

# **Tracking SDGs Progress to Leave No One Behind**

Recommendations for an update on the Guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews

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# I. Introduction and Background

The High-level Political Forum (HLPF) is the main United Nations platform for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As part of its mandate, the HLPF is responsible for conducting regular voluntary national reviews of progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda – by both developed and developing countries – in order to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned.

At the request of Member States, the UN Secretary-General prepared a report in 2016 on the Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level<sup>1</sup>, which included in its annex a proposal for voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the HLPF. The purpose of the guidelines is to help countries to frame the preparations for national reviews in a manner that may prove helpful to allow for comparability, enabling a discussion of good practices and the tracking of global trends<sup>2</sup>. The Secretary-General's report emphasizes that the guidelines should uphold the principles identified in paragraph 74 of the 2030 Agenda and aim to support the HLPF in addressing achievements and progress, gaps and challenges, and emerging trends.<sup>3</sup>

Member States subsequently requested the Secretary-General to update, as appropriate and taking into account feedback from countries participating in the HLPF, the voluntary common reporting guidelines and to make them available to Member States as a suggested tool in the preparations for voluntary national reviews<sup>4</sup>.

In 2016, 22 countries participated in voluntary national reviews at the HLPF, while 43 countries presented national reviews in 2017. In 2018, another 48 countries are expected to present reviews. As a result, it is an opportune moment to consider the use of the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines by Member States and whether they should be updated to enhance and improve them in advance of the 2018 HLPF.

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**Countries reviewed on use of guidelines:**

**Afghanistan, Argentina, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Denmark, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Nepal, the Netherlands, Panama, Peru, Portugal, Sweden, Thailand, Uruguay and Zimbabwe.**

Although this paper considers the guidelines in relation to children's rights, identifying both good practices as well as shortcomings to be addressed, its analysis and recommendations are applicable to other vulnerable and marginalized groups. In particular, given that children are represented in most other vulnerable groups – including women and girls, ethnic and religious minorities, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, refugees and migrants, and people living in poverty, among others – improving the guidelines in relation to children will also improve the quality of reporting on the SDGs for other vulnerable groups at risk of being left behind.

## **2. The Use of the Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines**

Among the 30 country reports reviewed, nearly half of the countries generally followed the structure of the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines including Afghanistan, Argentina, Bangladesh, Chile, Cyprus, Denmark, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Nepal, Panama, Thailand and Zimbabwe. Another six countries partly followed the guidelines, namely Costa Rica, El Salvador, Japan, Malaysia, Peru and Uruguay. Countries that did not follow the guidelines include six high-income countries from Europe – Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden – as well as Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras and India.

Among the high-income countries reviewed, there was almost an even split between countries which followed the guidelines generally or partially (Chile, Cyprus, Denmark, Japan and Uruguay) and countries that did not follow the guidelines at all (Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden). Among the developing countries reviewed however, nearly 80 per cent of countries followed the guidelines either generally or partially, indicating that developing countries use the guidelines to frame their reviews more than developed countries.

### ■ 3. The Coverage of Children in relation to the Guidelines

In reviewing Goals and Targets, the Secretary-General's guidelines suggest that reviews "may provide brief information on progress and the status of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and critical difficulties encountered in reaching them...The discussion could focus on trends, successes, challenges, emerging issues, and lessons learned, and describe what actions have been taken to address existing gaps and challenges. It could support the identification of gaps, solutions, best practices and areas requiring advice and support."<sup>5</sup>

In terms of the coverage of children in the country reports (VNRs) reviewed, there is no clear distinction between those countries that follow the structure of the guidelines generally or partially, and those countries that do not adhere to the guidelines at all. Countries providing relatively good coverage of children's rights issues include countries that follow the guidelines – such as Bangladesh, Chile, Indonesia, Thailand and Uruguay – as well as countries that do not follow the guidelines – such as Belgium, Guatemala and Portugal. The coverage of children's issues in voluntary national reviews thus appears to be based more on intentionality and/or political will to address children in relation to the SDGs, than a strict adherence to the Secretary-General's guidelines.

**the guidelines don't necessarily hinder the coverage of children but they don't help to articulate how SDGs will be achieved for children and groups left behind.**

Although the guidelines don't necessarily hinder the coverage of children, they also do not appear to help countries clearly articulate how they will achieve the SDGs for children, especially the most vulnerable groups. For example, there is a tendency among some countries to highlight the status of children or national targets for children, without outlining policies, initiatives or strategies to address them. In other cases, the reverse is true, with countries citing initiatives to address children without referring to the specific situation of children. Some countries also consider children generally, without highlighting disparities between different groups or identifying strategies that would help to achieve the SDGs for most vulnerable groups of children.

