



## Analysis of the voluntary National reviews\*

### Summary

The Committee reviewed the analyses of the voluntary national reviews that it conducted annually from 2018 to 2022 and synthesized lessons learned into a consolidated set of findings and recommendations. While it welcomed the considerable improvements made in the reports during that period, concerns remain that the potential of the voluntary national reviews as a tool of mutual learning is not being reached. In that context, the Committee recommends launching a new generation of reviews to help rescue the Sustainable Development Goals. The “voluntary national reviews – version 2” should refocus the reports away from descriptive narratives towards more in-depth analysis of successes and failures, policy insights and identification of structural obstacles. The Committee further recommended improvements to the voluntary national review process through broader stakeholder participation, feedback loops that bring lessons learned back into national debates and decision-making, and greater space for civil society and shadow reports at the high-level political forum on sustainable development.

### Recommendations

While appreciating the progress made in the voluntary national reviews since 2016, the Committee recommends that, in view of the urgent need for deeper, faster and more ambitious action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the Council and Member States launch a new generation of reviews, “voluntary national reviews – version 2”, to realign the reports with their agreed purpose as vehicles for exchange of experience and peer learning.

The Committee recommends that Member States pursue this realignment of voluntary national review content by refocusing the reports away from lengthy descriptive narratives of progress in the implementation of the Goals towards evidence-based analysis of progress, lessons learned from implementation, discussions of policy successes and failures, identification of key challenges, and assessment of the core transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the means of implementation. Reports should be framed under the concept of sustainable development as integrated and universal, with commitments to inclusion, human rights and respect for planetary limits.

The Committee also recommends that Member States undertaking voluntary national reviews strengthen the review process by including a feedback mechanism that facilitates learning from experience and informs future policy discussion and action. National processes should be inclusive and participatory, creating space for civil society contributions to identifying priorities, obstacles and opportunities.

To strengthen the review process for the implementation of the Goals, the Committee recommends that the Council: (a) include space for the presentation of shadow reports by civil society organizations at the high-level political forum on sustainable development; and (b) encourage countries presenting voluntary national reviews to incorporate, more systematically and comprehensively, voluntary peer review arrangements with partner countries as input to their national reviews.

\* Excerpt from Committee for Development Policy, Report on the twenty-fifth session, See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2023, Supplement No. 13 (E/2023/33)

## Analysis of the voluntary national reviews

From 2018 to 2022, the Committee conducted annual analyses of the voluntary national reviews presented at the high-level political forum on sustainable development the previous year. In 2023, it made recommendations on strengthening the process by taking stock of the findings from previous analyses, reviewing the findings of the analysis of voluntary national review reports conducted by civil society groups and meeting with stakeholders in the reviews. The objective is to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals Summit to be held in September 2023 by distilling the key lessons learned from the voluntary national review process to date into clear messages and recommendations aimed at enhancing the role of the reviews as an effective instrument in accelerating the implementation of the Goals.

The Committee noted that improvements could be seen in the quality of the reports prepared over the years and that they had evolved to provide a more inclusive and comprehensive picture of the state and prospects of sustainable development in countries submitting the voluntary national reviews. It particularly welcomed the broader and more consolidated treatment of the pledge to leave no one behind and the increased discussions on inequality. However, to fully serve as effective vehicles for the acceleration of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, further improvements in both content and process are required. In view of the slowdowns and reversals in progress in achieving the Goals, and the urgent challenge to “rescue the Sustainable Development Goals”, the midterm review is an opportunity to re-examine the nature of the reports.

**Substantive content, analytical depth and policy focus.** The Committee consistently finds that the reports lack analytical depth and policy focus. The voluntary national reviews were conceived as a tool to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. However, most reports are descriptive and do not adequately reflect on core priorities for the country, lessons learned from good practices that have accelerated progress, the nature of the challenges, the alternative policy measures that could be considered, or the gaps in knowledge where lessons from other countries would be of use.

**Transformative change.** There is a disconnect between the transformative ambition of the 2030 Agenda and the implementation efforts. Presented as a plan of action to transform our world, the Agenda envisions bold action for people, prosperity and planet that fundamentally changes the social contract for a more inclusive, equitable, just and sustainable future. The voluntary national reviews do not reflect the scale of effort needed to reach those ambitious aspirations. True transformative action and policy aimed at the root causes of inequality, injustice and degradation of the environment are often ignored in favour of superficial treatment of issues that avoids the deeper structural causes. Furthermore, many reports neglect the targets and goals that have particularly powerful potential to drive transformative and long-term change, including the means of implementation.

**Policy coherence for an integrated agenda.** The concept of Agenda 2030 as an interdependent and integrated agenda is acknowledged in principle but missing in practice. A growing number of countries are setting up interdepartmental coordination frameworks for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as multidimensional poverty measures that incentivize coordination. Yet, the strategies for implementation do not reflect an integrated approach. The reports discuss individual goals in isolation and there is little discussion of interdependencies and interlinkages. Mostly, scarce attention is given to trade-offs or synergies in policy strategies and policy coherence is discussed only superficially.

**A process for mutual learning.** Using the voluntary national reviews as tools for learning from a country’s own experience and that of others depends not only on the substantive content of the reviews but also on the process. Findings from the review preparation process should inform policy discussions and help to shape policies and actions for implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Voluntary national review processes seldom include a feedback mechanism whereby lessons learned are taken into account in domestic policy formulation and introduced in public discourse.

**A more inclusive process.** Broader engagement and consultation with stakeholders is lacking in the preparation of many reviews as well as in feedback from the high-level political forum on sustainable development and the voluntary national review process. Incorporating the views and perspectives of non-State actors, including civil society, academic institutions and businesses, is particularly important. The Committee has consistently recommended the ongoing engagement of civil society and space in the review process for independent input from all stakeholders, including the presentation of shadow reports.

The Committee recommends launching a new generation of reviews, voluntary national reviews – version 2, to help rescue the Sustainable Development Goals. The new generation of reviews should incorporate improvements to: (a) report content, by including more in-depth analysis of policy successes and failures, identification of key challenges and assessment of the core transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda; and (b) voluntary national review processes, by strengthening learning and feedback mechanisms, stakeholder participation and peer review.