ who submitted reports, of which 8 countries reported for the first time, 23 countries reported for the second time and 10 countries reported for the third time.

This introductory chapter summarizes the main conclusions and makes recommendations for future VNRs. Subsequent chapters explore in greater detail how the 2021 VNRs addressed pandemic response and preparedness (Chapter 2), the pledge to leave no one behind (Chapter 3), inequality (Chapter 4), gender inequality (Chapter 5), strengthening partnerships (Chapter 6), under-reported goals and targets (Chapter 7), and the environment (Chapter 8).

I.1 Main conclusions

While the Committee acknowledges advances in the VNR over time, key concerns raised by the Committee in the past on the scope and content of the reports remain. The VNRs reviewed are not reflecting the transformative ambition of the 2030 Agenda, nor do they appear to be effectively used as tools for taking lessons learned into policy debates and processes.

The VNR reports are largely descriptive and lack the substantive assessments and analyses required to serve their intended purpose of sharing the experiences of national governments, civil society, businesses and international partners. More detailed attention to and reflection on policies, strategies and actions taken, nationally and internationally and their impact, would help identify experiences and lessons learned, which could support improvements to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

¹ 42 countries presented their VNRs in 2021, but Bahamas only delivered a short summary and has been excluded from this analysis.

All VNRs report on the severe impact of the pandemic on SDG progress, with most reports putting more emphasis on socio-economic impacts than on health impacts. Many reports describe the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on marginalized and disadvantaged groups but do not reflect on why this is the case. Most reports detail the health response and social protection support, but a number of reports leave out any mention of vaccine access. Only about a third of the reports refer to target 3.d on pandemic preparedness.

The Committee is encouraged by the increasing attention given to the pledge to leave no one behind, which is mentioned in all reports. However, the focus of policy response, such as on the effects of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, is mostly on social protection measures for the vulnerable and marginalized groups with less reflection on structural issues. Furthermore, only two reports mention reaching the furthest behind first and none refer to actions to avoid pushing people further behind. When identifying marginalized and disadvantaged groups, disabled persons, women and girls, the elderly and children are widely recognized, while references to indigenous people, religious or ethnic groups, LGBTIQ and people living with HIV/AIDS are rarer.

A welcome trend of increasing attention given to income inequality in the VNRs continues. However, there is under-reporting of important targets of SDG10, in particular those referring to financial market regulation and enhanced representation of developing countries in international decision making. Furthermore, the notion of structural change, nationally and internationally is still absent. The VNRs continue to focus on social safety nets and redistribution rather than on underlying fundamental causes of inequality.

Three-quarters of the reports have a dedicated section on gender equality, which is a lower share than in previous years. Even fewer reports refer to specific targets under SDG5; the reporting is superficial in most VNRs. Only around half of the reports recognize gender pay gaps, and only one in four reports refers to any policies or strategies to address this issue.

The Committee found that there was a substantial increase in the attention given to climate action and clean energy, which it found to have been underreported in the VNRs presented in 2020. Sustainable consumption and production is discussed in almost all reports but, aside from waste reduction and management, the attention to individual targets is modest, suggesting the topic is not treated in much depth. Very few reports mention resource mobilization for ecosystem protection and sustainable management of forests. Based on a mapping of the interlinkages among environmental targets, as well as between environmental and other targets, the Committee explored how the reports address and refer to such interdependencies. For instance, the relationship between access to clean water and education is referred to in some reports.

Resource mobilization in general receives the most attention in the reporting of SDG 17. Other aspects, such as international commitments and creating enabling environments, have less coverage in the 2021 VNRs. As an example, only one quarter of the reports refer to policy coherence. This could indicate a failure of many reports to recognize and address the integrated nature of the sustainable development challenge and the transformative change needed to realize the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. The Committee is also concerned that targets, such as investment promotion and market access that specifically support the development of least developed countries, remain among the least reported targets overall. Furthermore, the importance of policy space is scarcely mentioned in any reports.

A general trend in past reports and again in the reports presented in 2021 is the lack of attention to means of implementation targets. Targets and themes related to technology transfer, capacity building and inclusive and equitable globalization and trade remain among the least reported. This is true for the reporting on all goals.

1.2 Analytical methods and approaches

The general approach adopted by the CDP in its analyses of VNRs has been to review how the VNRs presented each year have considered, or failed to consider, selected cross-cutting principles, goals or targets. The methods used for the content analysis include searches for references to specific terms, software-assisted contextualized word searches and focused

analyses of specific sections of reports. Analyzing a large number of reports that cover such a wide scope as that of the 2030 Agenda necessarily involves trade-offs, analytical choices, and a degree of subjectivity, particularly considering the diversity in report structures. Methodological differences, differently structured reports in different languages and other characteristics of the VNRs limit comparability across reports and in time. However, taken together, and acknowledging the limitations of this type of analysis, these complementary perspectives provide an overview of what the VNRs are revealing about the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and especially where the main gaps are.

1.3 Recommendations for future VNRs

The Committee recommends that the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) continues to explore how the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) can be made more effective for the purpose of sharing experiences on implementation of the 2030 agenda. This should be achieved by incorporating into these reports more specific and substantive discussions and analysis on national and international policies, actions and strategies taken as part of the global social contract in pursuit of the SDGs. Such reflections should review in particular the challenges of achieving the transformative and integrated objectives of the 2030 Agenda and include a reference to the key constraints faced by countries and support needed.

The Committee also recommends that ECOSOC and Member States undertaking VNRs strengthen the role of the reviews to share lessons learned among Member States and other stakeholders. Member States undertaking their second and successive VNRs should report on how findings from earlier reviews have been used to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 agenda nationally and internationally.

The Committee further reiterates its recommendation that ECOSOC and Member States undertaking VNRs explore ways to tap into new opportunities to make the VNR processes more inclusive, while ensuring adequate representation of groups that are disadvantaged. This requires continued engagement of civil society and space in the VNR process for independent input from all stakeholders, including the presentation of shadow reports.

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II Pandemic preparedness and consequences for the SDGs

II.1 Introduction

“Vaccine inequity is the biggest moral failure of our times – and people and countries are paying the price.”

- António Guterres at the Covid-19 Tools Accelerator Launch in February 2022

The Covid-19 pandemic has pushed more than 119 million people into poverty² and as the 2022 Sustainable Development Progress Report of the Secretary General emphasizes, decades of development progress has been reversed.³ A majority of people in least developed countries (LDCs) have still not received their first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine; as of May 2022 only 32 per cent of people in LDCs have received at least one dose, whereas 71 per cent of people in other developing countries and 74 of people in developed countries are vaccinated.⁴ The WHO aimed to vaccinate at least 70% of the world’s population by June 2022 which it has failed.⁵ The multistakeholder approach to distributing the Covid-19 vaccine has met major challenges and raises questions on how efficient and sustainable the Gavi Alliance has been in distributing the vaccines. Some critics believe that the momentum to administer the Covid-19 vaccine to developing countries might be lost forever.⁶ Moreover, food security issues relating to the pandemic as well as emerging conflicts have worsened.⁷

Needless to say, the pandemic disrupted implementation of the 2030 Agenda across all the SDGs and reversed progress in many. The ambition to reduce inequalities within and among countries (SDG 10) has been reversed with the onset of the pandemic and there is little hope of this trend changing if adequate and transformative policy responses are not put in place urgently. These consequences stem not only from the health effects by the spread of COVID-19, but also from the socio-economic impacts of the public health measures to contain transmission, and the global economic recession that was triggered. The consequences are multifaceted, have complex ramifications, and are reshaping the prospects for a more sustainable and equitable world.

The VNRs analyzed in this paper were presented in July 2021, about one and a half year into the pandemic. While the VNRs presented the year before were mostly prepared with pre-pandemic data and analysis, it has been both interesting and surprising to see how VNRs from 2021 differ, if and how they adapted and discussed effects and policy responses of the ongoing pandemic on the 2030 Agenda, particularly with respect to the key issues of equity, inclusion and sustainability.

II.2 The Unequal Impact of the Pandemic

All but five VNRs highlight the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on marginalized and vulnerable populations. It is encouraging to see priority attention being paid to the commitment to ‘leave no one behind’ in the context of the pandemic, which is explicitly mentioned in most (30 out of 41) reports. Nonetheless the analyses of these impacts vary and could be strengthened; only 16 VNRs report on the disproportionate mortality and morbidity Covid-19 has had on vulnerable groups. This is an increase from last year’s reporting, when only 5 out of 45 VNRs made reference to

² The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021 <https://www.un.org/en/desa/sustainable-development-goals-sdgs>

³ Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals 2022 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/29858SG_SDG_Progress_Report_2022.pdf

⁴ CDP Secretariat, 2022. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/LDC-vaccine-31-May-22.pdf>

⁵ WHO, 2021 Director-General’s opening remarks at the G7 Summit - 12 June 2021

⁶ Robbins, Nolen. 2022. The Drive to Vaccinate the World Against Covid Is Losing Steam <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/covid-vaccines-world-africa.html>

⁷ Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals 2022 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/29858SG_SDG_Progress_Report_2022.pdf

this. Women have been particularly affected by the pandemic due to gendered institutions and norms, including loss of employment and income, increase in the burden of unpaid care work, rise in domestic violence, and pressures on mental health.⁸ About 75 per cent of the reports mentioned the disproportionate gendered effects the pandemic has had. This is an increase from last year when only 22 per cent of the reports highlighted this. As an example, Zimbabwe's VNR underscored the gendered aspects of the pandemic and noted that while women were the ones on the frontlines fighting the pandemic, they were also one of the most vulnerable groups to feel the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic. Nearly all VNRs mention the overall impact the pandemic has had on their economies and the effects the pandemic has had on achieving the SDGs in time.

II.3 Pandemic Preparedness and Target 3.d

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the risk of a new, deadly and infectious disease has been a growing concern in the international community, particularly after the experience of the 2005 avian flu and the 2009 H1N1 outbreaks. Since the late 1990s, the World Health Organization (WHO) and other health authorities repeatedly issued alerts of a global threat and the critical importance for countries to be prepared to respond rapidly in case of an outbreak. Strengthening pandemic preparedness has therefore been one of the top priorities in the global health agenda and was included in the SDG framework. Target 3.d, one of the 13 targets under goal 3 aims to: "Strengthen the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks". It is monitored by two indicators that are related to the implementation of International Health Regulation (IHR) capacity and health regulation preparedness, and the spread of antimicrobial resistance. While all 196 state parties have been reporting regularly to the IHR, only 31% of the 2021 VNRs examined explicitly mentioned target 3.d. This is a slight increase from last year's reports, when 28% of the VNRs referred to the target.

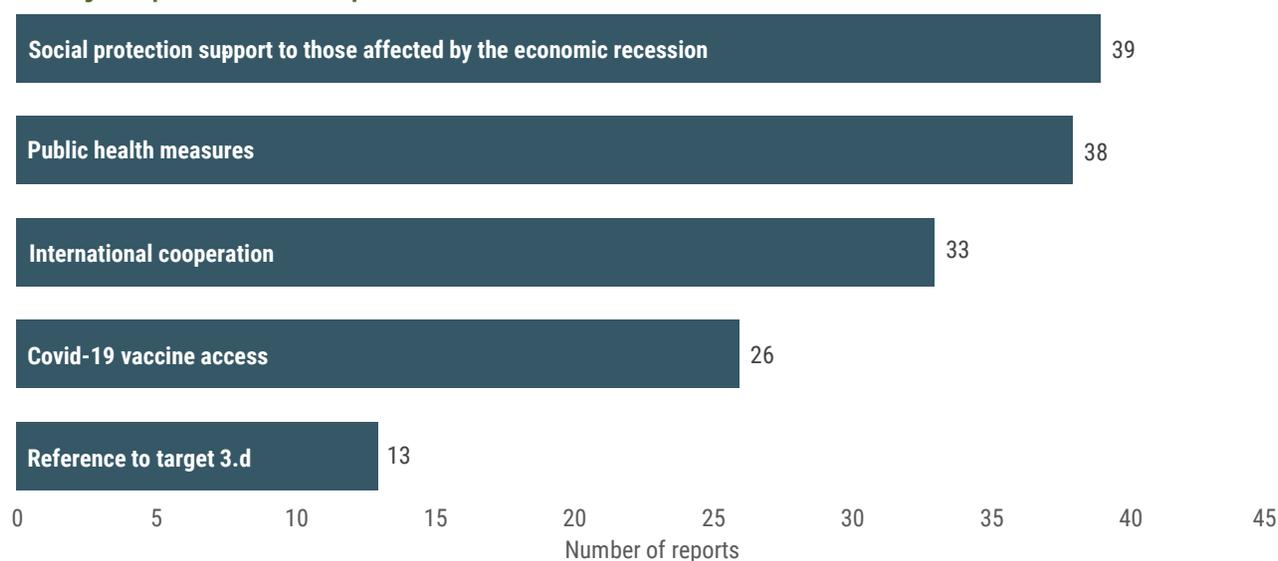
II.4 Pandemic Consequences on Sustainable Development Goals and Responses

Figure 1 provides an overview of the issues that were raised or neglected in the VNRs examined. All but one of the 41 reports reviewed discuss COVID-19's consequences on achieving the SDGs. Most countries focus on the public health measures taken to contain the pandemic such as lockdowns and emphasize socio-economic measures to address the related consequences, particularly stimulus measures, employment trends and social protection measures. Reports reviewed consistently focus on key public health measures taken to contain the infectious spread (38 out of 41), and on economic and employment consequences (39 out of 41). 33 out of 41 reports highlighted the need for international cooperation as a response to overcoming the pandemic and 35 reports referred to 'Building Back Better' or 'Building Forward Better'. In general, VNRs with strong emphasis on the principle of leaving no one behind also referred to the unequal effects of the pandemic.

In the VNRs analyzed last year, the full extent of the consequences was not known at the time of their writing. The reports presented at the HLPF in 2021 had more insight and preparation to reflect on the complex ways the pandemic could (and to a certain extent already have) reshape the future. It is somewhat disappointing to see that only 13 out of 41 VNRs refer to target 3.d which includes issues addressing pandemic preparedness as discussed in the section above. While nearly all VNRs submitted to the 2021 HLPF stated that the pandemic had made achieving the SDGs more challenging and that more was needed to build back better, propositions of urgent transformative action were lacking in the 2021 VNRs.