To improve the coverage of children, especially vulnerable groups of children, the guidelines should encourage countries to systematically outline the status of children in relation to the SDGs, including the status of different groups of children, specific policies, initiatives or strategies to target them, progress achieved and any remaining challenges.

## **4. Shortcomings in the Guidelines and Good Practices**

While the Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines provide a good starting point for countries to frame their Voluntary National Reviews, there are a number of shortcomings as well as good practices where to build on that can help address these gaps.

## 4.1 The Review of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In reviewing Goals and Targets, the Secretary-General's guidelines suggest that the review may provide brief information on progress and the status of all SDGs and a more in-depth analysis on a few selected SDGs and targets.<sup>6</sup> In relation to thematic reviews of progress, Member States have also agreed to discuss a set of goals and their interlinkages at the HLPF – without prejudice to the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the SDGs – with a view to facilitating an in-depth review of progress made on all Goals over the course of a four-year cycle.<sup>7</sup>

Among the 30 country reports reviewed, almost half of the countries report primarily on the set of Goals selected for in-depth review at the 2017 HLPF, namely SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14 and 17, including Afghanistan, Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Panama and Uruguay. Notably, nearly 75 per cent of these countries also followed the structure of the Secretary-General's guidelines generally or partially.

**Among countries reviewed half report primarily on the set of SDGs selected for in-depth review at the 2017. Only 9 countries reported on ALL goals: Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Kenya, Netherlands, Peru, Portugal, Sweden and Thailand.**

Only nine countries – less than one-third of all countries reviewed – reported on all 17 Goals including Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Kenya, the Netherlands, Peru, Portugal, Sweden and Thailand. Among these countries, six followed the structure of the Secretary-General's guidelines generally or partially, with only Belgium, Portugal and Sweden not adhering to the guidelines. The rest of the countries reviewed either report on a combination of Goals based on their national priorities (El Salvador, Honduras, Jordan and Zimbabwe), or did not review specific Goals (Italy, Japan and Luxembourg).

The suggestion to focus on a few selected SDGs and Targets – coupled with the fact that the majority of countries reviewed have done just that – is problematic for several reasons.

First, it runs contrary to the spirit of the 2030 Agenda in which Member States committed to engage in systematic follow-up and review of the implementation of the Agenda over its 15-year life span.<sup>8</sup> Second, it runs contrary to the principle that follow-up and review processes at all levels “will track progress in implementing the universal Goals and Targets... in all countries in a manner which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature...”<sup>9</sup> Reporting on some, but not all, goals does not respect the universal, integrated and interrelated nature of the SDGs. Third, reviewing a small number of Goals based on those selected for in-depth review at the HLPF practically means that countries presenting Voluntary National Reviews are unlikely to review the entire set of 17 SDGs during the life of the 2030 Agenda. Unlike thematic reviews where the set of Goals selected are part of a larger four-year cycle to review all Goals, there is no such cycle established for national reviews. Finally, the failure to review all 17 SDGs in a given Voluntary National Review has implications for vulnerable and marginalized groups such as children who may be better represented in some Goals than others. While all Goals are relevant to all people, encouraging countries to select only some Goals for review may inadvertently allow difficult or challenging Goals for certain population groups to be missed, essentially leaving them behind.

## ■ 4.2 The Pledge to Leave No One Behind

The pledge that “no one will be left behind” and the “endeavour to reach the furthest behind first” in paragraph 4 of the 2030 Agenda indicate that Member States will prioritize the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in their implementation of the SDGs. Member States have also agreed that follow-up and review processes at all levels will “...have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite these important commitments, there is little guidance in the Secretary-General’s guidelines as to how Member States may address vulnerable and marginalized groups in Voluntary National Reviews. There is only one reference in relation to the integration of the three dimensions that “the review could also assess how other principles of the 2030 Agenda, for example leaving no one behind, have been mainstreamed in the implementation of SDGs.”<sup>11</sup>

**More guidance is needed to ensure countries report on vulnerable and marginalize group.**



In the VNR reports reviewed, there are generally no systematic approaches to addressing vulnerable and marginalized groups. Some countries offer examples of good practice however, that should be considered in order to follow-up and review progress for vulnerable groups such as children.

For example, in discussing Goals and Targets, almost half of the countries reviewed explicitly recognize disparities in outcomes among different groups of children based on gender or sex, age, ethnicity (including indigenous status), income, geographical area, region, and/or maternal education including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Guatemala, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, Nepal, Panama, Thailand and Uruguay. Guatemala's report is particularly strong in this regard, while Uruguay's report is notable for highlighting rates of poverty among children disaggregated by children's different age groups.

