

Comparing Youth Participation in SDG Processes: An Assessment of High-Performing Countries in Europe and Asia

Miki Fukuda

IGES Integrated Sustainability Centre

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its accompanying 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides a comprehensive framework to address the world's most pressing sustainability challenges. However, with the 2030 deadline fast-approaching, progress on the SDGs remains woefully insufficient. At present, the world is only on track to achieve 17% of SDG targets by 2030 (UNDESA, 2024). Since the 2030 Agenda encourages bottom-up participation as part of a novel approach to global governance (Biermann, 2017), some observers have called for expanding engagement from young people to accelerate progress on the SDGs. For instance, youth representatives recently called for enhancing youth participation at the Summit of the Future in 2024, leading to the adoption of the “Declaration on Future Generations” as part of the “Pact for the Future (United Nations, 2024).”

These global calls not only resulted in a push for greater participation from young people at the international level. They have also led to youth representatives contributing to discussions over the SDGs at the national level. Yet, whether and to what extent these efforts have had a significant influence on national SDG planning remains poorly understood. In fact, there have been few studies that have compared youth engagement in the SDGs across multiple countries. This discussion paper therefore aims to offer a comparative assessment of youth engagement in SDGs processes in Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Finland and Japan. The paper also intends to draw upon insights from this comparative assessment to provide recommendations for policymakers seeking to meaningfully engage young people in SDG processes.

2. Meaningful Youth Engagement

The starting point for the paper is that there is no one-size fits all approach to youth engagement. In fact, UN Member States employ various forms and mechanisms to facilitate this engagement. Given this variation, it is also not surprising that the extent to which young people are granted genuine power to influence decision-making processes may differ from one country to the next. Some studies have implied that this variation may not only exist but that it could have a significant influence on policy and action. For instance, to evaluate—and encourage—meaningful youth engagement in varying contexts, Hart (1992) suggested a “Ladder of Children’s Participation” that can help differentiate between the intentions and effects of youth engagement. More recently, the OECD Future of Education project further refined this typology by adding “co-agency”—a category that emphasizes the potential for productive collaboration between adults and young people. While these frameworks help to assess the meaningfulness of participation, much of the literature focuses on specific countries or communities rather comparing

countries. For example, Yusof et al. (2022) investigated youth-led SDG initiatives in Malaysia, albeit noting the need for more comparative research on youth engagement.

One of the few studies to offer a comparative perspective of these issues was Fukuda and Zusman (2024). That two-country study identified the following four critical elements that can support meaningful participation of young people in sustainability processes:

1) Aims and Justifications: A clear presentation of the aims and justifications underlying youth involvement is essential for meaningful youth participation. The need for such a clear presentation stem from young people's right to participate and express their views and opinions freely. In so doing, they can offer suggestions that can help improve policies and services (Bárta et al., 2021; Farthing, 2015; Lansdown, 2019).

2) Power sharing: young people can initiate activities and make decisions independently. They are also considered capable, and their views are respected. Engagement mechanisms may aim to position young people as equal partners in the drive for a sustainable future. This sentiment aligns well with the partnership principles of Agenda 2030 (Checkoway, 2011; Cockburn, 2001; Hart, 2013).

3) Transparency and Accountability: With open communication channels, young people can be well-informed about the issues and the roles they are expected to play along with other stakeholders. A possible desirable side effect of transparency is strengthening accountability. That is, transparency around the SDGs will help allow decision-makers and young people to be held accountable for their commitments and actions (Fletcher, 2005; Kellett, 2009).

4) Support: Young people may need support to safely and continuously participate regardless of background, status, or identity. Such support includes, but is not limited to, financial assistance for travel and accommodations, economic incentives, psychological and mentorship assistance, and learning and capacity development opportunities. The above needs are embedded in the Leave No One Behind principles, which call for support for people who are most vulnerable and are excluded (Farthing, 2015; Ndayala & Kuya, 2016; Van Reeuwijk, 2018).

While these four elements can be used to create a framework for comparing youth engagement, more research is needed assessing these element's presence or absence across a wider range of countries. Comparative assessments are particularly important given the previously mentioned trends that have placed a growing emphasis in youth participation in sustainability processes over time.