⁸ UN Women, 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Women

Figure 1

Policy responses to the pandemic

Box 1

Good practices: Policy response

Guatemala's VNR highlighted the detrimental effects of the informal economy the pandemic has had: the informal economy was described as "the most affected as a result of the restrictions on economic activities due to measures to ensure the social distancing."

Zimbabwe's VNR highlighted the gendered aspects of the pandemic and noted that while women were the ones on the frontlines fighting the pandemic, they were also one of the most vulnerable groups to feel the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic.

Malaysia dedicated a section or a 'box article' to discuss the unequal effects of the pandemic on vulnerable groups in their VNR. There was a nuanced discussion on how the pandemic had impacted groups such as women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities and foreign workers. Moreover, they highlighted that absolute poverty had increased in 2020 and that the gini-coefficient had increased.

Paraguay dedicated a section of their VNR to discuss how the Leave No One Behind principle has been understood pre and post the arrival of the pandemic. The report highlighted that children and adolescents have become increasingly vulnerable as a result of education and training moving online and how lack of connection to the internet has been a hindrance for learning.

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Figure 2
Country reporting on pandemic preparedness

Country	Long-term preparedness			Impact	Unequal impact			Policy response				
	Effect of pandemic on achieving SDG's	Effect of pandemic in LNOB context mentioned	Reference to target 3.d		Overall economic impact	Disproportionate socio-economic losses amongst vulnerable populations	Gendered effects	Disproportionate COVID deaths and cases amongst vulnerable groups	Social protection	Public health measures	Post COVID recovery - Building back better	International cooperation
Afghanistan												
Angola												
Antigua and Barbuda												
Azerbaijan												
Bhutan												
Bolivia												
Cabo Verde												
Chad												
China												
Colombia												
Cuba												
Cyprus												
Czech Republic												
Dem. People's Rep. of Korea												
Denmark												
Dominican Republic												
Egypt												
Germany												
Guatemala												
Indonesia												
Iraq												
Japan												
Lao People's Democratic Republic												
Madagascar												
Malaysia												
Marshall Islands												
Mexico												
Namibia												
Nicaragua												
Niger												
Norway												
Paraguay												
Qatar												
San Marino												
Sierra Leone												
Spain												
Sweden												
Thailand												
Tunisia												
Uruguay												
Zimbabwe												
Totals	40	30	13	39	37	31	16	39	38	35	33	26

III Leaving No One Behind

“There are early signs of a tsunami of potential debt crises, deprivation, discontent and civil unrest. No country, developed or developing, will be isolated from the impacts”

- UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed at the 2022 Forum on Financing for Development

III.1 Background

In September 2015, all 193 member states of the United Nations made a pledge to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole. This commitment—*to leave no one behind*—is the core principle of *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and applies to all 17 SDGs. Above all, this commitment represents the transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda. As UN Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed said in the opening remarks of the Forum on Financing for Development earlier this year, there are early signs of a tsunami of catastrophic consequences if we do not rescue the SDGs in time. These consequences will impact the most vulnerable people the hardest. Knowing that more than 119 million people worldwide has been pushed into poverty as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic,⁹ it is therefore of great significance to analyze the actions governments are taking to prevent more people from being pushed behind but also to understand what is being done to leave no one behind.

It is encouraging to see that all 41 VNRs submitted in 2021 referred to the pledge to leave no one behind. When the reviews started in 2016, this was not the case. Even reports that refer to the term briefly discuss measures focused on targeting vulnerable groups (see Figure 3). The following sections will provide an insight in how the 2021 VNRs has understood the concept of leaving no one behind, who is considered as left behind as well as a discussion on which aspects of leave no one behind that remains unexplored.

III.2 Who is considered as being left behind or at risk of being left behind?

Most reports refer to persons with disabilities, women and girls, children and youth, the poor and low-income groups, and the elderly as groups that are vulnerable, at risk of being left behind or the targets of specific policies to avoid being left behind (see Figure 3). Several also refer to migrants as well as people in geographical areas that are further behind. There are also a few that report on prisoners and ex-prisoners as being left behind or at risk of being left behind. Thirteen out of 41 reports mentioned indigenous people and LGBTIQ people respectively, as being left behind or at risk of being left behind. The least reported group that countries reported on was people living with HIV/AIDS. Only 8 out of 41 reports identify this group as being at risk or being left behind. Figure 4 shows examples of groups that have been considered in the sections on leaving no one behind in the 2021 VNRs, beyond the most frequently mentioned, and broadly defined, categories.

⁹ World Bank Group (January 2021). Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: Looking back at 2020 and the outlook for 2021. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-COVID-19-global-poverty-looking-back-2020-and-outlook-2021>.

Figure 3

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

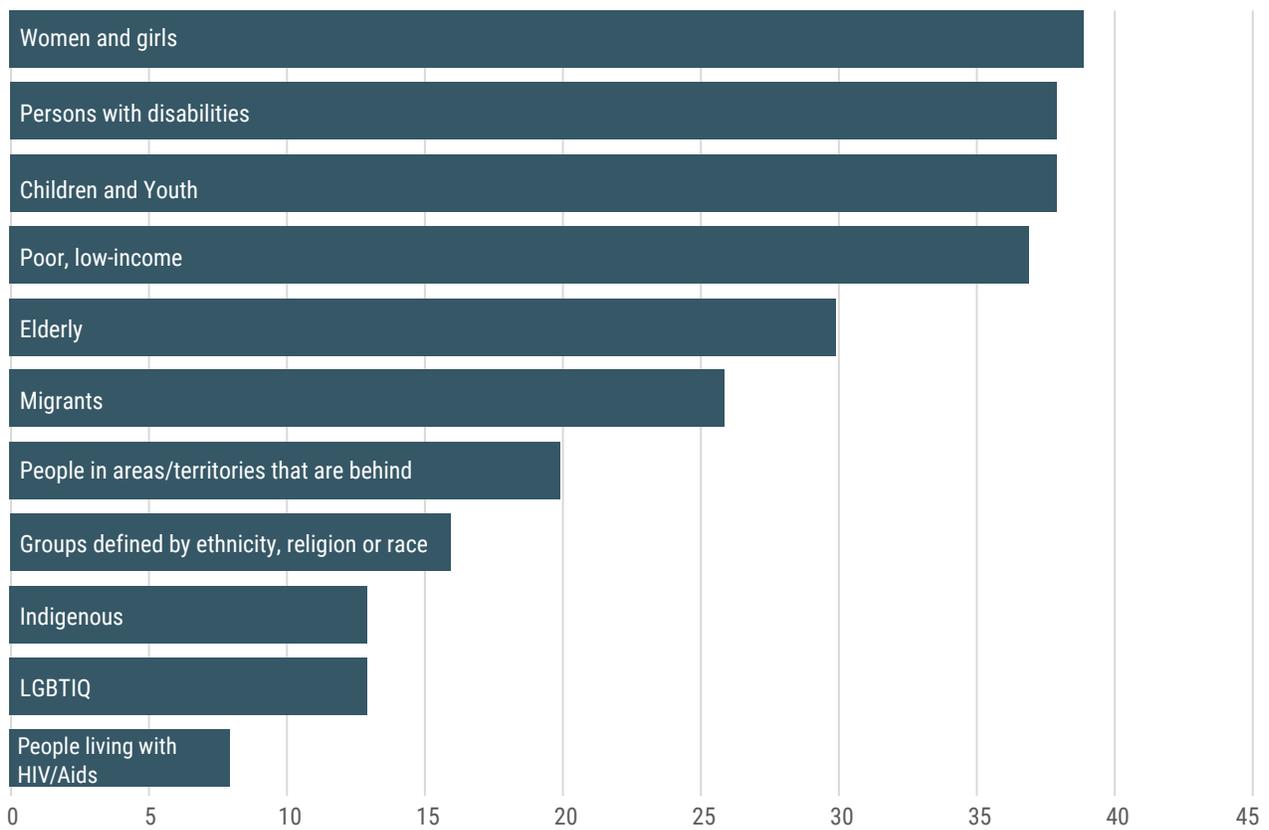
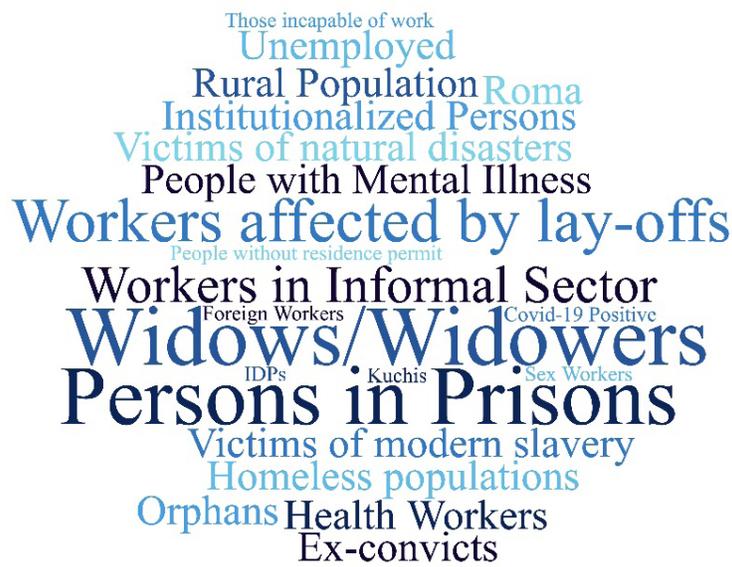


Figure 4

Other groups mentioned as being left behind or at risk of being left behind.

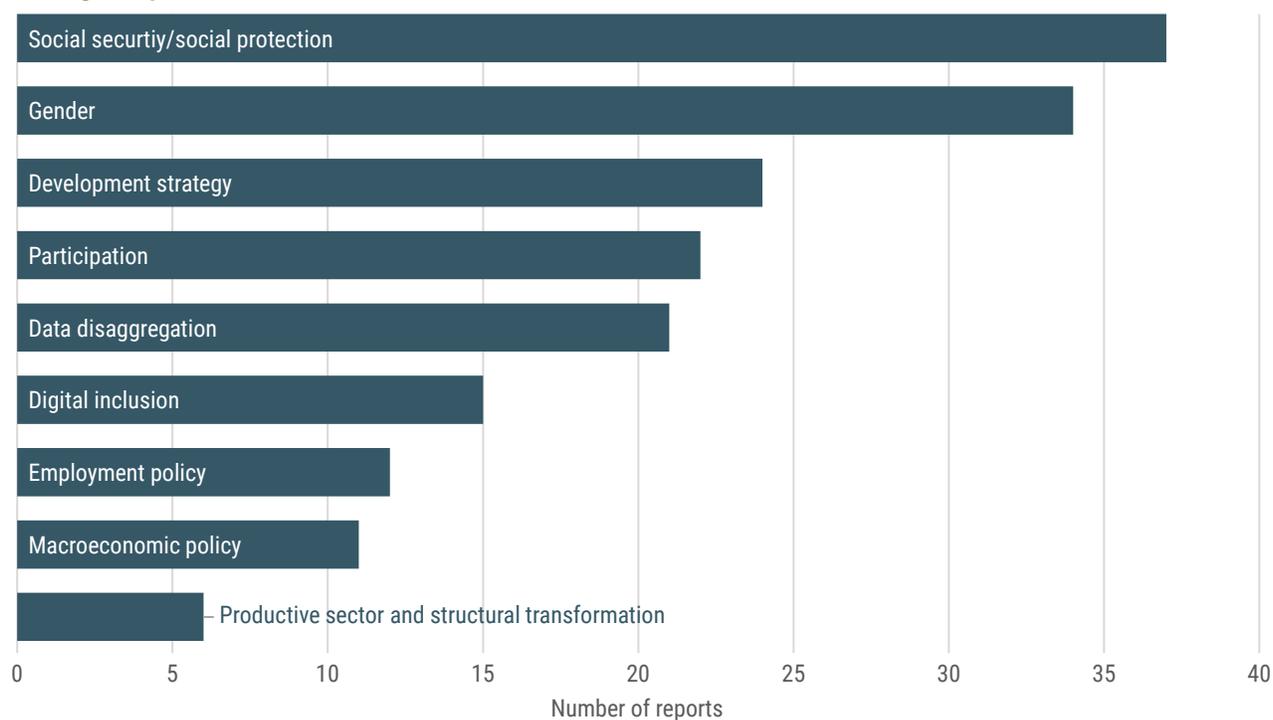


III.3 How is the concept of leaving no one behind understood?

In the 2021 VNRs, countries either dedicated a section of their report to leave no one behind or they provided the details throughout the report in various sections. Countries sections and passages dedicated to leaving no one behind provide a snapshot of how countries understand the concept and what types of policies they consider as part of their strategies to fulfill it. The policy approaches most frequently quoted in the sections on leaving no one behind were social protection, gender inclusion and improving data disaggregation. More than half of the reports refer to implementing leaving no one behind as part of their development strategy. About a fourth of the reports mentioned improved employment policies as a policy response to leave no one behind and only six reports referenced structural transformation as a necessary action to leave no one behind. As an example, Antigua and Barbuda identified systemic issues such as insufficient development financing and delays in aid flows that could hinder the pace of the implementation of programmes and projects, as well as transformative actions needed to tackle these issues such as having a better plan for the exogenous shocks that the small island state could be exposed to and that would have enormous impact on development progress.

Figure 5

Policy responses to Leave No One Behind



III.4 What aspects of leaving no one behind remain unexplored?

Issues that remain underexplored in the VNRs are how to put into practice the commitment to “reach the furthest behind first”, how to not push people further behind and reaching the furthest behind first, issues regarding digital inclusion and the importance of productive capacities in strategies to leave no one behind:

- i. Reaching the furthest behind first. While about a fourth of the 2021 VNRs refer to the commitment to reach the furthest behind first, few outline their strategies to fulfill it. In most reports, references to “reaching the furthest behind first” were limited to simply mentioning the phrase or to identifying the furthest behind within broader vulnerable groups. The latter is a critical first step, but greater reflection in the VNRs on the policy alternatives, trade-offs and associated dilemmas could help stimulate innovation and peer learning to advance the implementation of this commitment.