Similarly, half of the countries reviewed highlight initiatives or strategies that target specific vulnerable groups of children – such as girls, children with disabilities, indigenous children, migrants and orphans and vulnerable children – including Bangladesh, Belgium, Chile, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Portugal, Thailand, Uruguay and Zimbabwe. In several cases, countries outline government spending on certain groups such as children and youth, women, the poor and/or other vulnerable groups.

Notably, three countries – Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Kenya – include a dedicated section in their reports focused on leaving no one behind. Bangladesh's section on special initiatives on "leaving no one behind" includes a focus on persons with disabilities and identifies specific actions taken under SDGs 1, 3 and 5 in relation to children with disabilities. Ethiopia's section on leaving no one behind also includes a sub-section focusing on children's rights and welfare.

**Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Kenya – include a dedicated section in their reports focused on leaving no one behind.**

Finally, a number of countries highlight their engagement with vulnerable and marginalized groups in relation to SDGs implementation and/or review. At least one-third of countries refer to consultations with traditionally excluded or marginalized groups including Bangladesh, Chile, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kenya, Jordan, Malaysia, Panama and Peru. More significantly, several countries – Costa Rica, Denmark, Guatemala and the Netherlands – incorporate the views of or include direct contributions from specific groups in their reports. Not surprisingly, the inclusion of other stakeholders' views, especially those from marginalized groups, offers valuable insight into the challenges and actions needed to leave no one behind.

## 4.3 The Disaggregation of Data

Integral to the promise to leave no one behind is the disaggregation of data. In relation to follow-up and review, the 2030 Agenda stresses that “quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data will be needed to help with the measurement of progress and to ensure that no one is left behind.”<sup>12</sup> Member States have also agreed that follow-up and review processes at all levels will be “...informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.”<sup>13</sup>

One shortcoming of the Secretary-General’s guidelines is that they do not encourage countries to include information on efforts to achieve the full disaggregation of data or to include such data in a statistical annex as part of their report. Although the guidelines suggest that countries may include a statistical annex with data, less than half of the countries reviewed do so.

Many countries reviewed highlight the issue of data disaggregation, albeit briefly, and/or provide some disaggregated data for some SDGs Targets. One-third of countries reviewed however, provide little or no information on disaggregated data including Argentina, Brazil, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden. While only a small number of countries, including Guatemala, Indonesia, Nepal and Thailand, address the issue and importance of disaggregated data comprehensively, none of these countries provide a dedicated section on data disaggregation. Notably, Belgium’s report includes a statistical index that identifies which indicators can be disaggregated by particular characteristics.

One-third of countries discussing the issue of disaggregated data recognize the provision or lack of disaggregated data as a challenge including Bangladesh, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Kenya, Nepal, Thailand, Uruguay and Zimbabwe. Certain countries such as Guatemala, India, the Netherlands, Peru and Portugal stress the importance of disaggregated data to leave no one behind, to monitor progress for vulnerable groups or to target specific groups. Over one-third of countries cite efforts to improve the availability of disaggregated data including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, Nepal, Panama, Peru and Thailand.

## ■ 4.4 The Contribution of Other Stakeholders

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes that follow-up and review processes at all levels “will be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support the reporting by all relevant stakeholders.”<sup>14</sup>

The 2030 Agenda also commits Member States “to fully engage in conducting regular and inclusive reviews of progress at sub-national, national, regional and global levels”<sup>15</sup> while Resolution 70/299 “encourages Member States to involve stakeholders in the national voluntary reviews in accordance with paragraphs 78 and 79” of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>16</sup>

In support of these principles and commitments, the Secretary-General’s guidelines provide some guidance to Member States in involving stakeholders in Voluntary National Reviews. In relation to the methodology and process for preparation of the review, the guidelines note that the report may discuss “how stakeholders from civil society, academia and the business sector were involved, which consultations took place... etc.”<sup>17</sup>

The guidelines do not offer any further details or suggestions however, as to how stakeholders – especially from vulnerable or marginalized groups – may contribute to Voluntary National Reviews.

Many countries reviewed highlight consultations with other stakeholders in preparing their Voluntary National Review, including some with traditionally excluded or marginalized groups. In terms of child and youth participation, just over one-third of countries refer to consultations with children and/or youth including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, Nepal, Panama, Sweden, Thailand and Zimbabwe, with only Bangladesh<sup>18</sup>, Jordan and Malaysia specifically noting consultations with children to prepare for their national review. Notably, Jordan’s Voluntary National Review preparations paid special attention to ensuring the inclusion of women, youth, children and persons with disabilities in consultations.

In addition to holding consultations with various stakeholders, several countries engage in the good practice of including contributions from other stakeholders in their official reports. Both Denmark and the Netherlands include independent contributions from youth as well as contributions from civil society, the private sector, academia, and sub-national governments such as municipalities in their reports. Guatemala’s report is noteworthy for including a section on the perceptions of adolescents and youth for each SDG reviewed, while Costa Rica’s report highlights challenges for each SDG as identified by vulnerable groups such as women, the elderly, Afro-descendants, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples and the LGBTQ community.

Finally, at least one-third of countries reviewed support the contribution of other stakeholders by including representatives in their official delegation to the HLPF and, in some cases, in their national presentation. Notably, Belgium, Denmark, Guatemala, the Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, Thailand and Zimbabwe included youth in their delegation to the HLPF, with Thailand and the Netherlands including youth representatives in their national presentation.

## ■ 5. Key Recommendations and Conclusion

While the voluntary common reporting guidelines have provided a good starting point for Member States to frame their national reviews during the last two years, there is a need to update them to address shortcomings and to reflect the good practices of Member States in presenting Voluntary National Reviews.

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are made as a contribution to the discussion and for consideration by the Secretary-General in revising the voluntary common reporting guidelines.

**1. Member States can be encouraged to report on all 17 goals in Voluntary National Reviews** unless there is a relevant reason for not doing so, such as the case of land-locked countries not reporting on Goal 14.

**2. Member States should be encouraged to include a dedicated section on leaving no one behind** in their voluntary national report to highlight the status and situation of vulnerable groups in relation to the SDGs. Member States should be encouraged to focus on children as a vulnerable group generally, as well as specific vulnerable groups of children such as girls, children with disabilities, indigenous children, refugee and migrant children, etc.

**3. Member States should be encouraged to highlight the status of vulnerable groups, including children, strategies, policies and initiatives to address them, progress achieved and remaining challenges in reviewing specific SDGs and targets.**

They should be encouraged to identify disparities in outcomes between different groups, including different groups of children, as well as public spending for specific vulnerable groups including children.

- 4. Member States should be encouraged to include a dedicated section on data, outlining all efforts and measures to ensure the full disaggregation of data** by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.
- 5. Member States should be encouraged to include a dedicated section on data, outlining all efforts and measures to ensure the full disaggregation of data by** income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.
- 6. Member States should be encouraged to include a statistical annex with disaggregated data**, as far as possible, in order to assess the overall status of the SDGs as well as the status of specific groups in relation to the goals, targets and indicators.
- 7. Member States should be encouraged to highlight consultations with vulnerable or marginalized groups**, including children, in preparing for their voluntary national review.
- 8. Member States should be encouraged to include the views and perceptions of vulnerable or marginalized groups, including children, in reviewing specific SDGs and targets.** Children and young people have been recognized as active agents of change in the 2030 Agenda.
- 9. Member States should be encouraged to include independent contributions from stakeholders**, including children, in their national report. Such contributions should be in addition to stakeholder consultations at national and sub-national levels.
- 10. Member States should be encouraged to include stakeholder representatives, including children, in their delegation and voluntary national review presentation at the HLPF.**

## Endnotes

1. United Nations, General Assembly, Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level: Report of the Secretary-General, A/70/684 (15 January 2016), available from: [undocs.org/A/70/684](https://undocs.org/A/70/684).
2. Ibid, para. 89.
3. Ibid, para. 90.
4. General Assembly Resolution 70/299, Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level, A/RES/70/299 (29 July 2016), available from: [undocs.org/A/RES/70/299](https://undocs.org/A/RES/70/299), para. 9.
5. Report of the Secretary-General, Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level, p. 26.
6. Ibid.
7. General Assembly Resolution 70/299, para. 4.
8. General Assembly Resolution 70/1, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1 (25 September 2015), available from: [undocs.org/A/RES/70/1](https://undocs.org/A/RES/70/1), para. 72.
9. Ibid, para. 74(b).
10. Ibid, para. 74(e).
11. Report of the Secretary-General, Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level, p. 26.
12. General Assembly Resolution 70/1, para. 48.
13. Ibid, para. 74(g).
14. Ibid, para. 74(d).
15. Ibid, para. 77.
16. General Assembly Resolution 70/299, para. 7.
17. Report of the Secretary-General, Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level, p. 25.
18. While there are no direct references to child participation, Bangladesh's report highlights consultations with students from both high school and university in preparing for its voluntary national review.

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