

Policy pointers

The current Voluntary National Review guidelines should be revised by the UN Secretariat and General Assembly to clearly outline evaluation measures and review processes. These gaps should be filled in consultation with the UN Evaluation Group (UNEG) and the broader evaluation community.

National governments should engage with evaluation networks and professionals early in the Voluntary National Review process. They should also consider developing and harmonising national evaluation policies.

National evaluation organisations should initiate dialogues with their governments on evaluation's role, and engage with institutions in charge of defining evaluation processes.

There is a need to strengthen evaluation capacity and use in all countries; this requires courageous political will, adequate resources and evaluation expertise.

VNR reporting needs evaluation: a call for global guidance and national action

This briefing analyses 43 'Voluntary National Reviews' (VNRs) of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Extending a 2016 analysis, it finds that monitoring is strong but evaluation systems and processes often remain missing or misunderstood. Sporadic good practice is emerging, such as: linked National Evaluation Policy and action planning (Nepal); recognition of the SDGs' complexity when considering evaluation (Czech Republic); learning through evaluation (Ethiopia and Kenya); and drawing on findings from past evaluations (Belize). Countries still to submit their first VNR could build on these examples. We also recommend action for the UN Secretary General, the UN Evaluation Group, national governments, international organisations and professional evaluators to jointly address the significant gaps.

Countries are beginning to document their progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through regular Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted to the UN's High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets clear expectations for VNRs to be "rigorous and based on evidence"¹, and the UN recommends that the first VNR in particular should describe the reviewing process and how the 'national follow-up and reporting' system will be implemented.²

Evaluation enhances monitoring's meaning and depth by addressing complexity in how the SDGs are best achieved:³ so each VNR should include up-to-date evaluation findings and an assessment of progress on national evaluation policies and systems.² An earlier briefing reviewed the 22 VNRs submitted in 2016,⁴ and found that evaluation was mostly overlooked.⁵ In this briefing,

we extend our analysis to the 43 VNRs from 2017,⁶ highlighting similar oversights but also some emerging good practice (Figure 1).

Formats and content. The 43 reviews vary hugely. The shortest, from the Maldives, is 28 pages while the longest (Uruguay) reaches 386. Generally, longer reviews include more statistical data. Some countries with short reviews just refer to their existing statistical reporting system. Countries with well-established sustainable development monitoring systems from the 1992–2012 'Rio process'⁷ have notably shorter reports, whereas countries building on this approach as part of their roadmap to the SDGs have longer documents.

Understanding how monitoring differs from evaluation. All reports lean heavily towards monitoring indicators when describing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. This implies that the SDGs' review and follow-up process will be

Evaluation enhances monitoring's meaning and depth

data-rich, but weaker on integrated analysis. 24 reports mentioned evaluation a few times but confused it with monitoring. 13 reports did show sufficient understanding of evaluation. Six didn't mention evaluation at all.

Gaps are particularly notable in VNRs from European and Asian countries. However, Nepal,

Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Cyprus, Italy, Denmark and Portugal are exceptions to this trend. Reviews from Latin America and Africa dedicate comparatively more effort and reflection to evaluation, and many show good understanding.

Evaluation's role is vague. Most VNRs (even those from Latin America and Africa) do not entirely capture how evaluation can help report and guide SDG implementation. Only three countries assign a clear role to evaluation: Nepal, Honduras and Guatemala. These describe evaluation as a policy review mechanism. However, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Nepal, Panama and Uruguay report plans to develop National Evaluation Policies. Since the proposal of 'voluntary common reporting guidelines for VNRs' did not account for evaluation's role in national follow up and review, it is likely that it will also be unclear in forthcoming reports, unless new guidance is produced.⁸

Existing monitoring systems provide opportunities. All 43 countries will embed SDG reporting into their existing statistical infrastructure. Almost all countries (41 out of 43) have conducted, or are planning, a gap analysis to assess how existing monitoring systems should be adapted to integrate SDG reporting. While many European countries refer to systems used since the 1990s, most African, Asian and Latin American countries refer to monitoring systems designed between 2000 and 2015, primarily for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Integrating new indicators into current systems will require substantial commitment, effort and resources. Many VNRs from Africa and Latin America explicitly discuss the challenges of monitoring the SDGs, and many countries have made strong efforts to engage numerous local and national institutions. For example, El Salvador has held a statistical workshop to define and validate indicators and targets for each SDG, involving 58 governmental institutions. This increased focus on monitoring systems will provide opportunities for a demand of high quality evaluations that feed into ongoing planning and prioritisation for SDGs implementation.