- ii. Pushing no one behind. While most countries mention measures they are taking to make the lives of the most vulnerable better, little attention is given to how to avoid making them worse off or pushing them back.¹⁰ There seems to be an underlying assumption in the VNRs that policy action can only produce positive outcomes – sometimes insufficient, sometimes underfunded, but generally in the right direction. The reality is that poorly conceived projects or regulation enabling certain types of investments without adequate and inclusive assessments of impacts can push people and communities behind. It is important for the VNRs to acknowledge this and report on how they are managing these trade-offs. A few 2021 reports refer to efforts to avoid people being pushed back by COVID-19, climate change, disasters and health costs. Cabo Verde highlighted the need to reallocate resources to fight both the health related and social consequences of the pandemic. Antigua and Barbuda mentioned the expanded health sector expenditure by 0.5 per cent of GDP as a result of the pandemic as well as the reduction of electricity costs. However, most VNRs do not meaningfully reflect on how to avoid pushing people further behind by their own policies and investments or the regulation under which private investments are made. Among a few exceptions, the input provided by CSOs to Germany's VNR regarding negative effects of unsustainable policies noted that: "In order to have an impact on decision-making, a proper sustainability strategy should reflect on problems, voice criticism, find solutions, follow-up on implementation and come up with consequences for non-compliance."
- iii. Digital inclusion as a way of leaving no one behind. Less than half of the reports (15 out of 41) mentioned the need for access to technology to leave no one behind. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing shift towards digital learning, equal access to digital technology is a crucial aspect to leave no one behind.
- iv. Acknowledging and acting on the link between production structure and exclusion. Few countries make a clear connection between the goal of leaving no one behind and policies to build productive capacities and move towards structural transformation. Again, among few exceptions, the input provided by CSOs to Germany's VNR noted that "Our economic system is currently based mainly on growth and on the exploitation of humans and nature (...) If we want to enable all people and generations to live in dignity within the planetary boundaries, we cannot rely solely on innovative technologies and increases in efficiency. We must also change our conceptions of growth and wealth and make our lifestyle socially and ecologically sustainable." Antigua and Barbuda's VNR also mentioned the need for structural transformation in their report with contingency plans to mitigate impact of exogenous shocks for example.

In synthesis, there have been significant improvements in the treatment of leaving no one behind in the VNRs and there are experiences to draw from in terms of methods to identify specific groups at risk of being left behind and thereby tailoring policy to national and local circumstances. However, there has been little connection in the VNRs between the concept of leaving no one behind and the transformative, cross-cutting policy areas that would significantly and sustainably enable and provide resources for other areas more commonly and directly associated to leaving no one behind such as social protection and employment. There has been not enough discussion on the difficult policy trade-offs that need to be tackled head-on to ensure that development not only leaves no one behind but pushes no one behind. Keeping in mind that between 75 and 95 million additional people could be living in extreme poverty due to the devastating social and economic effects of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine as well as rising inflation,¹¹ it is of great importance that states implement robust and transformative policy responses that not only leave no one behind but that pushes no one behind.

¹⁰ Diane Elson, (2018). "Push No One Behind", *Journal of Globalization and Development*, 2018, vol. 9, issue 2, 12

¹¹ The World Bank, 2022 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview#1>

Box 2

Good practices: Examples of Leave No One Behind

- **Cabo Verde** – Identified systemic racism, colonial legacy and harmful masculinity norms as risk factors that could contribute to people being left behind. It is encouraging to see that Cabo Verde chose to include these systemic and sociocultural issues in their VNR.
- **Antigua and Barbuda** – Dedicated a section in their VNR to “Systemic Issues and Transformative Actions” where they highlighted the importance of having a plan for exogenous shocks that could negatively affect development progress.
- **Norway** – Included a chapter in their Leave No One Behind section called “LNOB online - web accessibility”. They discussed the increasing importance of having a universal design of the digital environment in order to ensure access to the digital space for everyone.
- **Bhutan** – Implemented “last mile services” to its most vulnerable population with targeted interventions to mitigate the impacts of climate change as well as implementing targeted policies aimed at reducing child poverty.
- **Japan** – Introduced the ‘Japan SDG Award’ in 2019, as a way of encouraging more stakeholders to take action in working towards the progression of SDGs. In 2021, they gave special awards for an organization, a co-operative, a university and a company that had demonstrated and put into action the concept of Leaving No One Behind.
- **Sweden** – Included main messages from four municipalities that had conducted Voluntary Local Reviews. Localizing the SDGs and the pledge to leave no one (or no city) behind can be a powerful way for citizens to promote accountability.

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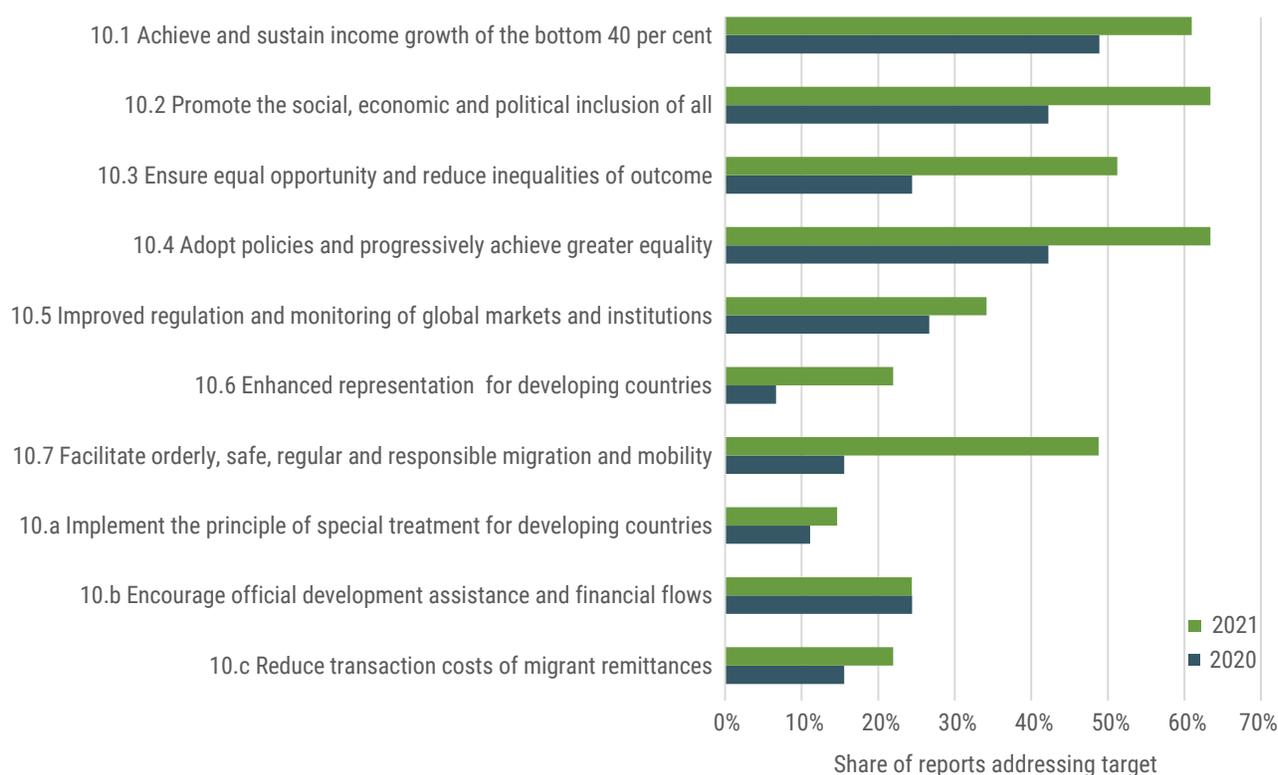
IV SDG10 Reduced inequalities

To monitor progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is convened every year to review progress on the SDGs. Each year around 40 to 50 countries provide the HLPF with an extensive report on progress on the SDGs, their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). In the 2019 VNRs, SDG10 (Reducing inequality within and between countries) was one of the most underreported SDGs.¹² However, analyzing the 2020 batch and 2021 VNRs¹³ shows that fortunately attention to SDG10 has moved up from its bottom position to a lower middle position: 38 out of 40 2021 VNRs report on SDG10 as compared to 40 out of 45 2020 VNRs.

Nevertheless, *reporting on the specific targets of SDG10 remains grossly insufficient*. Only 5 of the 2021 VNRs report on all 11 targets, another 6 on 8-10 targets. The share of VNR's reporting on target 10.1 (which is already a weak target) in 2021 was similar to the reporting in 2020, while the share reporting on domestic (10.4 and 10.5) and international targets (targets 10.5, 10.a and 10.b) increased slightly. This is still woefully insufficient (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Reporting on specific targets of SDG10 in 2020 and in 2021



This continued deficit in many reports on specific targets of SDG 10 and the frequent absence of relevant policy discussions on specific measures in VNRs as indicated in Figure 6 is especially deplorable in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, as the pandemic is likely to reverse progress made in reducing income inequality since the financial crisis. It is estimated that the average Gini ratio in emerging and developing countries increased by 6 per cent since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. An example of clear analysis and of policy proposals is the Indonesian 2021 report (Box 3).

¹² <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/voluntary-national-reviews-reports-what-do-they-not-tell-us/>

¹³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/CDP-Reflections-2021-VNRs.pdf>

Table 1

Trends in income inequality and polices to reduce income inequality 2021 VNRs

Increased Income Inequality	Income inequality unchanged	Decreased Income Inequality	Unclear income inequality trend	Total VNRs	Clear policy proposals to reduce income inequality	Unclear policy proposals to reduce income inequality
17	10	6	8	41	17	24

Source. Tabulation by author based on all 41 submitted 2021 VNRs.

The 2022 World Inequality Report (WIR2022)¹⁴ finds that the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated several forms of health, social, gender and racial inequality within countries but acknowledges that it is still too early for a systematic understanding of the intra-country impact of the crisis on income and wealth inequality due to the lack of real-time data on the distribution of growth across all countries. However, some high-frequency data sources assisted WIR2022 to understand the interplay between the Covid crisis and inequality within countries. From billionaire wealth records, WIR2022 observes that the gap between the very top of the wealth distribution and the rest of the population has widened dramatically during this pandemic. Between 2021 and 2019, the wealth of the top 0.001% grew by 14%, while average global wealth is estimated to have risen by just 1%, but as income inequality data generally come less frequently than billionaire wealth data it is too early to produce global income inequality estimates that properly consider the effect of Covid on income inequality within countries, but some country-level studies provide useful insights into these dynamics.

WIR2022 reports on a World Bank monitoring dashboard composed of harmonized indicators from high-frequency phone surveys conducted in over 45 countries in response to the Covid pandemic: These surveys show higher rates of income loss in low and middle-income countries than in high-income countries which seem to be linked to the formality/informality of the labor market; the farm vs. non-farm family business dichotomy might be another driver of increased inequality, pointing to the buffer role played by the agricultural sector. At the other end of the distribution, it appeared in the dashboard that emerging and low-income countries are no exception to the exceptional rise in top wealth inequalities observed above: While incomes dropped at the bottom of the distribution, capital rose steeply at the top.

In emerging countries, where social security systems are less developed, the effect of the pandemic on low-income groups has been more severe: WIR2022 reports on World Bank estimates that the pandemic drove about 100 million people into extreme poverty, raising the global total to 711 million in 2021, up from 655 million in 2019. Without this crisis, the number of people in extreme poverty in 2021 would have been 613 million. Looking at inequality across the entire population, the International Monetary Fund has also estimated that, in 2020 income inequality grew in emerging markets and low-income countries because of the Covid crisis. It could increase to a level comparable to that in 2008, reversing all gains made since then. In these countries, fiscal resources and borrowing capacities remain low, safety nets are patchy, and social protection programs sometimes almost non-existent.

According to WIR2022 the weaker the social protection system, the more unequal the impacts of a crisis are likely to be, and households that have relatively limited access to markets, capital, and basic services will be most severely hit. Studies quoted in WIR2022 suggest that the early phases of the pandemic (the lockdowns) had a greater effect on vulnerable individuals, including those on lower incomes and with lower education levels, minorities, and women and that in developing countries, informally employed workers tend to face a higher risk of losing their jobs than workers with formal contracts, but evidence in developing countries, and particularly low-income countries, remains incomplete due to the paucity of data on informal labor income, despite recent efforts to improve the measurement of distributional effects, such as the UN's Socio-Economic Impact Assessment conducted in several emerging countries during the crisis which tend to support the assumption that the pandemic has resulted in a loss of household labor income, both formal and informal, a decline in remittances, and price inflation triggered by food price hikes, with spillover effects through rising household

¹⁴ World Inequality Lab 2022, World Inequality Report 2022 Paris (abbreviated WIR2022).

Box 3

SDG10 in 2021 VNR of Indonesia

Indonesia's VNR has systematic presentation on SDG10, including effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic (2019-2020). A first part focuses on the level of inequality, a second on leaving nobody behind, a third on challenges, a fourth on actions and a fifth on policies.

1. Levels of inequality. Indonesia's Gini ratio of per capita expenditure over 2015 to 2019 declined from 0.408 to 0.380 which was a reversal from the increasing trend from the early 2000s. From a longer-term perspective, the Gini ratio is still high a.o. caused by an increase in skills of urban workers due to import substitution policies and a capital-intensive industry. The report also shows growth incidence curves (GICs) The one from 2010-2015 depict a very steep slope around the top 10% richest households reflecting a disproportionately large increase in consumption of that group. The one from 2015- 2019 shows a relatively flat slope until around the top 20% richest meaning that the percentage increase of consumption for this group is no longer disproportional large. But since 2019 the poorest 20% group experienced a large decrease in income by 16.5% while the decrease for the richest 20% group is only 8.3%. Four mechanism t exacerbated the inequal impact of COVID-19 in household income: informality of jobs, the inability to work from home, the decline of mobility-dependent economic sectors and stalling workers' educational attainment.

2. Leaving no one behind. The report discusses leaving nobody behind firstly in terms of geography, of relative poverty and of equal opportunity, discrimination, and the role of the state: the number underdeveloped villages declined from 2014 to 2018 by almost 30%. There is thus significant progress in reducing disparity in regional development while still room for improvement as in the COVID-19 pandemic poverty incidence in these villages rose from 21.7% to 26.4%. Despite a consistent decline in absolute poverty, Indonesia's relative poverty does not show a similar progress. To reduce inequality, it is necessary to ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices

3. Challenges. The report identifies identify four challenges in achieving the targets of Goal 10: *Low social mobility*. People born to low-income families will earn 85-90% lower than those born in nonpoor families when they are adult. *High rate of urbanization*. So far is that rapid urbanization goes hand in hand with increasing inequality. inequality in urban areas is much higher than in rural areas. *Structural transformation.*, Indonesia is experiencing stalled industrial change as the main engine of structural transformation and tertiarization increases inequality. *High labour informality* is the cause of structural transformation towards an unproductive tertiary sector that tends to increase inequality and a challenge to achieve universal access to social protection.

4. Various actions to overcome challenges have been implemented: as low social mobility is related to the low investment in human capital the government continues to strive to improve access to education and health for lower groups, while various scholarship programs for the poor have been implemented. Also, low social mobility is associated with the low nutrition-status of children a national strategy to reduce stunting has been formulated. Several initiatives have been started so that investment, especially in the manufacturing sectors, can be accelerated as speeding up licensing that several other actions have been implemented and many non-state actors also play a role in their contribution in the achievement of Goal 10.

5. Policy responses are also outlined in the 2021 Government Work Plan (RKP) focussing on economic recovery from COVID-19, with however also several themes relevant to Goal 10: (1) Strengthening Economic Resilience for Quality and Equitable Growth; (2) Regional Development to Reduce Inequality; and (3) Increasing Quality and Competitiveness of Human Resources. This to be achieved through a.o., *social protection system reform* with a 100% and integrated social assistance programs; *labour-intensive infrastructure* development strategies; *human resources development* strategies strengthening the health sector, alleviate poverty, and reduce inequality; to *increasing the productivity* and competitiveness of the workforce; an industrial and trade recovery strategy to enhancing competitiveness of leading industrial sectors; encouraging procurement of local goods; accelerating the development of import substitution products, and optimizing the Preferential Trade Agreement Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

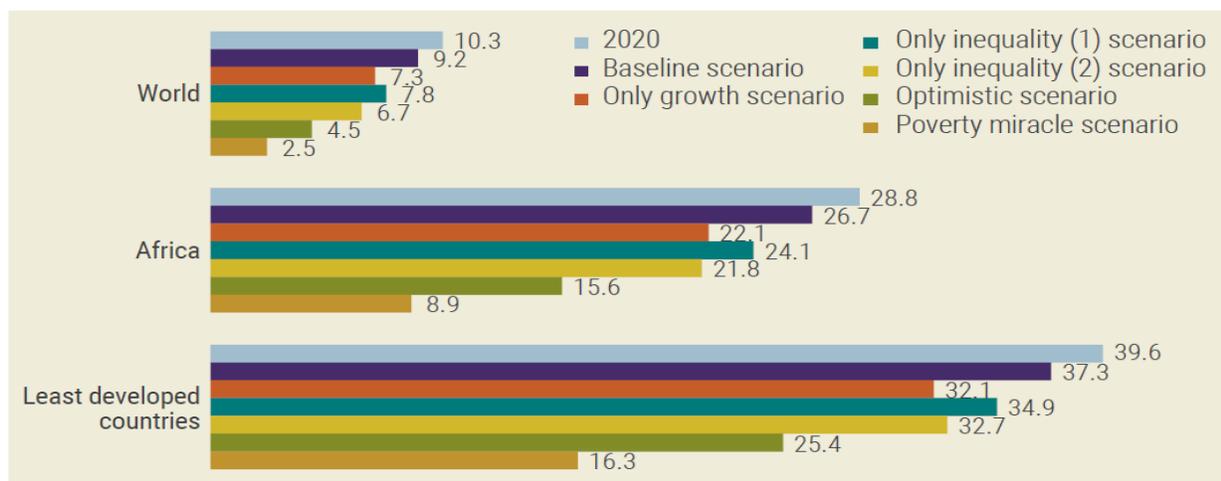
debt levels, unaffordable out-of-pocket payments for healthcare services, and reduced access to public healthcare and education. In other words, the crisis hit low-income households disproportionately hard.¹⁵

The importance of structural change with redistributive measures has recently been demonstrated by UN DESA which carried out an alternative scenario analysis¹⁶ showing how different combinations of economic growth (SDG8) and reduction in income inequality (SDG10) can help the world reach or get closer to achieving reducing poverty SDG target 1.1 by 2030¹⁷. UN DESA constructed six possible scenarios to 2030 based on different assumptions of GDP growth and income inequality. Their baseline scenario assumes continuation of the most recent UN DESA forecast of 4.7 per cent average annual growth in GDP per capita from 2022 to 2030 in developing countries with no change in income inequality. In this scenario, about 9.2 per cent of the world's population—or 785 million people—would remain in extreme poverty by 2030 (Figure 7). The second 'only-growth scenario' assumes an increase in the average annual growth in GDP per capita in developing countries to 6.7 per cent for the 2022-2030 period, with income inequality remaining unchanged. In this scenario, the share of the world population living in extreme poverty by 2030 would decline to 7.3 per cent, to 625 million people. Two only-inequality reducing scenarios (keeping the baseline GDP per capita growth at 4.7%) demonstrate the impact of inequality reduction on the eradication of extreme poverty, Under the 'modest-inequality reduction of 1 per cent per annum' scenario, the extreme poverty rate would decline to 7.8 per cent by 2030 to 668 million people in poverty.

With the 'moderate-inequality reduction scenario' (2 per cent annually), extreme poverty can even be reduced to 575 million people by 2030. An 'optimistic scenario' is based on a GDP growth rate of 6.7 per cent and an annual reduction of inequality by 3.1 per cent. Under this scenario, the extreme poverty rate in the world would decline to 4.5 per cent or 383 million people living in poverty, with the rate 15 and 25 per cent in Africa and the LDCs, respectively

Figure 7

Extreme poverty headcount ratio for Africa, LDCs and the world in 2020, projections by scenario for 2030



Source: Figure 4 UN/DESA (2021).

¹⁵ See also van der Hoeven, R. and R. Vos (2022). 'Reforming the International Financial and Fiscal System for better COVID-19 and Post-Pandemic Crisis Responsiveness', Chapter 2 in Papyrakis, E. (ed.) *COVID-19 and International Development*, Springer

¹⁶ UN/DESA (2021) *The critical role of income redistribution for poverty reduction: Alternative scenarios*, Policy Brief #119, 18 October 2021, UN New York

¹⁷ These scenarios by DESA are constructed using the World Economic Forecasting Model of the Global Economic Monitoring Branch of UN DESA, which produces forecasts under alternative assumptions regarding both the rate of per capita GDP growth and reduction in income inequality.

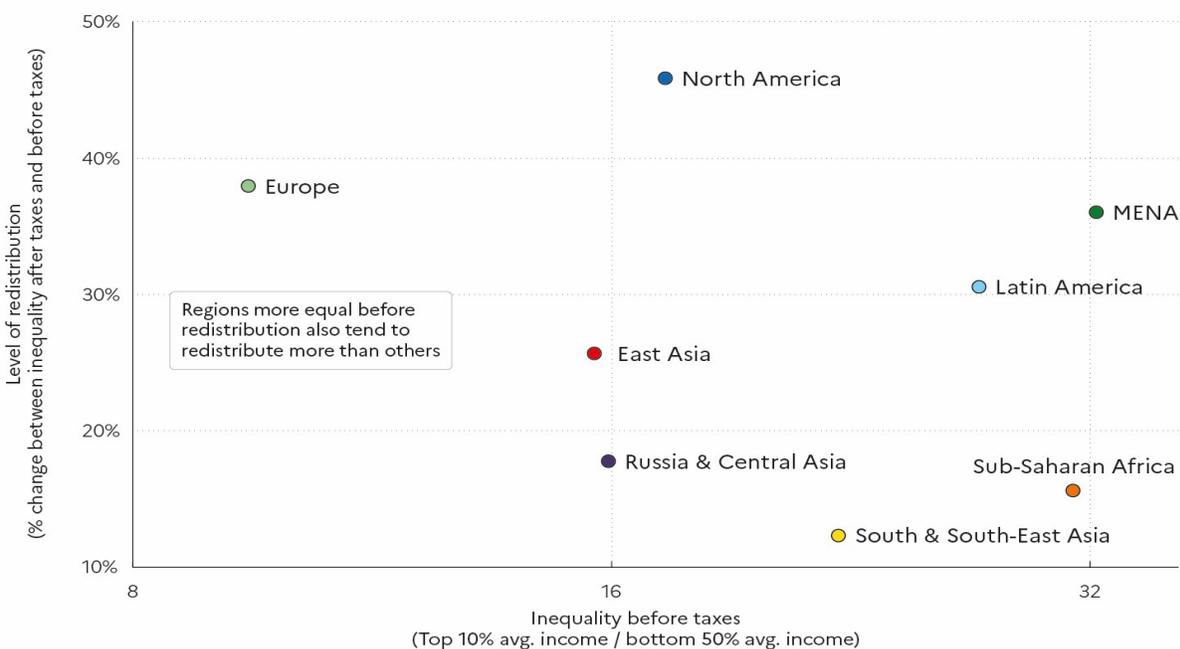
(Figure 7). Finally, if the average annual per capita GDP growth rate can be raised to 10.7 per cent and income inequality reduced by 7.4 per cent per annum, the poverty rate would be reduced to 2.5 per cent by 2030, or below the “frictional” rate of 3 per cent, implying that only 217 million people will be living in extreme poverty.

In sum, the above scenario analysis by DESA 2021 shows that inequality reduction can be a potent driver of poverty reduction, and, combined with robust growth, can produce rather positive results.

To look at redistribution policies across the world’s regions in more detail, WIR 2022 plots the degree of inequality before taxes on the horizontal axis, and the degree of inequality reduction on the vertical axis. (Figure 8) The lower the inequality before taxes, the higher the level of redistribution. The table shows that in regions where market inequality levels are relatively low (i.e. where pre-distribution is relatively high), there tend to be more social forces pushing for higher redistribution as well and conversely, when the institutional and policy set-up does little to reduce inequality in the first place, there are fewer mechanisms to reduce inequality after taxes as well. An important conclusion from this global observation is that *high levels of redistribution are difficult to attain with low levels of pre-distribution*.¹⁸ WIR 2022 underscores that these two forms of inequality reduction go hand in hand and are complements rather than substitutes. Figure 9 shows the relationship between inequality before taxes and transfers (as measured by our T10/B50 income gap, on the horizontal axis) and inequality after taxes transfers (on the vertical axis) across countries in WIR 2022. The main observations made at the regional level are confirmed by this more detailed country level representation. *Inequality differences after taxes and transfers are mainly driven by inequality differences before taxes and transfers*. Pre-tax inequality explains most of the variations in post-tax inequality levels observed across countries. In other words, *redistribution matters to reduce inequality but does not significantly change country rankings*.

Figure 8

Income inequality before and after taxes, 2018-2021: Top 10/Bottom 50 income gap

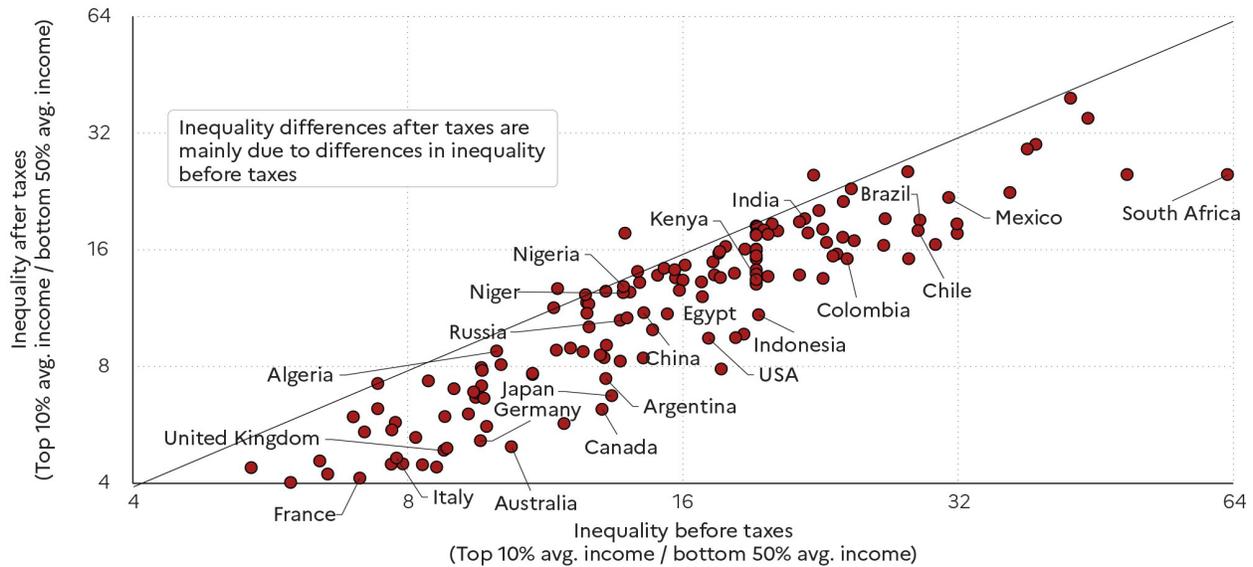


Source WIR 2022 table 1.9b P.36.

¹⁸ Pre-distribution incomes are also called factor incomes table 10.2 in van der Hoeven, R. (2019b) ‘Income Inequality in Developing Countries, Past and Present’, Chapter 10 in M. Nissanke, J. A. Ocampo (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Development Economics*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14000-7_10

Figure 9

Income inequality before and after taxes, 2018-2021: Top 10/Bottom 50 income gap



Interpretation: Before taxes, the bottom 50% in South Africa earns 63 times less than the top 10%, whereas after taxes, the bottom 50% earns 24 times less than the top 10%. Income is measured after pension and unemployment payments and benefits received by individuals but before other taxes they pay and transfers they receive. Data for 2018-2021. **Sources and series:** [wir2022.wid.world/methodology](https://www.wir2022.wid.world/methodology)

Source WIR 2022 Table 10, P.37.

As low-income countries have a lower level of redistribution (i.e the percentage change between inequality after taxes and before taxes) it is so much the more important that low income countries step up efforts and report on specific policies to increase their redistribution capabilities, so as to counteract the growing income inequality resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing policy measures and also increase capacity to change pretax income inequality as discussed in the 2020 VNR review¹⁹.

UN DESA (2021) concludes that achieving SDG 1, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, will require extraordinary efforts by countries, both individually and collectively and that the most successful countries in terms of poverty reduction have generally been those that have followed a strategy that is sometimes referred to as “economic growth with equity,” in which the eradication of poverty is anchored in both strong economic growth and income redistribution. It stresses that such a strategy places high priority on the creation of jobs, as well as progressive taxation and more comprehensive public service provision and that in countries where agriculture accounts for a large share of employment and livelihoods, especially for the poor, raising the productivity of the farming sector holds the key for successful poverty reduction in the short- and medium-term. But, it warns that higher agricultural productivity does not automatically translate into the expansion of the rural non-farm sector, and it is thus important to put in place policies that encourage smallholder farmers and rural households to increase their nonfarm income and that, as the globalization and technological changes have opened up different routes to structural economic transformation, it will be necessary for countries to choose the path that suits their specific context and pays attention to equitable distribution and protection of environment.

It underlines that further strengthening of social protection systems and increased investment in people’s capabilities and resilience will be particularly important in reducing poverty and that the establishment of robust social protection and universal health-care systems should not be goals for the distant future: the focus could be on accelerating efforts

¹⁹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/CDP-Reflections-2021-VNRs.pdf>

to achieve universal, nationally appropriate social protection floors; making social protection systems shock-proof and utilizing efficiently the new digital technologies to overcome resource constraints. Furthermore, gender mainstreaming should also be the norm for all aspects of the post-pandemic recovery efforts and the reduction of the gender digital divide should be accorded high priority.

UN DESA (2021) warns that the mobilization of support for policy measures aimed at strengthening the redistribution of income and assets in society has never been easy and that opposition by powerful groups has often made the pursuit of income redistribution highly challenging. However, the massive efforts made over a short period of time during the pandemic in terms of strengthening social protection and education reminds us that change is possible. UN DESA (2021) concludes that countries should seize this opportunity to be more ambitious, to expand social protection, reimagine education and health systems, and consider solutions previously considered too difficult to implement.

WIR 2022 underscores that while the large stimulus packages implemented by richer countries were both essential and successful in preventing a sharp rise in poverty and inequality at the bottom of the distribution, it should be noted, that these programs were costly and increased public debt by the order of 5-20% of national income. This public debt will have to be repaid by individuals in one way or another. At this stage WIR2022 argues that no one knows how this debt will be repaid, that different strategies can be pursued, with distinctly different consequences for the overall impact of the pandemic on inequality and that the impact might be felt over several years or decades, as has been the case with major economic shocks in the past: governments could, for instance, be tempted by a mix of austerity measures (such as were imposed in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis) and regressive taxes (such as increased value-added taxes), which would disproportionately hurt low-income groups, but should governments implement progressive taxes or pursue partial debt cancellations or restructuring, such measures would help to lower inequality also in other countries in the world .

It is therefore crucial that future VNRs stress coherent macroeconomic, structural, and social policies to stem the growing income inequality which will continue in most countries after COVID-19, if no international and national essential policy changes emerge.

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V SDG5 Gender inequality

This chapter examines how SDG 5 has been treated in the 2021 VNR reports, by mapping how they have addressed, or failed to address various aspects of gender inequality. 46 specific topics organized into 11 themes capturing relevant dimensions and issues of gender inequality have been identified and the reports have been reviewed to determine the extent to which they capture and discuss these issues. The themes and topics are listed in appendix 5.1.

The most comprehensive treatment of gender inequality, measured by the range of topics discussed, was found in the report presented by Laos which addressed 33 of the 46 topics. At the other end of the scale, we find the reports submitted by China, Niger and Uruguay, which discuss only one. The median country report discusses 18 topics, while the average number of topics discussed is 19.

30 reports contain a chapter devoted to SDG5, 9 reports mention all SDG 5 subgoals and 26 mention some of them. The most frequently reported topics are shown in Table 1 and the least reported topics are shown in Table 2.

Table 1

Most frequently reported topics in gender inequality

Topic	Number of countries reporting
Absence of law that ensures women's rights to inheritance and ownership or employment is mentioned	34
Fair representation of women in public and government bodies is mentioned	33
Actions to protect women from violence and domestic abuse are mentioned	33
Human trafficking is mentioned	32
Actions to improve economic empowerment of women and girls are mentioned	32
Family planning methods are mentioned	31
Actions to protect women from violence on job, schools, sexual harassment are mentioned	31

Table 2

Least reported topics in gender inequality

Topic	Number of countries reporting
Awareness or actions about future of female participation in labor market because of AI or robotizations (future of works) is mentioned	1
Online gender-based abuse is mentioned	1
Promotion of empirical academic research that examines the implementation of the law with regards to gender	2
Treatment of women in prostitution	2

Table 3

Average share of reporting on topics/criteria within each theme

Theme	Number of criteria	Average % of criteria met by countries
Affirmative action	1	80.0
Corporate governance	2	51.3
Education	5	24,5
Entrepreneurship	4	33.8
General	5	44,0
Harmful practices	8	56.9
LGBT	4	20.0
Labor market	8	36.3
Laws and norms	5	40.5
Partnership	1	12.5
Public policy and governance	2	53.8
Research	1	5.0

The “Harmful practices” theme contains eight criteria, which is the most for any theme, and it is also the most widely reported of the themes that include at least four topics. In contrast, “Education” and “LGBT” are two of the least frequently addressed themes. Table 3 shows the top 5 reporting countries across each theme.

Table 4

Top 5 reporting countries for each SDG 5 sub-theme (percentage of topics reported on)

Rank	Education	General	Harmful practices	LGBT	Labor market	Laws and norms
1	Cuba (80)	Japan (100)	Cuba (100)	Denmark (100)	Germany (87)	Japan (80)
2	Cabo Verde (80)	Czech Republic (100)	Denmark (100)	Cuba (100)	Czech Republic (87)	Sweden (80)
3	Japan (60)	Tunisia (80)	Zimbabwe (87)	Germany (75)	Cyprus (75)	Namibia (80)
4	Mexico (60)	Laos (80)	Sweden (87)	Norway (75)	Norway (75)	Cyprus (80)
5	Laos (60)	Zimbabwe (80)	Spain (87)	Spain (75)	Japan (62)	Laos (80)

Since the CDP has previously tracked the reporting on these themes and topics for VNRs presented in 2020 and 2019, it is possible to compare the current batch of reports with previous years. 43 and 34 countries provided reports in 2020 and 2019 respectively. Table 4 illustrates how the average percentage of topics discussed changed in each thematic category. We can see that LGBT+, harmful practices, gender inequality in corporate governance and labor market are more frequently reported on than in earlier years. Countries also have been paying more attention to institutional and legal frameworks for promoting gender equality. Academic research and international partnerships on the other hand have received less attention in the 2021 and 2020 VNRs compared to the 2019 Reports. Because a different group of countries report each year, we cannot say if these are general trends, but it does allow for exploration of how the current batch of VNRs prioritize these issues compared to earlier years.

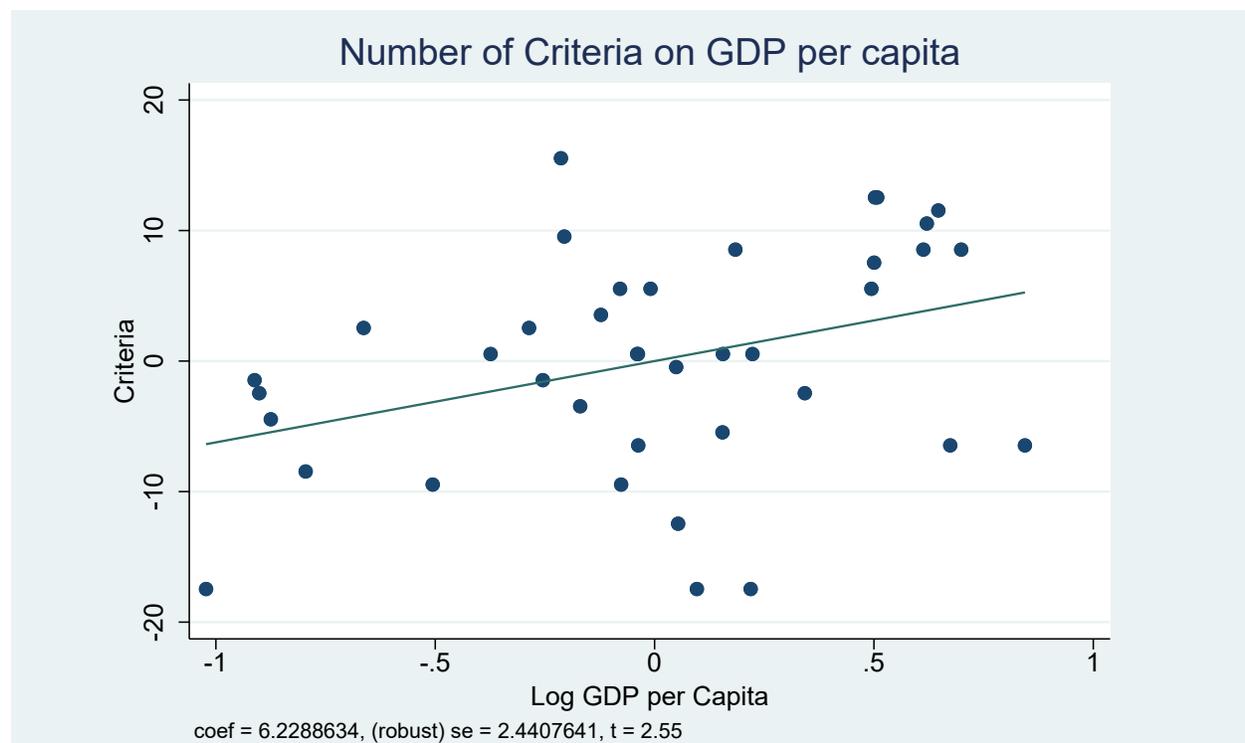
To test the relation between economic development and the intensity of reporting on gender inequality we analyzed the correlation between the number of topics covered in reports and the level of economic development. As a proxy for economic development we use the logarithm of GDP per capita. The regression of the number of topics discussed in 2021 VNRs and GDP per capita indicates the positive correlation.

Then we divided countries which submitted reports in 2021 in three groups based on the values of GDP per capita – the first group – 13 countries with a highest GDP per capita while the third contains 13 countries with the lowest GDP per capita (North Korea was not included in any category due to the absence of the estimated GDP). The mean number in the first group is higher than in the others but statistically the difference is not significant.

Next we pooled the reports submitted in 2019-2021. Pooled regression on 114 reports indicates a positive correlation between the number of topics discussed and GDP per capita. Moreover, when we segregated topics which specifically indicate mentioning of actions undertaken with regard to gender inequality (the provision of women, children and LGBT rights) we also find positive correlation with GDP per capita.

Figure 10

Relationship between SDG5 reporting criteria and GDP per capita



Overall, CDP is encouraged by the fact that more countries are discussing LGBT+, harmful practices with respect to gender, gender inequality in corporate governance and labor market and institutional and legal framework of gender inequality in their VNRs compared to earlier years. We also observe higher frequency of reporting on gender inequality issues by high income countries relative to lower income countries. Reporting on international partnerships for gender equality is also receiving less attention. Increasing the use and awareness of such partnerships to support lower income countries prioritize and ensure that everyone receives equal treatment and opportunity regardless of gender may therefore be a valuable avenue for progress.