3. Country Selection

Building on previous studies, this paper examines youth engagement in SDG processes in Denmark, Germany, Indonesia, Finland and Japan. These countries were selected for a few reasons. Arguably the most important is that all five countries have performed well on the SDGs (based on the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) rankings). These relatively high level of performance suggests that they are all committed to using different mechanism to make progress on the SDGs; they therefore may offer useful insights into how they harness the energies and ideas of young people toward those ends. Above and beyond their strong performance, comparing the five countries is also justified by the fact that they have submitted multiple Voluntary National Review (VNR) and followed similar VNR reporting cycles. The VNRs are reports that countries voluntarily submit the United Nations approximately every five years to share progress on the SDGs. The similarities in the number of VNRs reporting cycles makes it possible to use those reports as basis for comparisons. In fact, the VNRs that are presented in Table 1 are the primary source of data that is used for the comparative assessment later in this paper.

Table 1 VNRs Used for the Comparative Assessment

Country	Reviewed Document	VNR Cycle
Denmark (SDSN 2024 #3)	● Report for the Voluntary National Review: Denmark's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2017) ● Voluntary National Review 2021 Denmark (2021)	2017, 2021
Germany (SDSN 2024 #4)	● Report of the German Federal Government to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (2016) ● Report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, German Voluntary National Review to the HLPF 2021 (2021)	2016, 2021
Indonesia (SDSN 2024 #78)	● Voluntary National Review (VNR) "Eradicating Poverty and Promoting Prosperity in a Changing World" (2017) ● Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) "Empowering Peoples and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality" (2019) ● Indonesia's Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2021 Sustainable and Resilient Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic for the Achievement of the 2030 Agenda (2021)	2017, 2019, 2021
Finland (SDSN 2024 #1)	● National report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Finland (2016) ● Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2020)	2016, 2020
Japan (SDSN 2024 #18)	● Japan's Voluntary National Review: Report on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (2017) ● Report on the implementation of 2030 Agenda ~Toward achieving the SDGs in the post-COVID19 era~ (2021)	2017, 2021

(Source: developed by author)

Methods

To compare youth engagement across the case study countries, the paper followed two steps. The first step involved a simple "overview" text analysis on youth-related SDG policies, programs, initiatives, and youth engagement patterns in the VNRs for the selected countries. The text analysis relied on searches for the

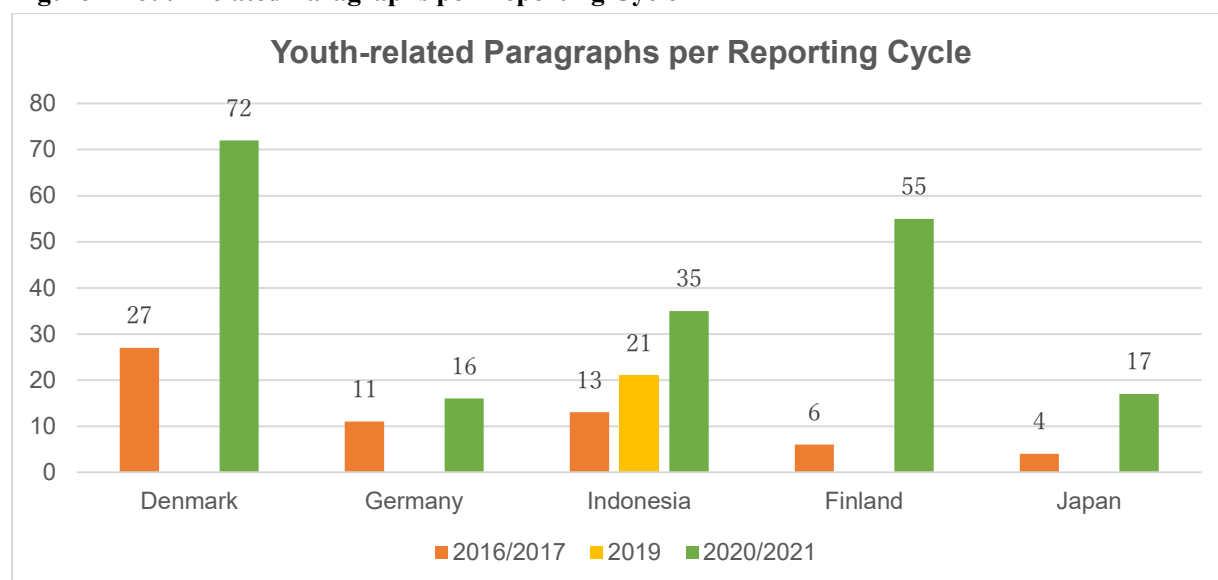
keywords "youth," "young people," "adolescent," or "next generation" in the VNRs. Sentences pertaining to policies or initiatives associated with these keywords were then consolidated and treated as a single paragraph for further investigation. The second step involved a more qualitative assessment of the countries using the four aforementioned elements (Aims and Justifications, Power sharing, Transparency and Accountability, and Support) to frame the analysis. The results begin with the text analysis and then move to the qualitative assessment.

