

**RESEARCH**

# Evaluating the World's Progress towards the Implementation of the United Nations Agenda 2030 Using Countries' Voluntary National Reviews

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## ABSTRACT

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the status of the implementation of national commitments for the implementation of the United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by learning lessons from what is presented in countries' Voluntary National Reports (VNRs), and identify targeted areas for improvement and resource allocation.

**DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH:** The paper critically discusses the key question (practical and theoretical) of how to accelerate the pace of the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030 at half-way to the finishing line and achieve Sustainable Development (SD) across the world. For the purpose of this research, 37 young researchers (undergraduates and postgraduates) from across the world selected and analysed more than 30 countries' VNRs ensuring there were good representations from all the regional groups of the UN General Assembly.

**FINDINGS:** The paper presents the analysis of the results and findings of 30 selected countries' VNRs from the UN's high-level political forum (HLPF) database. More importantly, the paper also outlines the global

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challenges facing many countries across the world and the need to support national agendas to accelerate progress towards the UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs.

**ORIGINALITY/VALUE:** It is clear from the research, countries must evaluate and analyse their own VNRs to identify targeted areas for improvement and resource allocation to accelerate progress towards the UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs.

**RESEARCH LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS:** Researchers have faced several methodological challenges during the research analysis on the selected countries' VNRs, mostly relating to data gaps with several countries having incomplete data for some SDGs. These incomplete data hinder a comprehensive assessment of these countries' performance. There are other situations where data are also likely to be underestimated.

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS:** The paper concludes with a discussion of the public strategic and policy implications of these findings and provides practical recommendations to accelerate the pace of Agenda 2030 and the implementation of its 17 SDGs across the world.

**KEYWORDS:** *Sustainable Development; United Nations; Agenda 2030; Sustainable Development Goals; SDGs; Implementation; Accelerate; Universities; Strategy; Public Policy; Voluntary National Reports; VNRs*

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## INTRODUCTION

“SDGs represented a promise of a better future to hundreds of millions of people across the world. Halfway to the 2030 deadline, the SDGs were in trouble. Today, just 17 per cent of the targets are on-track. Future generations deserve more than 17 per cent of a sustainable future.”

**António Guterres**  
*Secretary-General*  
*United Nations*  
15 July 2024

The overarching objective of the **UN Agenda 2030** for Sustainable Development (SD) and its **17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** is the transformation of the world. Governments across the world are under increasing pressure to rise to the current challenges of improving performance and accelerating the pace of the UN's Agenda 2030 for SD and the implementation of its 17 SDGs, currently half-way to its finishing line. It is therefore very important to create an enabling environment for all stakeholders (individuals and institutions) within countries to accelerate the pace of achieving the Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs.

As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, Agenda 2030 encourages member states to “conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven”. These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the UN Agenda 2030; regular

reviews are to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and involve multiple stakeholders.

The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of Agenda 2030. The VNRs also seek to strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilise multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the SDGs. Many countries have expressed interest in carrying out VNRs of their implementation of Agenda 2030 for the 2024 UN meeting.

In this paper, we will discuss the results and findings of our analysis of more than 30 selected countries' VNRs from the UN's high-level political forum (HLPF) database. The findings of the research will show the status of the implementation of national commitments by learning lessons from what is presented in these reports.

## RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This research aims to provide an analysis of selected VNRs (based on the regional structuring of the UN membership or on selected sub-regional groups of countries) and consider the following questions/objectives:

- An overview of the country VNR and the researchers' sense of how the country is progressing towards implementing Agenda 2030;
- Is it possible to determine the progress of the country from the report and, if yes, is it possible to find a way to measure the country's performance whether on-track or off-track (moderate or seriously off-track) from achieving the targets in 2030;
- What are the problems that seem to be the major challenges facing the country in meeting the goals;
- What are the lessons that can be learned from each country's VNR so other countries can accelerate their progress towards achieving Agenda 2030;
- Identify any key dates and figures mentioned in these VNRs around the 17 SDGs; and
- Provide and overall concluding remarks.

## METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this research, we invited more than 37 young researchers (undergraduates and postgraduates) from across the world to analyse selected countries' VNRs (30) and report their findings as per a pre-designed SDGs Tracker framework.

In selecting the sample countries' VNRs for this research analysis, researchers ensured to have good representations from all the regional groups of the UN General Assembly. These are as follows:

- African states;
- Asia-Pacific states;
- Eastern European states;
- Latin American and Caribbean states;
- Western European; and
- Other states.

We also considered the regional groups as members of the regional economic commissions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). These are as follows:

- UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), hosted by Addis Ababa;
- UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, hosted by Bangkok;
- UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), hosted by Geneva;
- UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), hosted by Santiago de Chile; and
- UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Africa (ESCWA), hosted by Beirut.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Researchers faced several methodological challenges during the research analysis on the selected countries' VNRs, mostly relating to data gaps with several countries having incomplete data for some SDGs: these incomplete data hindered a comprehensive assessment of these countries' performance. There are other situations where data are also likely to be underestimated.

The overall research analysis reveals the following regarding the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs:

- The varied scores across the different SDGs show diverse performance; for example, **SDG 1** (Eradicate Poverty): while several countries report high achievements in this particular goal, other countries report significant implementation challenges;
- **SDG 13** (Climate Action) consistently shows the highest-achieving goal among the selected countries studied, suggesting effective initiatives in this area have been implemented by these selected countries;

- In addition to **SDG 13**, high achievement in other goals across multiple countries include: **SDG 10** (Reduced Inequalities); **SDG 11** (Sustainable Cities and Communities); and **SDG 14** (Life Below Water);
- Persistent challenges remain for **SDG 2** (Zero Hunger), consistently the lowest-achieving goal across the selected countries. These low scores for **SDG 2** indicate the urgent need for more robust interventions to address hunger and food security issues;
- Most countries show moderate progress in SDGs related to Health and Well-being (**SDG 3**), Clean Water and Sanitation (**SDG 6**), Affordable and Clean Energy (**SDG 7**), and Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (**SDG 9**);
- Other significant challenges remain in Improving Education (**SDG 4**) and Fostering Sustainable Economic Growth (**SDG 8**).

## GLOBAL CHALLENGES

The different countries' VNRs in this research explore global viewpoints and countries' latest thinking in attempting to achieve the different SDGs of Agenda 2030. However, among the selected countries' VNRs, the impact of COVID-19, wars and conflicts clearly influence most, if not all, SDGs of Agenda 2030, particularly in Developing Countries. The analysis clearly reveals that all sectors are affected. This is irrespective of distinction such as economic issues; this is a large umbrella term that ranges from funding, inflation, and currency devaluation. We are cognizant of the growing concerns for the impact of the current downturn on other global issues such as deteriorating environmental conditions, energy, wars and conflicts, obesity and climate change.

Poor governance with regards to mismanagement of public services, corruption and weak public sector budgets, climate change and environmental crises, as well as growing regionalism within nations and the long journey towards social inclusion across the board, all serve as hurdles that must be tackled immediately to fast track the implementation of Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs.

The economic state of the world and its nations are arguably the largest stumbling block in the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. Categorical worldwide inflation as a result of COVID-19 and the subsequent geo-political conflicts, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have caused inflation rates to jump from 4.7% in 2021 to 8.8% in 2022 (IMF, 2024). There are also other war and conflict zones such as the Palestine-Israeli conflict and Sudanese civil war.

The rising cost of living across the world has constrained both citizens and their governments, especially in their spending commitments to schemes that would aid

the implementation of the 17 SDGs. An additional economic issue that faces our international cohort is the growing budget deficit, with more and more nations falling increasingly behind in managing, let alone paying off, their debts, as borrowing becomes a necessity rather than a luxury. Much of this pressure on government loans has been the informal economy, a feature primarily proficient in DCs where governments are unable to retain a tax income - reducing their fiscal budget for the nation's social schemes such as healthcare, etc.

Unemployment, especially youth unemployment, is also a shared feature of DCs; this can have its ties to the growing need and focus of nations in their attempts to diversify their respective economies - from one-sector dominated economies to more green, sustainable and successful sectors inspiring growth.