Figure 11

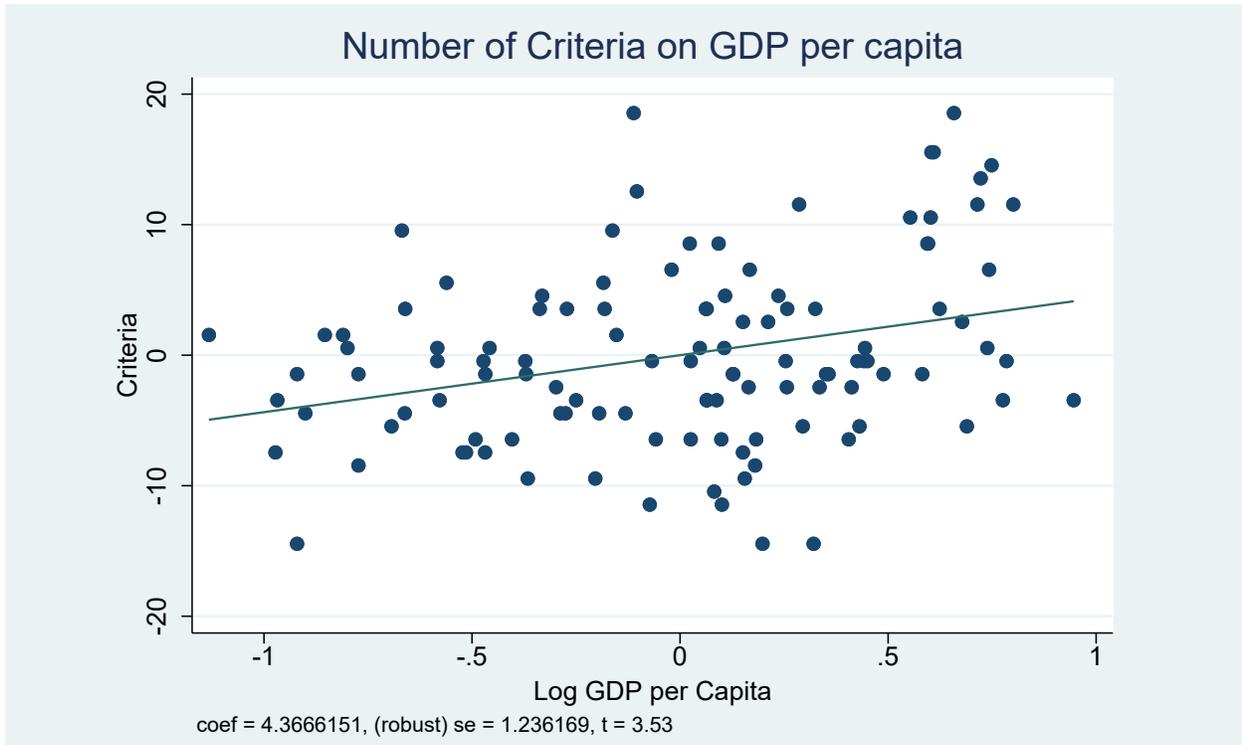
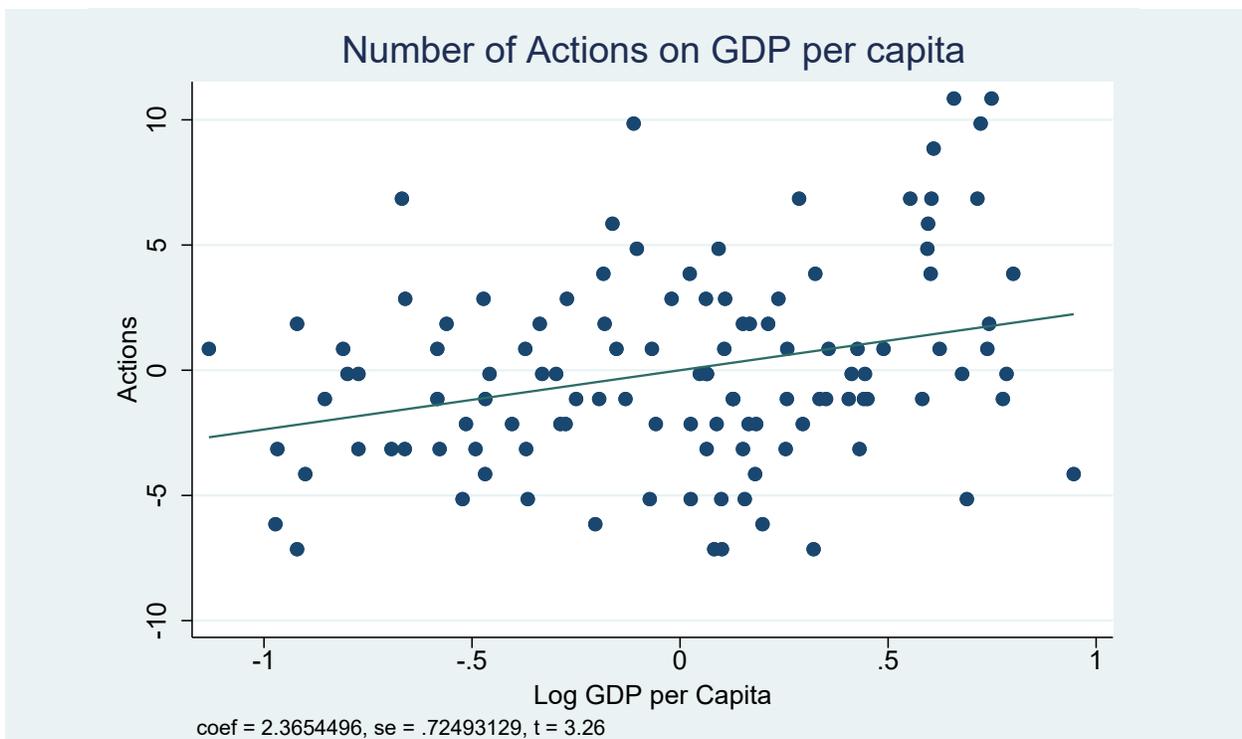
Relationship between SDG5 reporting criteria and GDP per capita

Figure 12

Number of actions for gender inequality mentioned vs GDP per capita

Box 3**Title**

Among the 41 VNR presented in 2021, the report submitted by Zimbabwe is one of the most extensive in SGD5 reporting. It discusses 21 of the SDG5 criteria and discusses a set of interesting practices.

The report highlights the Domestic Violence Act passed in 2007, which is the country's primary legislation to combat all forms of sexual and gender-based violence. It criminalizes domestic violence and aims to prevent abuses caused by cultural and customary practises that discriminate women, such as child marriages, female genital mutilation, virginity testing, force wife inheritance and others. Also, The Revised National Gender Policy was adopted in 2013 with a declared goal of "achieving a gender just society where men and women enjoy equality and equity". It contains a comprehensive overview of the implementation of gender related initiatives and goals across all parts of the society, business, and political system.

In 2005, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development (MWACSMED) was established. MWACSMED promotes sector specific guidelines for government officials to provide them with skills necessary to mainstream gender in their respective sectors. In 2020, the ministry conducted a special training for 39 government officials with the purpose of mainstreaming gender consideration into macroeconomic policies. Among many other goals, MWACSMED encourages and supports expanding the participation of women in all sectors of the economy, increasing number of women in decision making positions and growing women income.

An interesting example of an initiative aiming to empower women economically is the Women's Microfinance Bank established in 2018. The institution's aim is to provide more women with capital and operational finance and promote their financial and economic inclusion. As of December 2019, nearly 76,000 saving accounts were opened, and 47,000 loans disbursed to women. Despite serving people of all genders, the bank declares that its primary goal is to serve previously unbanked women, especially from rural areas.

The report also includes discussion of various topics such as representation of women in government bodies and decision-making positions, promoting gender inequality in a school curriculum, fighting domestic violence and forced marriages. However, the authors admit what there is still much to do. Challenges include access to justice, underinvestment in Sexually Based Gender Violence data management and sustaining one stop centers. Rigid religious norms and practices, which are inherently harmful to women and girls, remain major concerns.

Appendix

V.1 Set of themes and criteria used to analyze SDG 5

General

- A Chapter on SDG5 is presented
- All targets of SDG5 are mentioned
- Some targets of SDG5 are mentioned
- International comparison of gender inequality is presented
- Regional comparison of gender inequality is presented

Labor market

- Gender pay gap is mentioned
- Actions to decrease gender gap are mentioned
- Actions to deal with occupational segregation are mentioned
- Family planning methods are mentioned
- Maternity/Parental leave is mentioned
- Actions towards quality childcare is mentioned
- Barriers to inclusivity in the employment market are mentioned
- Actions to empower immigrant women for employment is mentioned

Affirmative action

- Actions to improve economic empowerment of women and girls is mentioned

Entrepreneurship

- Gender gap in entrepreneurship is mentioned or is a concern
- Actions to decrease gender gap in entrepreneurship are mentioned
- Gender gap in access to credit or financial markets is mentioned
- Actions to decrease gender gap in access to credit or financial markets are mentioned

Corporate governance

- Gender gap in Executive positions, Board of Directors, etc. is mentioned
- Actions to address Gender gap in Executive positions, Board of Directors, etc. are mentioned

Education

- Gender inequality in education is mentioned
- Actions to promote gender equality in education are mentioned
- Incorporation of gender thinking in curricula is mentioned
- Actions to increase women's participation in the field of math and sciences (STEM subjects) are mentioned
- Awareness or actions about future of female participation in labor market because of AI or robotizations (future of works) is mentioned

Laws and norms

- Absence of law that ensures women's rights to inheritance and ownership or employment is mentioned
- Amendment or adoption of laws that are aimed to decrease discrimination in labor market or education is mentioned
- Social norms which prevent gender equality mentioned
- Actions towards social norms which prevent gender equality mentioned are discussed
- Online gender-based abuse is mentioned

Harmful practices

- Actions to protect women from violence, domestic abuse are mentioned
- Actions to protect women from violence on job, schools, sexual harassment are mentioned
- Prostitution is mentioned or is a concern
- Actions against human trafficking are mentioned
- Actions to protect women in prostitution are mentioned
- Forced early marriages of women are mentioned
- Actions to deal with early marriages of women are mentioned
- Human trafficking as a concern is mentioned

Public policy and governance

- Fair representation of women in public and government bodies is mentioned
- Quotas for the underrepresented gender in public governance are mentioned

LGBT

- LGBT rights are mentioned
- Social attitudes towards LGBT people are mentioned
- LGBT inclusive education embedded in the curriculum is mentioned
- A system for managing statistics regarding the types of violence is created/improved

Research

- Promotion of empirical academic research that examines the implementation of gender equality laws is mentioned

Partnerships

- Support to decrease gender inequality in other countries is mentioned

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VI Partnerships for the goals and SDG 17

VI.1 Introduction

There are specific challenges to providing a comprehensive overview of the treatment of SDG 17 in the VNRs. A very broad range of issues are included under this goal and many of these, such as partnerships, debt, trade and financing are often addressed throughout the reports and not necessarily in a dedicated section. Furthermore, several of the SDG 17 targets contain more than one core issue, so coverage of a target does not necessarily mean it addressed all the central aspects of that target. By not focusing the assessment solely on SDG17 sections, but also searching for key terms throughout the reports and attempt has been made to be as consistent and inclusive as possible in this analysis.

VI.2 What are countries reporting on?

The central role of SDG 17 and partnerships for the achieving the SDGs is widely accepted and discussed in the VNR reports. All reports except one address goal 17 and many have a dedicated section. Coverage of individual targets is more selective with on average only 40 per cent of targets reported on and many issues left unaddressed in the majority of reports.

Figure 13 shows the reporting on different targets of SDG17 in the VNRs. Most countries refer to financing and discuss issues such as ODA, international cooperation and aid as well various aspects of public domestic resource mobilization and fiscal policy. Mobilization of additional financial resources for developing countries from multiple sources (SDG 17.3) and Domestic resource mobilization (17.1) are the two most reported targets under goal 17, while debt sustainability (17.4) is also addressed in more than half the reports. A welcome trend is that all high-income countries reported on international finance and their development assistance commitments. However, there is in general more focus on identifying and discussing different sources of financing than there is on assessing financing requirements and the costs of SDG implementation. A better balance of assessing needs and sources would benefit the sound reporting of financing strategies and realistic implementation of the goals.

De Oliveira ²⁰ finds that the majority of countries (39/42²¹) provided examples of contributions by non-state actors to 2030 Agenda implementation beyond consultation on priorities and participation in governance arrangements. This is an improvement compared to earlier years. Participation in specific projects and multistakeholder partnerships and initiatives are the most common type of engagement by civil society reported in the VNRs.

Between half and a quarter of reports refer to aspects of technical cooperation and knowledge sharing, such as target 17.8 on capacity building for science technology and innovation (STI) and information and communications technologies (ICT), international support for national planning (17.9) and capacity building to enhance data availability (17.18). A similar frequency of reporting is seen for targets related to partnerships including Public Private Partnerships (17.17) and Global Multistakeholder Partnerships (17.16).

²⁰ De Oliveira, Ana. (2022). *Progressing National SDGs Implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum in 2021*. Ottawa: Cooperation Canada.

²¹ De Oliveira, unlike the CDP, also included Bahamas (which provided a summary, but not a full report) in their analysis. Bahamas where among the 39 countries reporting on stakeholder contributions.

Figure 13

SDG 17 target reporting**VI.3 What are countries not reporting on?**

The CDP is particularly concerned with the lack of attention provided to SDGs that target LDCs specifically, such as providing duty free, quota free market access for LDCs (17.12) and investment promotion for LDCs (17.5). These targets remain among the least reported as has also been observed in earlier reports. Similarly, increasing developing country exports (17.11) is also comparatively under-reported.

Respect each country's policy space and leadership to establish and implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development (17.15) is another target that continues to be under-reported as observed in previous assessments.

A final noteworthy absence is the comparatively low reporting on enhancing policy coherence (17.4). Given the integrated and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda and the SDG that most reports acknowledge and highlight the lack of attention to improve mutually reinforcing policy actions is both surprising and worrying.

VII Under-reported goals and targets

As in previous analyses, an assessment of under-reported goals and targets (i.e., those that receive few mentions and little discussion) was undertaken to ascertain which topics and issues of the 2030 Agenda are not prioritized in the VNRs. Among the 41 reports submitted in 2020, 22 reports include specific references to all goals, while a further 10 cover 15 or 16 goals, indicating that most countries reported broadly on progress towards achievement of the 2030 agenda (refer to Figure 14). A few countries have prioritized a smaller number of goals and focused their reporting on those.

Figure 14

Number of goals reported on in each VNR

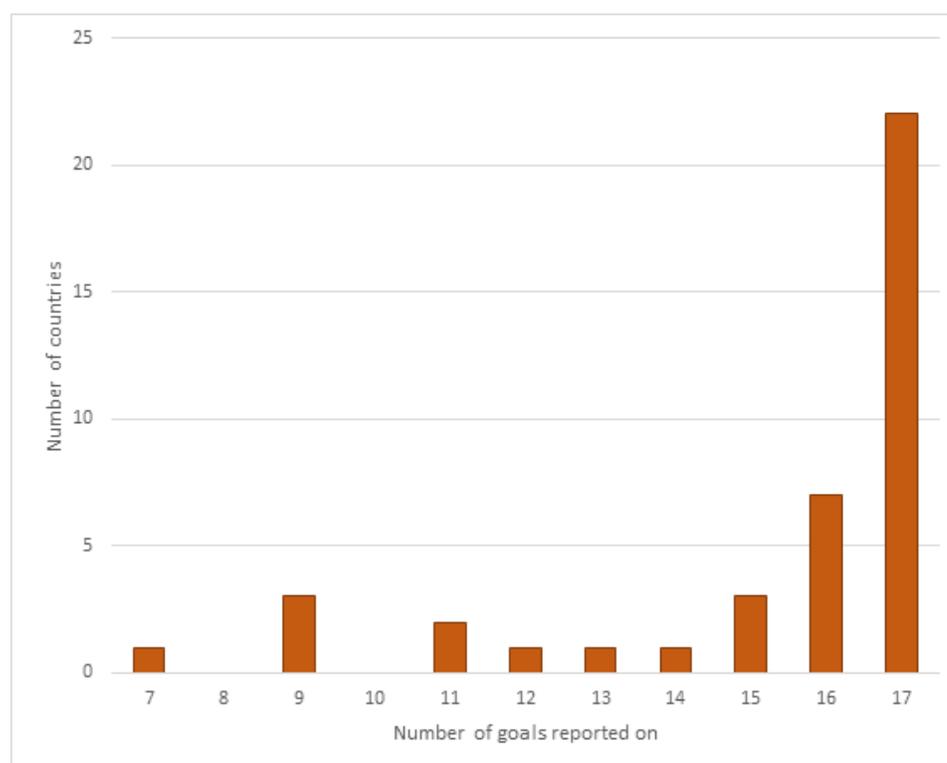


Figure 15 shows the reporting of goals and targets. The goals least reported on were SDGs 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), 14 (Life below water), and 15 (Life on land). However, the low reporting on SDG 14 is largely explained by the significant number of land-locked countries reporting in 2021.

A general trend in past reports and again in the reports presented in 2021 is the lack of attention to means of implementation targets. As seen in Figure 16, targets and themes related to technology transfer, capacity building and inclusive and equitable globalization and trade remain among the least reported. This is true for the reporting across all SDGs. While some means of implementation targets refer to commitments that only apply to certain groups of countries or issues that are only relevant in a subset of reporting countries, the broad trend of not covering or discussing means of implementation is of concern with respect to pursuing the transformative change enshrined in the 2030 Agenda.

Figure 15
Reporting on goals and targets

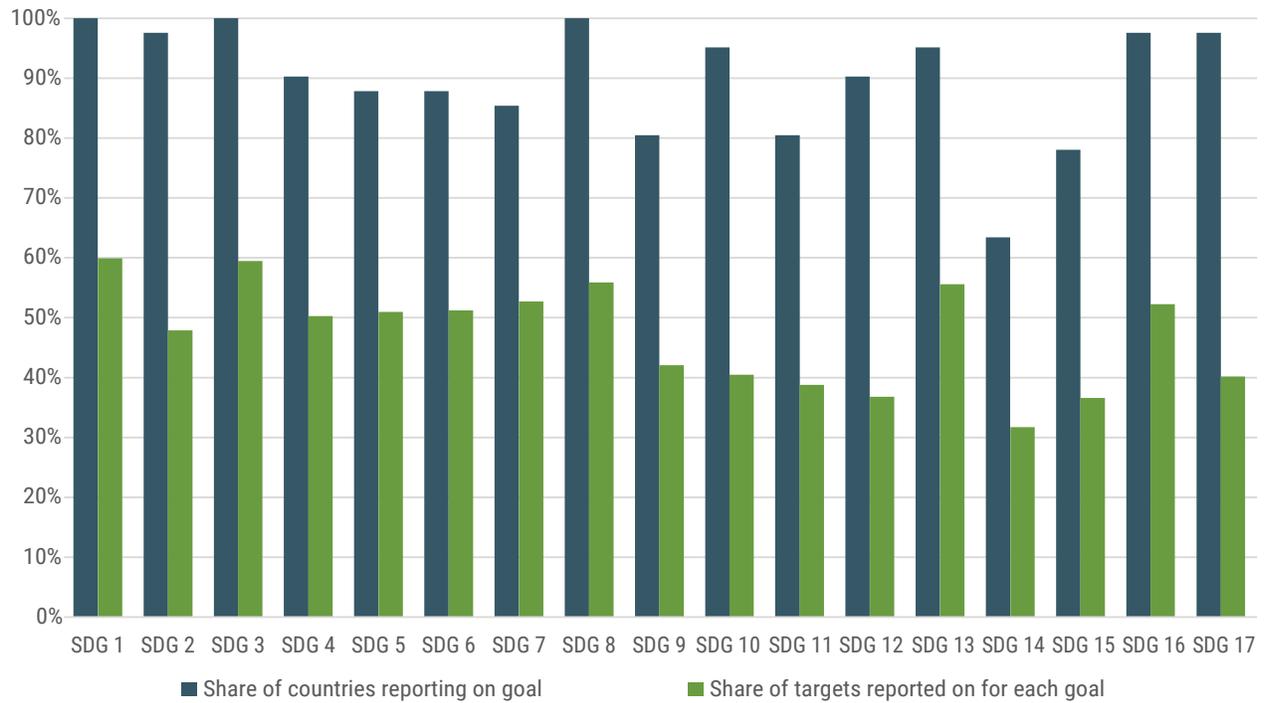


Figure 16
Reporting on outcome targets vs means of implementation targets

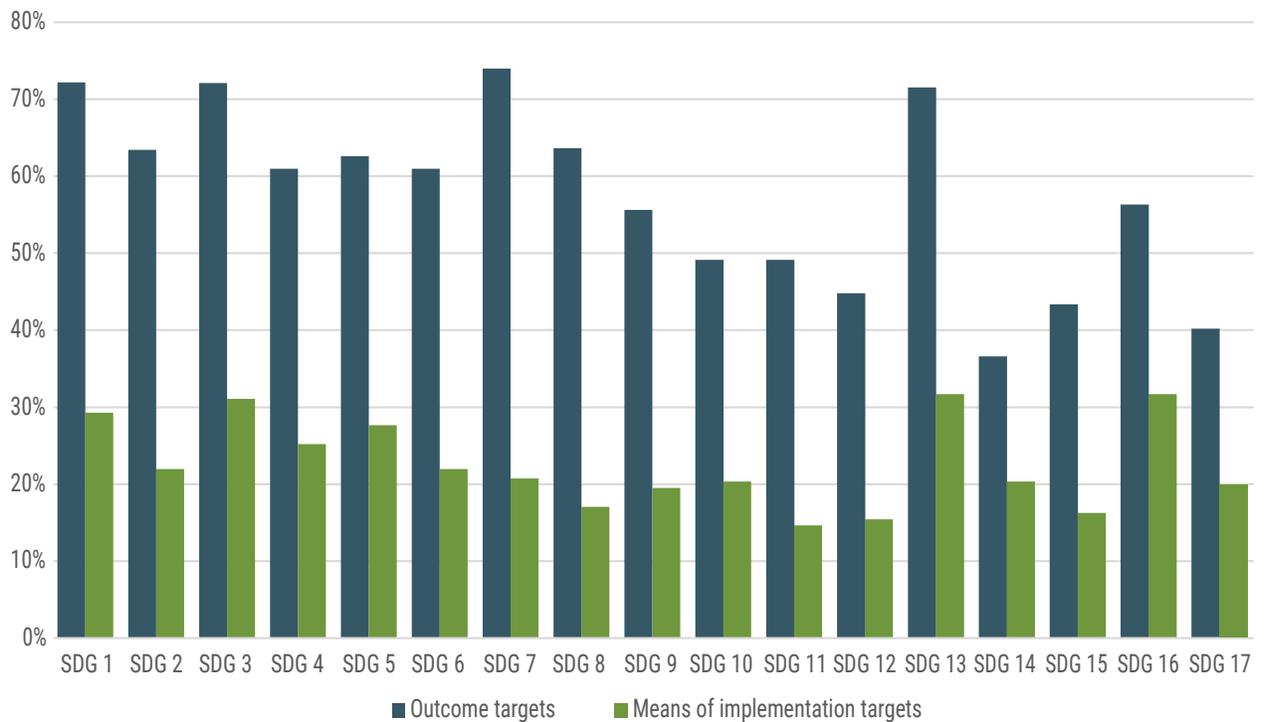


Table 7

Least frequently reported targets

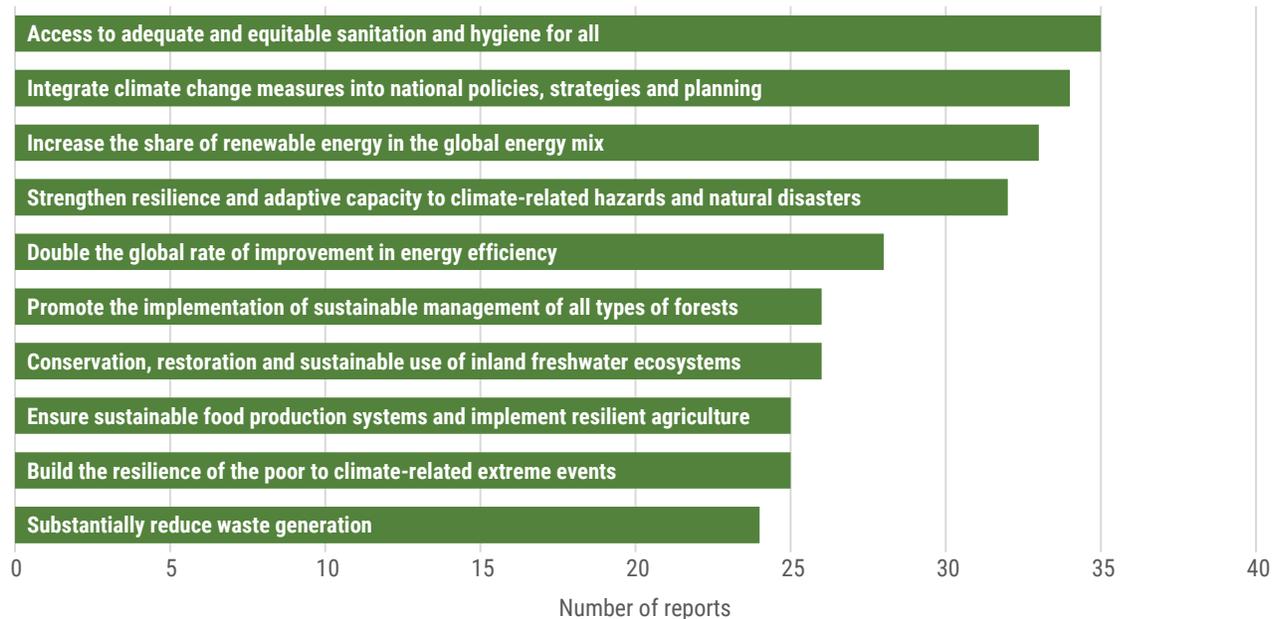
Target	
11.c	Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials
2.b	Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets, including through the parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and all export measures with equivalent effect, in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round
12.c	Rationalize inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption by removing market distortions, in accordance with national circumstances, including by restructuring taxation and phasing out those harmful subsidies, where they exist, to reflect their environmental impacts, taking fully into account the specific needs and conditions of developing countries and minimizing the possible adverse impacts on their development in a manner that protects the poor and the affected communities
9.a	Facilitate sustainable and resilient infrastructure development in developing countries through enhanced financial, technological and technical support to African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States
9.b	Support domestic technology development, research and innovation in developing countries, including by ensuring a conducive policy environment for, inter alia, industrial diversification and value addition to commodities
10.a	Implement the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in accordance with World Trade Organization agreements
11.a	Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning
15.b	Mobilize significant resources from all sources and at all levels to finance sustainable forest management and provide adequate incentives to developing countries to advance such management, including for conservation and reforestation
15.c	Enhance global support for efforts to combat poaching and trafficking of protected species, including by increasing the capacity of local communities to pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities
1.b	Create sound policy frameworks at the national, regional and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions
6.b	Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management
8.a	Increase Aid for Trade support for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, including through the Enhanced Integrated Framework for Trade-Related Technical Assistance to Least Developed Countries
8.b	By 2020, develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization
12.a	Support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production

VII Environment

The voluntary national reports (VNRs) presented in 2021 show a welcome increase in attention given to environmental targets compared to earlier reports. In particular, climate action (SDG13) was addressed in almost all reports (39/41) and many had a section dedicated to climate action. Most reports also specifically addressed at least one target and it is encouraging that 33 reports discuss integration of climate change into national policies, strategies and planning, while 31 also give mention to strengthening capacity for adaptation and resilience. Sustainable energy targets aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, such as increasing the share of renewable energy (target 7.2) and accelerating energy efficiency (7.3) are also included in the majority of reports. However, for means of implementation targets there is lower coverage. Only 16 reports mention the climate commitments under the Paris agreement and only 10 the promotion of mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States.

Figure 17

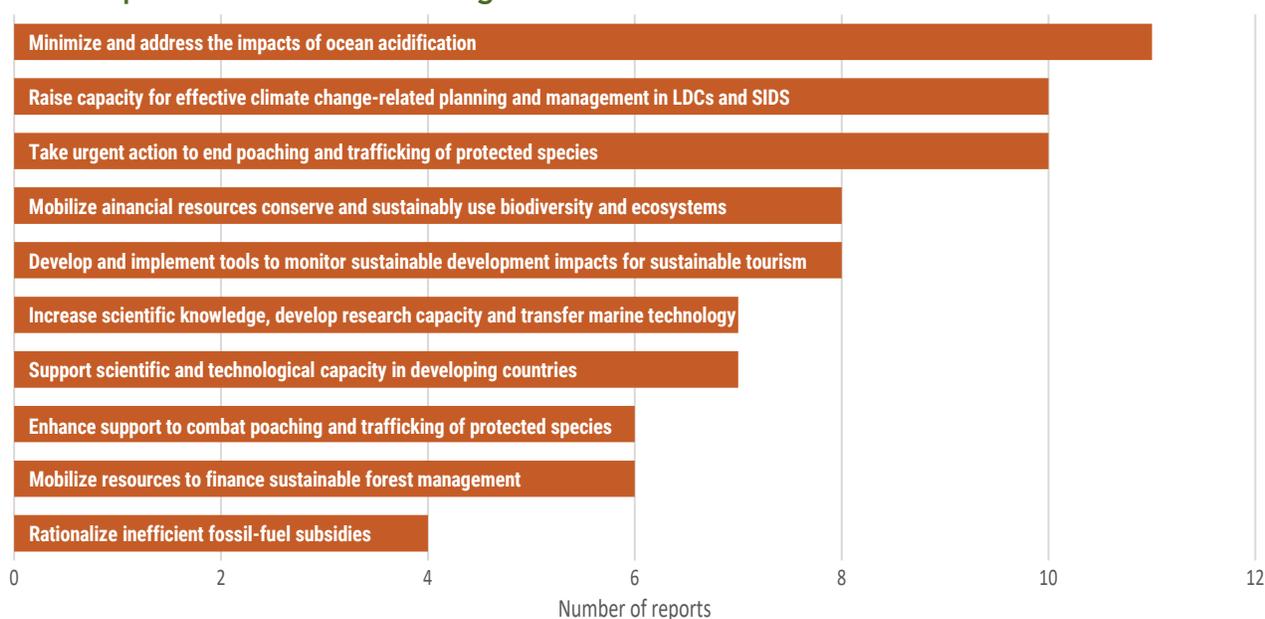
Most frequently reported environmental targets



Sustainable production and consumption are discussed in most reports (36/41). However, while waste reduction and management are frequently reported on, the attention to other targets is modest and the topic is generally not treated in much depth.