4. Results

Enhanced Quality of Youth Engagement in VNRs Varies Across Countries And Over Time

Figure 1 draws upon the aforementioned text analysis to give an overview of the number of paragraphs pertaining to youth issues per VNR reporting cycle for each country. As illustrated in Figure 1, all five countries have increased references to youth-related keywords in their VNRs. To those following the SDGs, this trend may not be surprising: it aligns with the growth in overall VNR length and the increasing attention to youth issues over the past decade. More relevant to this paper is the comparison across countries. In this connection, the text analysis reveals youth-related initiatives are most frequent in the latter cycle of Denmark's and Finland's VNRs. At the same time, Indonesia's VNR exhibits a growing emphasis on youth-related initiatives while also making the third-most references to those initiatives among the five countries in this study.

Figure 1 Youth-related Paragraphs per Reporting Cycle

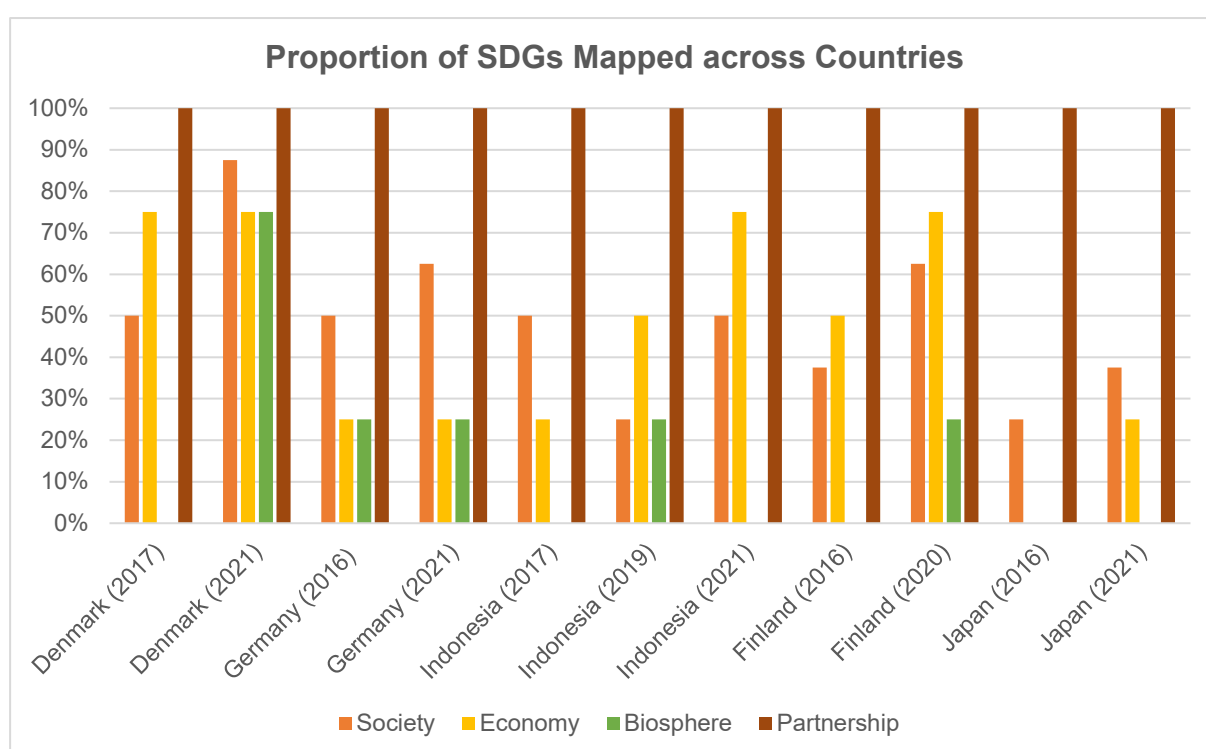


(Source: developed by author)

Thematic Associations and Youth References

The text analysis also helped to shed light on which SDGs were most associated with youth-related initiatives over time and across countries. The approach to mapping each country's SDG coverage is described in the Appendix. Mirroring the previous result, a common trend observed across all countries was an increase in the number of SDGs referenced in later reporting cycles. In fact, Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of SDGs mapped across the first 2016-2017 and second 2020-2021 reporting cycles.

Figure 2 Proportion of Links Between Youth Keywords and SDGs Across Countries



Note: The referred SDGs were grouped to Society (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 16), Economy (8, 9, 10, 12), Biosphere (6, 13, 14, 15), and Partnership (SDG 17). Due to the uneven distribution of the number of SDGs across each dimension, the figure displays the citation rate as a percentage for each dimension.

The same data used for Figure 2 can also offer insights into how countries measure up to each other. For instance, that data suggests that Denmark (2021) exhibited the most diverse and comprehensive coverage on links between youth initiatives and different SDGs. This was demonstrated by the fact that Denmark mentions youth initiatives in relation to all of the SDGs except 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and 14 (Life Below Water). In contrast, the other surveyed countries displayed a tendency to focus on links between youth initiatives and the social and economic dimensions of the SDGs, with comparatively less attention given to the environmental dimension. Beyond SDG 13 (Climate Action), environmental goals such as SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) received surprisingly few mentions in the context of youth-related initiatives.

Last but not least, the text analysis revealed that all countries referenced SDG 17 (Partnerships) in relation to youth. This suggests that youth-related content tended to be framed mostly as contributing to fostering partnerships, rather than specific thematic challenges. To get deeper insights into how countries may vary in this well-covered area, it is important to go to the detailed case studies in second step.

Qualitative Case Studies

This section offers additional insights into the platforms, mechanisms and initiatives that countries have created to support youth engagement in SDG processes. Though not mentioned explicitly in the following descriptions, the case studies are based on the four previously mentioned elements of meaningful youth engagement.

Denmark

In Denmark, one of the key government-backed channels that the Minister for Development Cooperation and the Minister for Climate, Energy has established to ensure that youth have an impact on decision-making processes are youth climate panels. The youth climate panels enable young people to comment on government and parliamentary decisions related to climate and other pertinent sustainability issues. Another channel that plays an important role in engaging young people in national SDG implementation is the Danish Youth Council (DUF). The DUF is an umbrella organization that supports and represents 80 youth organizations in Denmark through education, partnerships, and youth involvement. As a private organization, the DUF is responsible for supporting youth-led activities and organizations and allocating profits from national lottery funds to assist with those activities. The DUF also conducts several polls among Danish young people; the findings from these polls have been used for a dedicated chapter on Youth within Denmark's VNRs.

In addition to the climate panels and the DUF, Denmark has also created opportunities to contribute to the VNRs. To illustrate, the VNR contains a dedicated section recognizing the importance of “vulnerable children and young people and child poverty.” There is also text in the VNR underlining that the government aims to “provide assistance and opportunities for youth with disabilities, minority backgrounds, and financial difficulties to realize their potential and participate” (Ministry of Finance, 2021, p. 139). The above summary suggests that Denmark considers young people not merely passive recipients for care but equal partners who can leverage public and private support to bring their experience and expertise to bear on SDG decision making.

Germany

Germany has also created several channels to facilitate youth engagement in SDG processes. One of the more visible of such channels is the German Federal Youth Council. The Youth Council serves as a member organization of the Dialogue Group, inviting stakeholders to the preparatory meeting for the State Secretaries' Committee on Sustainable Development since 2018 (The German Federal Government, 2021,

p. 73). In addition, Germany also supports the participation of young people in the UN Youth Delegates for Sustainable Development—a United Nations initiative that aims to help young people become involved in national and global sustainability processes. Germany’s participation in this initiative led to development a position paper in the Annex of the VNR that offered different perspective and views on issues such as gender equality, anti-discrimination, education, and, most important for this paper, ensuring meaningful youth participation. