



## Analysis of the 2020 voluntary national reviews (VNRs)\*

### Summary

The VNRs presented in 2020, while showcasing a number of achievements, suggest that the transformative and structural changes that would be necessary for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda are not taking place, and certainly not with

the urgency that the ambition of meeting the SDGs by 2030 demands. Greater attention needs to be given in the VNRs to the transformative aspects of the 2030 Agenda and to the review process as an instrument to advance SDG implementation.

### Recommendations

The Committee recommends that the Council promote, in the context of the high-level political forum on sustainable development and in its guidance on voluntary national review processes, a dialogue and exchange of experiences among countries on how to address climate change and environmental issues, including sustainable consumption and production; inequalities of all kinds, including gender inequality; and productive capacity and structural transformation, in order to ensure that the voluntary national reviews fulfil their role as instruments to advance the transformative objectives of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the pandemic, which is deepening and exposing inequalities within and between countries.

The Committee further recommends that the Council, and Member States undertaking voluntary national reviews, explore ways to tap into the new opportunities resulting from expanded online engagement worldwide to make the voluntary national reviews more inclusive, while being mindful to ensure representation of groups that are disadvantaged in terms of digital access. Greater attention should also be given to ensuring that lessons learned during the voluntary national review process are fed back into national policymaking. The Committee also recommends the active engagement of civil society and the inclusion of space in the voluntary national review process for independent civil society inputs, including the presentation of shadow reports.

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\* Excerpt from Committee for Development Policy, Report on the twenty-third session, See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2021, Supplement No. 13 (E/2021/33)

Since 2018, the Committee analyzes annually the VNRs presented at the HLPF.<sup>1</sup> This year, it conducted an analysis of the 45 VNR reports presented in 2020. While there are welcome advances, the review suggests that the transformative and structural changes that would be necessary for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda are not taking place with the urgency that the ambition to meet the SDGs by 2030 demands. Moreover, the current public health and socio-economic crises are threatening to reverse the progress made in recent years.

**Under-reported goals and targets.** The most commonly unreported goals and targets in the 2020 VNRs are those most closely related to environment and climate change; and inequality. While this can be associated to the legacy of the Millennium Development Goals and data availability, it is inconsistent with the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs, the need for balance between the three dimensions of sustainable development and the pressing crises of climate change, environmental degradation and inequality, aggravated by COVID-19.

**Leaving no one behind.** It is encouraging that increasing attention has been given to the pledge to leave no one behind. Little has been said, however, about the operationalization of the concept of reaching the furthest behind first; about action to avoid pushing people further behind; and about the role of transformative, cross-cutting policy areas that would significantly and sustainably enable social protection, generate employment, and provide resources for other measures more commonly associated to leaving no one behind.

**Productive capacity and structural transformation.** Most reports refer to issues related to structural transformation, including industrialization and diversification, but very few reflect a comprehensive transformational vision or report on action such as industrial policy. This suggests a disconnect between the ambition to meet the SDGs and the attention given to the type of developmental transformation that could drive and sustain SDG implementation in the long run.

**Sustainable consumption and production.** Goal 12 is among the least reported, as are other targets directly related to sustainable consumption and production. There is little reflection on the impacts of unsustainable production and consumption patterns on ecosystems and people, within and across borders.

**Inequality.** More countries addressed inequality than in previous years. However, few referred to structural changes to redress increasing income inequality, whether in regard to the challenges presented by COVID-19 (see below) or pre-existing trends such as the growing inequality between incomes from capital and labour. Most action reported to address SDG10 refers to targeted schemes and projects rather than clear and comprehensive strategies and policies. The targets in SDG 10 that refer to inequality between countries have received even less attention than the targets that refer to inequality within countries.

**The treatment of gender inequality.** All reports in 2020 referred to gender, the vast majority referred to issues of domestic violence, and many to the fair representation of women in government, economic empowerment and inequality in education. Less attention was given to structural issues that shape gender inequality, such as limitations on access to land, enabling technologies, STEM training and finance; and legal and social norms such as those that determine the distribution of unpaid work.

**Pandemic preparedness and COVID-19.** Although VNR preparations were already advanced when the pandemic was declared, most reports include an assessment of COVID-19's consequences. Most emphasized the impact on economic growth, but few mentioned its unequal impacts such as the death toll for marginalized communities, gendered effects of lockdowns, and vulnerability of informal workers to the global recession. There was also relatively little attention to target 3.D related to pandemic preparedness. These issues, as well as strategies to ensure equity in access to vaccines and healthcare, will require attention in the 2021 VNRs.