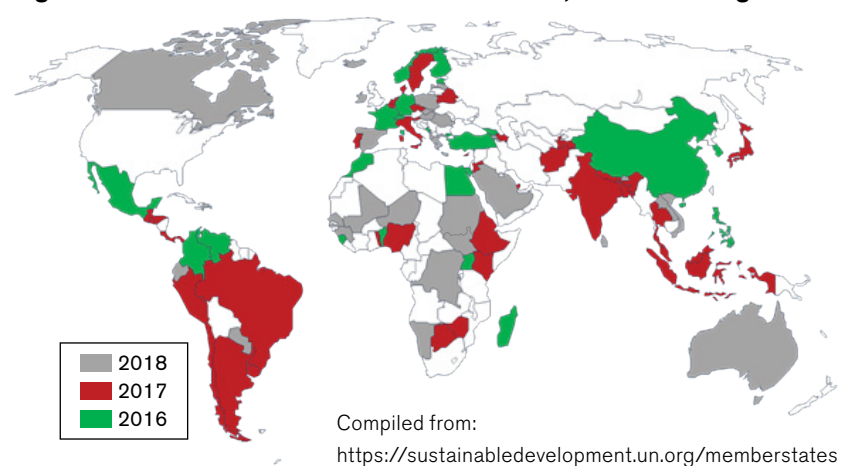
Few qualitative indicators. Most monitoring systems lack qualitative analysis. The dominance of quantitative indicators may be partially due to:

- Little clarity in existing guidelines about how qualitative analysis can support country reporting on the SDGs,⁹ and
- The existence of specific targets on statistical capacities for SDG17.

Also, in the longer reports, national authorities tend to overlook the available statistical information for SDG indicators and instead emphasise new quantitative, national, indicator-based reporting. References to qualitative evaluation approaches are generally missing, despite their utility when monitoring data is hard to access. Nevertheless, there are some notable exceptions. Azerbaijan, Benin, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Portugal, Qatar and Sweden all stress the importance of using qualitative data and analysis.

Governance system. Almost all countries have developed a high-level governance structure for the 2030 Agenda and SDG reporting. This is a promising development that shows national prioritisation and country ownership of the 2030 Agenda. 26 reports mention establishing coordinating bodies tasked with overseeing progress towards the SDGs. These are usually committees, commissions or councils coordinating different ministries. Some are open to wider participation, for example including representatives from civil society and the private sector. Responsibility for M&E usually mirrors the national SDG governance structure, ie the main coordinating body is also responsible for monitoring, evaluation and reporting. In 14 countries, M&E responsibilities for the SDGs lie with the president/prime minister's office. In others, overall responsibilities sit within one specific ministry, including those with mandates for planning, environment, foreign affairs, trade and economy, devolution, federal planning and finance. In some cases, new coordinating bodies have been given responsibility for M&E. National bureaus of statistics are heavily involved in many cases, and in

Figure 1. Countries with VNRs in 2016 and 2017, and submitting in 2018



four countries they are the main responsible body for M&E and reporting on the SDGs.

Good evaluation practice

Asia. In Asia overall, the 2030 Agenda is seen as complementing current national plans and strategies for sustainable development. Most Asian countries reporting in 2017 are still formulating National SDG Roadmaps. In terms of follow-up and reporting, Asian countries tend to choose centralised systems heavily driven by indicators. Examples of reference to and use of evaluation include:

- **Nepal** has developed a five year 'Integrated National Evaluation Action Plan' for 2016–2020' and it's planning to develop a national evaluation policy by July 2018.
- **Indonesia** has presented clear evaluation guidelines for different stages of programmes. These mention the DAC evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.
- **Afghanistan** puts significant emphasis on multi-stakeholder approaches for reviewing progress towards achieving the SDGs.
- **The Maldives** intends to cross-reference qualitative and quantitative data when reporting progress.

Europe. In Europe, many countries have made institutional and consultative arrangements for implementing the SDGs, have set up national action plans and are currently establishing follow-up mechanisms. In addition, several European countries have reported significant private sector involvement as companies include the SDGs in their core business strategy. In terms of follow-up and review, very few European countries outline evaluation's role. However, some examples of good practice and commitments include:

- The **Czech Republic's** VNR stresses monitoring must be accompanied by evaluation that addresses the SDGs' complexity when considering how they are achieved.
- **Cyprus** refers to evaluation in the education sector and how it is contributing to higher performance. Evaluation is clearly being used to improve and adapt programmes.
- **Portugal** stresses that indicators cannot be the primary driving force for development. Changes reported by indicators should be investigated to understand causal linkages between the SDGs and national policies using methods that assess attributing and contributing factors.
- **Italy** commits to maintaining stakeholder involvement in follow-up and review. Stakeholder

involvement will help to select the most relevant indicators, inform decisions and foster widespread ownership of the sustainable development agenda. Defining measures through stakeholder engagements will provide a good basis for active and useful evaluation.

- Malmö in **Sweden** has adopted the 2030 Agenda goals and has piloted an assessment of the municipality's long-term investments using the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental). This is a good example of trialling evaluative exercises that recognise interconnectedness between the SDGs.

Africa. African VNRs have some very good examples of integrating the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063¹⁰ at the local level, including using evaluative processes. Most countries reported involving civil society in developing and validating the VNRs.

- In **Kenya**, the government has studied the period 2000–2015 to assess progress against the MDGs and to document the experiences, challenges and lessons learnt. This study has informed the new Medium-Term Plan and the Road Map for implementing the SDGs. The VNR has been validated by different stakeholders, including through consultations with civil society and the private sector. Kenya's VNR also shows willingness to tap into new and non-traditional data sources to complement statistics.
- **Botswana** has highlighted the need for multi-sectoral involvement when the statistics office develops the reporting and national indicators system. This will provide a good basis for evidence-based evaluation.
- **Ethiopia** emphasises the value of learning through M&E and has conducted a national review of performance against the MDGs. This has fed into the preparation of Ethiopia's national agenda for the SDGs.
- Some companies on the **Zimbabwe** stock exchange have adopted sustainability reporting in accordance with the Global Reporting Initiative G4 guidelines. This is generating evaluative evidence for the private sector's contribution to the SDGs.

Latin America. In Latin America, governance models for the SDGs tend to be participatory, and include both governmental and non-governmental institutions. In terms of follow-up and review, countries are investing significant energy in improving monitoring activities and in strengthening statistical capacities. Good examples showing understanding of, and commitment to, evaluation include:

- **Costa Rica** acknowledges the importance of evaluation for policy review, effectiveness, efficiency and accountability.
- **Guatemala** is planning periodic national and local reviews. These will feed policy recommendations into the cycle of public management.
- **Belize's** VNR utilises earlier evaluation findings to assess the current situation for cash transfer programmes, gender equality and fisheries/marine management.
- The Government of **Panama** has established a multidimensional approach to measure welfare, poverty and discrimination/segregation. This approach requires specific policies and M&E mechanisms.

Recommendations

The 2030 Agenda clearly recognises the role of evaluation for strengthening analysis, accountability, learning and stakeholder engagement for the achievement of the SDGs, particularly at the national level. Yet despite outlining several good practices, the second round of VNRs reveals a general lack of reflection and understanding about how evaluation should be included into the SDGs' national follow-up and review processes. To address this, we recommend:

- The current VNR guidelines should be revised by the UN Secretariat and General Assembly to clearly outline evaluation measures and review processes. This process should engage and be informed by the UN Evaluation Group (UNEG) who represent all the UN Evaluation agencies, and the broader evaluation community, including the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS), EvalPartners, the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) and the Clear initiative, among others.
- Countries still preparing their first VNR should engage with regional and national Voluntary Organisations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs) early in the process and not wait until evaluations need to be implemented. They should develop national evaluation policies to harmonise practices across the various levels of government and local authorities.

Notes

¹ United Nations (2015) Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015 (A/RES/70/1), page 32, 74g. / ² The Secretary General (2015) A/70/684, Report of the Secretary General Guidelines. United Nations. Report on critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level, page 25–27, annex on proposal for voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum. / ³ Schwandt T *et al.* (2016) Evaluation: a crucial ingredient for SDG success. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17357IIED> / ⁴ Simon B *et al.* (2017) Evaluation: a missed opportunity in the SDGs' first set of Voluntary National Reviews. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/17423IIED> / ⁵ We have used five criteria for assessing the VNRs: use of M&E keywords, mention of a reporting system for measuring progress towards the SDGs, description of a methodological framework for M&E, and evidence that evaluation is integrated into follow-up and review systems and into the general governance system. / ⁶ Some notable countries haven't yet committed to presenting their VNRs, including the USA, the UK, Russia and South Africa. / ⁷ The process arising from the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio, Brazil (also known as the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit). / ⁸ As presented in the annex to A/70/684. / ⁹ UNDP (2017) Guidelines to support country reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals. <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Guidelines-to-Support-Country-Reporting-on-SDGs-1.pdf> / ¹⁰ African Union Commission (2015) Agenda 2063, the Africa We Want. www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/agenda2063.pdf

- The evaluation community should engage in VNR processes at both global and national levels:
 - a. International evaluation networks and organisations should actively contribute to the revision of VNR guidelines by providing guidance on how to integrate evaluation into the SDGs' follow-up and review processes.
 - b. At national levels, VOPEs should start high-level dialogues with their governments about the role of evaluation in achieving the SDGs and how to integrate it into monitoring systems. UNEG, IOCE and IDEAS should support VOPEs' efforts.
 - c. It is key that evaluators engage with the specific institution in charge of defining evaluation processes, so as to ensure that evaluative exercises are timely and that evaluations use appropriate methodologies and approaches. In some countries, this will be the institution charged with coordinating overall efforts for implementing the SDGs.
 - d. There is a need to strengthen evaluation capacity and use in all countries; this requires courageous political will, adequate resources and evaluation expertise. Particularly in:
 - i) Adopting and sustaining participatory processes, and
 - ii) Conducting and using evaluation, including developing analytical skills. Bilateral and multilateral funders should support countries that are seeking assistance to further develop their systems and capacities.

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Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

EVALSDGs is a network of policymakers, institutions, and practitioners who advocate for effective evaluation for the SDGs.

UNDP Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) helps UNDP achieve greater accountability and facilitates learning from experience by conducting evaluation and generating objective evidence.

EvalPartners is a global partnership that aims to influence policymakers, public opinion and other stakeholders so evaluative evidence is valued and used.

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