Meanwhile, the issue of poor governance or disillusionment with one's government has grown internationally, irrespective of a nation's wealth. This has complemented the rise of populists globally with growing discontent for trust in politicians due to suspicion of corruption and morally dubious decisions. A growing proportion of people has given up with politics and therefore lacks any awareness or even interest in the SDGs. The lack of constitutional checks and balances in matters such as public funding, public budgets and public spending cause the path towards achieving the 17 SDGs much more rocky and tedious as millions of citizens across the globe are deprived of the necessary funding to improve their quality of life as a result of government corruption or mismanagement.

The subsequent lack of public sector funding, a common theme amongst many of the selected countries in this research, have paved the way for private sector-led social programmes. While these contributions are more than welcomed, countries must take the lead in achieving the SDGs and the eventual improvement of its citizens' conditions. Countries need to continue all necessary schemes to achieve Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs.

Another persistent and urgent issue is climate change. Climate change and the various relating environmental issues need to be addressed urgently to ensure achieving the necessary SDGs, such as SDGs 13, 14 and 15. Many countries, particularly the islands, face the real possibility of being submerged under water due to rising sea levels, the destruction of entire ecosystems, the decay of biodiversity and the gradual increase of the Earth's temperature, all of which will have detrimental effects on the future of not only individual citizens but entire populations.

Another prevalent aspect from the analysis amongst nearly all countries is the growing sense of regionalism. Entire areas of respective nations are being 'left behind'

in favour of urbanisation and the subsequent economic growth that it entails. Rural regions lack access to key services such as adequate healthcare, high quality education, safe water and sanitation – let alone matters such as electricity and modern infrastructure. Naturally, governments have given more attention to economic producers in their respective nations with investment, infrastructure and resources, but the SDGs clearly outline a commitment to not leave anyone behind – a feat that we as an international community are failing at quite significantly across the board.

Last but definitely not least, we have the matter of social inclusion (SDG 10). Many countries are trailing with regards to reduced inequalities across social characteristics and minority groups such as Women, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) and LGBTQ+ communities, to name a few. Many of these groups, together with others, face discrimination across nearly all sectors such as employment, opportunities, education, social stereotypes and basic human rights. For instance, millions of PWDs do not have access to the necessary wash facilities or adequate care to assist their lives. There are no SDGs without equality of opportunity, yet nations have neglected the rights of minorities to opportunity by rejecting social inclusion legislation/schemes. In some instances, nations have legislated *de jure* change regarding minority rights, but there remains very little *de facto* change when you look below the surface.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM SELECTED COUNTRIES' VNRS

To accelerate progress towards achieving the UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs, there are several vital lessons to be learned from each country's experience.

- Several countries emphasised the importance of strengthening ***collaboration and partnerships*** with other countries across the world. For Canada and Singapore, collaboration and partnerships can enhance governance, policy cohesion, and inclusivity, ensuring a more unified approach towards SD.
- Other countries, such as Cambodia and Namibia, state that ***integration*** of SDGs into national policies and frameworks helps to maintain a consistent focus on sustainability across all sectors and promotes comprehensive progress.
- Robust ***data collection*** is very important for any public policy implementation; therefore, strengthening data capabilities allows for more precise assessments and identification of areas needing improvement. As an example, Cambodia and Namibia consider the quality of data collected essential for accurately tracking progress and making informed policy decisions.
- ***Inclusivity*** remains a critical component, with Romania's focus on regional development and inclusive social policies, together with Qatar's and Iceland's

emphasis on equitable development, showcasing the importance of addressing social inequalities and ensuring marginalised groups are not left behind.

- ***Environmental prioritisation*** is another crucial lesson, underscored by the experiences of Romania, Iceland, and Kenya. Strict enforcement of environmental laws, investment in green technologies, and a focus on renewable energy are necessary steps for SD.
- ***Economic diversification***, as demonstrated by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, is vital for reducing dependency on limited resources and enhancing economic resilience.
- Countries facing economic challenges, such as Austria and Zimbabwe, illustrate the importance of ***effective financial management and innovative economic strategies*** to fund SDG-related projects. Learning from Qatar's proactive ***crisis management*** during COVID-19 can help nations develop resilient systems to withstand future shocks.

## UNIVERSITIES' ROLE IN ACCELERATING THE PACE OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF UN AGENDA 2030

“Universities and academic institutions are not only centers of learning but also hubs of innovation, research, and community engagement. They play a pivotal role in equipping the next generation with the knowledge and skills needed to achieve sustainable development.”

**Tatiana Valovaya**

*Director-General United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG)*

22 July 2024

This research aims to introduce a variety of new perspectives for universities to accelerate their role in helping countries accelerate the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030 for SD. By integrating SD into curricula, fostering a culture of innovation, and nurturing socially responsible citizens, educational institutions can act as catalysts for change.

Universities are considered by many scholars as very important for the achievement of the UN SDGs and different chapters in this volume critically address the question of how universities can accelerate the implementation of the UN 17 SDGs of Agenda 2030, and embed the 17 SDGs on developing new methods and approaches to suit the challenges and opportunities of this new era of digital revolution, particularly after the COVID-19 global pandemic. These new approaches call for actions to create different appropriate ways of doing things, and of doing new things that will be essential to



solve our future problems and help in the implementation of the 17 SDGs of Agenda 2030.

Universities serve as vessels of knowledge, shaping the minds of future leaders, entrepreneurs, and advocates for SD. Through an holistic approach that includes not only academic instruction but also extra-curricular activities, partnerships, and community engagement, education institutions can shape individuals who are not only well-versed in the challenges posed by the SDGs but are also equipped with the skills and mindset needed to address them.

Furthermore, educational institutions function as laboratories of experimentation and innovation, where new ideas and solutions to global challenges can be developed and tested. By encouraging research and fostering a collaborative environment, these institutions contribute directly to the creation of actionable strategies for the implementation of SDGs. Moreover, they act as hubs that connect academia, industry, and government, facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge transfer to accelerate progress towards the realisation of SDGs and accelerate implementation of the UN Agenda 2030.

Policy-makers and higher education leaders need to consider creative and innovative approaches to cost saving and performance management. Most countries across the world have embarked on several major transformation and restructuring initiatives towards re-connecting their universities with the discourse of SD.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the research on the selected countries, the overall implementation of the goals remains not very satisfactory overall, and it varies from country to country. Therefore, all countries are encouraged to evaluate and analyse their own VNRs to identify targeted areas for improvement and resource allocation to accelerate progress towards the UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs.

While there are areas of commendable progress, substantial challenges remain. The varied performance across different SDGs emphasises the necessity for targeted interventions and strategic allocation of resources to accelerate progress towards achieving the UN Agenda 2030. Although the available data might lack precise details, they still provide a functional framework to track achievements.

When taking all of the above into account, it is conspicuous that there is a commonality of challenges facing the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs. To list a few of these common challenges: the compound shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent geo-political conflicts, economic roadblocks and stagnation,

poor governance, climate change, environmental crises, growing regionalism in favour of urbanisation, and the necessity of social inclusion and ‘not leaving anyone behind’.

There is an urgent need for improvements for those countries with consistently low scores across multiple SDGs. These countries require significant support and policy changes to accelerate their progress. The priorities for these countries should be on SDGs such as Zero Hunger and No Poverty by implementing robust policies and programmes.

Countries with incomplete data must act swiftly to enhance their process of data collection by filling the data gaps to ensure a complete and accurate assessment of progress.

There is also an urgent need to promote, increase awareness and engagements around SDGs to foster collective efforts towards achieving Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs. In doing so, countries must create an enabling environment for all stakeholders to play their part in helping countries to achieve Agenda 2030.

By adopting these strategies emphasising partnerships, integrating SDGs into national policies, enhancing data collection, promoting inclusivity, prioritising environmental sustainability, and ensuring economic resilience, countries can better navigate their unique challenges and significantly accelerate their progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030.

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## BIOGRAPHY



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