Life below water (SDG 14) and life on land (SDG 15) are the least reported goals overall. While the large number of land-locked countries reporting in 2021 (10) largely explain the low coverage of SDG 14, the comparatively low frequency of reports discussing ecosystem protection and sustainable forest management is noteworthy. With respect to oceans, international concerns such as ocean acidification (11 reports) and overfishing (18 reports) are not receiving much attention.

Figure 18

Least reported environmental targets

Means of implementation targets are typically less frequently reported on and dominate the list of least reported targets (Figure 18). This includes targets such as those addressing resource mobilization, capacity development and partnerships. The least reported target is rationalization of fossil fuel subsidies, which is only mentioned in 4 reports.

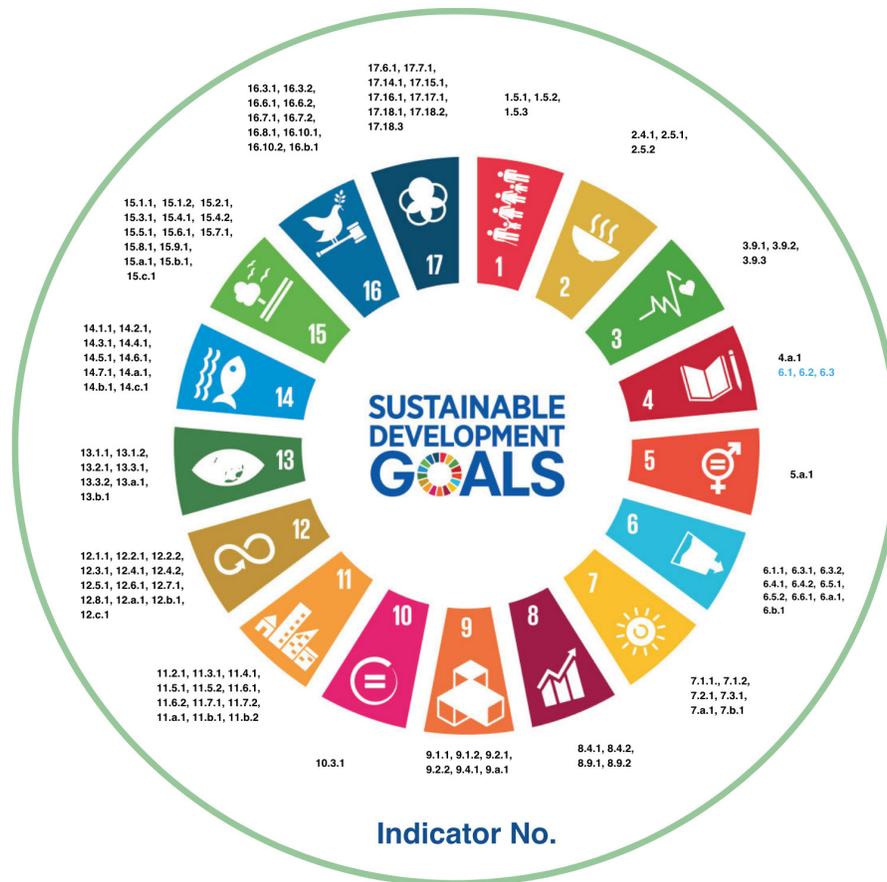
VII.1 Connections between SDG4 and SDG6 in VNRs submitted by African countries

The 2030 Agenda is an integrated strategy and progress in one goal supports progress in others. Achieving sustainable development across the 17 goals, in social and economic dimensions, is inseparable from environmental protection and overcoming threats to the environment such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Given this close relationship, it is unsurprising that environmentally related targets underlie all 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). Figure 19 illustrates the environmentally related targets, by indicator number (in the outer circle) that correspond to each of the 17 SDGs (in the inner circle).

Despite the importance of environmental targets to all SDGs, reporting on environmental goals in VNRs has only recently gathered momentum. Recognizing the importance of achieving environmental goals for obtaining sustainable development, this review cycle offers the opportunity for these African countries to capture a broad picture of environmental progress.

Figure 19

SDGs and their environmentally related target goals



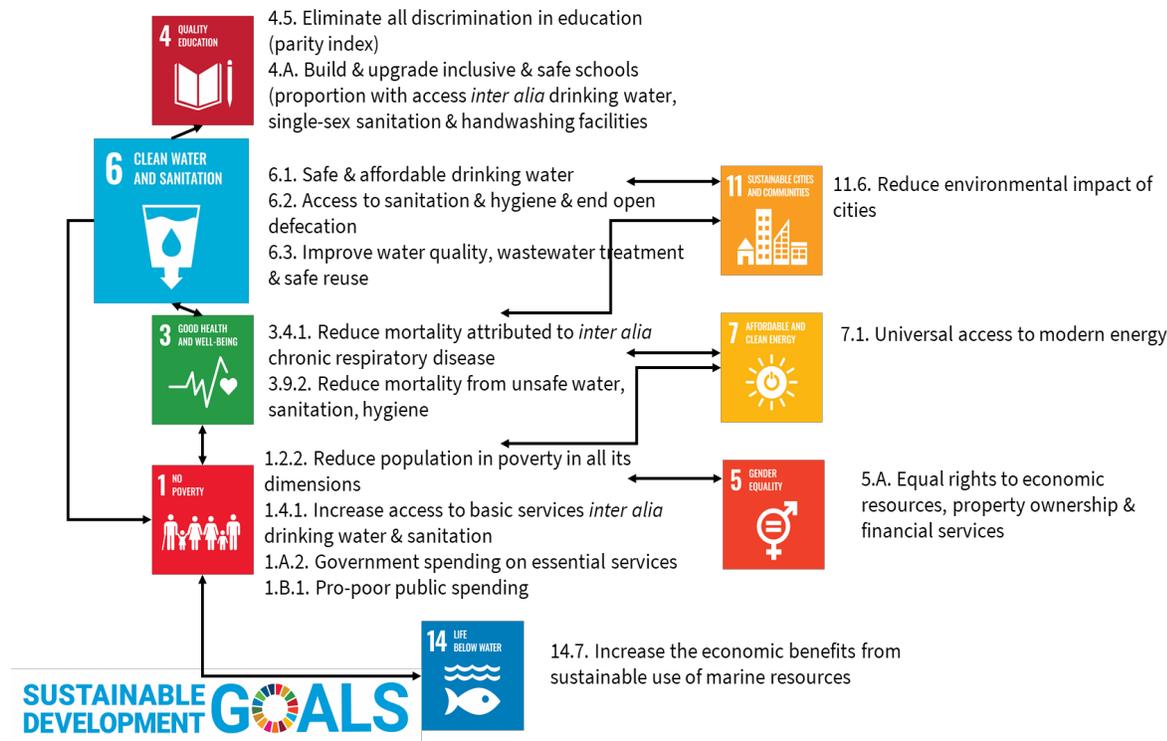
VII.2 Interconnections between Education & Clean Water and Sanitation

The SDGs are fundamentally linked as progress on one goal may inherently create a conducive environment for achieving another. Similarly, failure to achieve a particular goal may undermine efforts to achieve another. Figure 20 illustrates this interconnectedness and a potential circular effect. A subset of the environmental goals are focused on in this chapter, illustrating that no poverty (SDG 1), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and good health and well-being (SDG 3) play a central role in the realization of the other goals.

The relationship between clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) and quality education (SDG 4), and how these two goals relate to other SDGs, is a pertinent case of this interconnectedness. Access to water and sanitation facilities is an education issue, a health issue and a poverty issue. A direct link to education relates to the impact that clean water and sanitation in schools can have on children's school attendance. This is particularly true for girls who may struggle to stay in school without the hygienic facilities necessary for menstrual hygiene management (MHM)¹. Women and girls are also more likely to be responsible for the collection of water which takes away from schooling time. The gendered effect of water access on education contributes to gender disparities in education (addressed in SDG 4.5, 4.6) and may generate broader gender inequities (that SDG 5 seeks to overcome). Access to water and quality education are both related to good health and well-being (SDG 3). Clean water and sanitation access decrease the risk of waterborne illnesses and mortality (SDG 3)². This further relates to eradicating poverty (SDG 1): health and the costs of healthcare can exacerbate and poverty, while poverty can cause ill health by limiting access to the goods and services needed for health and well-being³.

Figure 20

Interconnectedness between a subset of environmentally related SDGs



Key to overcoming poverty is the provision of basic services, including clean water and sanitation facilities. The provision of safe water is dependent on a number of environmental protection measures. One example, illustrated in Figure 20, is the need to ensure that urban areas have a low environmental impact to avoid pollution that can damage safe water supplies (SDG 11.6).

VII.3 Access to safe water in schools in African countries

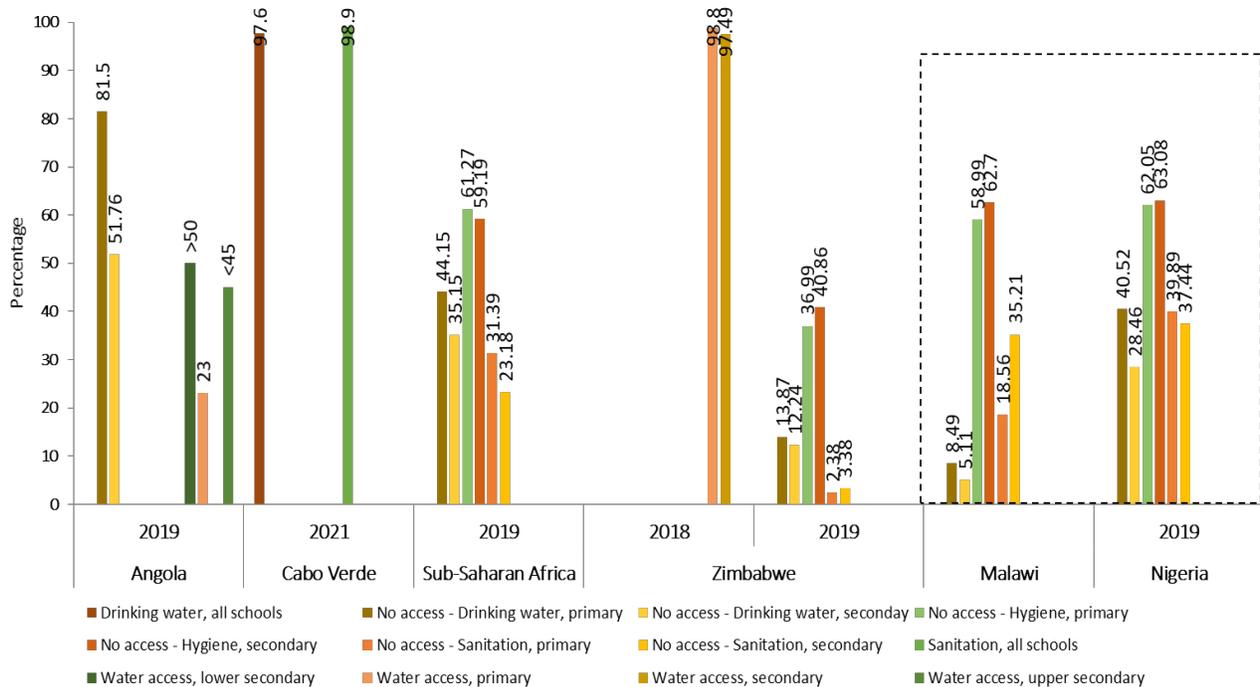
Access to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) in schools, which supports inclusive and safe schools (SDG 4), allows students to pursue their education in a comfortable, safe, and hygienic environment. The sample of reporting African countries with data on schools with access to water (Error! Reference source not found.), provides some evidence that access to clean water and sanitation in schools is quite variable. Reliable and comprehensive data is lacking. For Angola, 81.5 per cent of primary and 51.76 per cent of secondary schools in 2019 had no access to drinking water. This is in contrast to Zimbabwe, where only 13.87 per cent of primary and 12.24 per cent of secondary schools in 2019 had no access to drinking water.

Across sub-Saharan Africa in 2019, on average 44.15 per cent of primary and 35.15 per cent of secondary schools do not have access to safe drinking water. Notably, Cabo Verde records high access to sanitation at 98.9 per cent and 97.6 per cent access to drinking water among all schools in 2021.

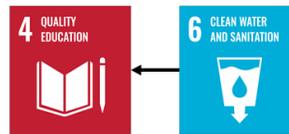
In addition to the evident disparities between primary and secondary school water access, 2019 data also indicates a large disparity between urban and rural schools' access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. For Sub-Saharan Africa, the urban coverage, compared to the rural coverage, was found to be 9 percentage points higher for basic water, 19 points higher for basic sanitation and 38 points higher for basic hygiene. In rural sub-Saharan Africa, only one in nine schools (11 per cent) had a basic hygiene service⁴. These disparities indicate that primary schools in rural areas are in particular need of basic water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

Figure 21

Access to water in schools for select African countries



4.A. Build & upgrade inclusive & safe schools (proportion with access inter alia drinking water, single-sex sanitation & handwashing facilities)



6.1. Safe & affordable drinking water
6.2. Access to sanitation & hygiene & end open defecation

Note: Malawi and Nigeria did not submit VNRs

Source: Washdata (2022) and VNRs (2021)

Access to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), how it is related to quality education (SDG4), and how this relationship is connected to other SDGs illustrates the close link between environmental and other social and economic outcomes. This case highlights the importance of tracking and reporting on environmental targets for achieving outcomes like quality education for all. Notable, however, are the differences, depicted in Figure 21, in reporting on outcome and means of implementation targets. To achieve improvements in quality of education, it is important to track progress in implementation targets for clean water and sanitation.

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