



Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*

The Committee decided that it would undertake annually an analysis of the voluntary national reviews presented at the high-level political forum on sustainable development, with the purpose of supporting Governments and stakeholders in improving the effectiveness of the reviews as an instrument to advance implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The analysis will focus on the ways key principles and selected cross-cutting issues are addressed in the voluntary national reviews, highlighting best practices and identifying gaps. It will bring value added by providing technical, transparent and objective analysis of the reviews. It will also complement the Committee's substantive work on sustainable development issues as well as the work undertaken by the Secretariat and other organizations, including civil society, on monitoring the implementation of Agenda 2030 and on synthesizing reports on the reviews.

The Committee's analysis will build on and further refine the approach piloted in 2017, as described in chapter VI. Overall, a more substantive discussion of policy strategies and challenges in the voluntary national reviews would help in fulfilling their functions of sharing best practices and advancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda. For example, while almost all the reviews being presented in 2017 recognize the principle of leaving no one behind, only 14 countries reported specifically on strategies for putting the principle into practice and the policy dilemmas involved. While most reports did focus on groups left behind, most identified only a very few groups. A broad conceptualization that includes ethnic and religious minorities and the poorest of the poor would be desirable. Countries in general recognize the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda, and almost all have established coordination mechanisms. Only nine, however, reported on specific trade-offs in policy choices and how they might be addressed.

Voluntary national reviews, presented annually at the high-level political forum on sustainable development, are a key element of the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. Through the voluntary national reviews, countries provide information on national approaches to implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The aim of the reviews is to enable the sharing of experiences with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. There has been

widespread interest in the reviews, with more than 43 countries having presented their reports in 2017 and 47 scheduled to do so in 2018.

The voluntary national reviews follow a flexible approach, in line with their voluntary nature and the diversity of the States Members of the United Nations. This allows Governments, which are encouraged to prepare the reviews in consultation with all stakeholders, to choose a process and format that best fits their situation and

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national circumstances. Despite limits to the comparability of the voluntary national reviews caused by the variety of formats used, analysing the information contained in the many reviews can yield important messages about the overall approaches to implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and reveal lessons learned and best practices that can both be of use to other countries and induce a process of healthy competition among countries.

In 2017, the Committee decided to initiate research on and analysis of the voluntary national reviews. The Committee analysis of the reviews complements the annual synthesis report provided by the Secretariat and the assessments by other organizations, examining how the voluntary national reviews address key principles and cross-cutting issues, based on the diverse expertise of the Committee. The analysis aims at encouraging Governments to address critical challenges in promoting the necessary ambitious and transformative agenda. The work of the Committee is neither an analysis of national implementation of the 2030 Agenda nor a judgment of the voluntary national reviews, but an objective analysis of how they have approached selected cross-cutting issues and principles.

The pilot analyses of all 43 voluntary national reviews presented to the high - level political forum in 2017 covered, in particular, the key thematic challenges of leaving no one behind (see chapter II) and addressing policy trade-offs through policy integration. 99. The analysis of leaving no one behind focused on reported policies and strategies aimed at implementing the principle with regard to individuals and population subgroups. The Committee found, in its analysis, that while almost all countries recognized this key principle, only 14 referred to specific comprehensive strategies implementing it. At the same time, many countries reported on strategies and policies in key areas associated with leaving no one behind. However, as set out in chapter II of present report, an effective implementation of the principle typically requires macroeconomic policies conducive to equitable growth, sectoral policies that expand productive capacities and universal social programmes in addition to targeted policies. Hence, voluntary national reviews that utilize a broad conceptualization of leaving no one behind may be particularly valuable for sharing best practices.

Most voluntary national reviews in 2017 provided few details on how and why strategies related to leaving no one behind were working. Hence, for the reviews to become an effective mechanism for sharing lessons learned, countries assigning high priority to this principle should include a more comprehensive discussion on their policy choices. Information on policies that proved to be ineffective and on difficulties in translating the principle into concrete strategies and policies would also be helpful. The Committee also noted that in the voluntary national reviews addressing the groups most at risk of being left behind, most countries emphasized women, people with disabilities and children, while relatively few gave special consideration to ethnic or religious minorities or the poorest of the poor. More information in the reviews on the ways in which the most marginalized and vulnerable groups are addressed would be beneficial.

An essential characteristic of the 2030 Agenda is its integrated nature, which demands that policy choices be considered on the basis of their multidimensional implications. It therefore requires policymakers not to only to identify and harness synergies between policy objectives, but also to address trade-offs, where measures directed at one objective can have negative impacts for other objectives, different groups of people, other countries or future generations. While almost all countries mentioned in their voluntary national reviews that they had frameworks in place (such as strategic planning or institutional coordination mechanisms) that allowed for setting policies in an integrated manner, only eight countries referred to specific mechanisms that enabled the identification and resolution of trade-offs. Less than half of the reviews explicitly mentioned trade-offs and, in most cases, the references were very general. Only nine countries reported on specific trade-offs faced and how they had been addressed. Given the importance of addressing trade-offs for achieving progress towards sustainable development and the inherent difficulties in finding solutions for them, more attention in the voluntary national reviews to describing concrete trade-offs and policy mechanisms for addressing them could significantly increase the value of the reviews for sharing experiences that accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.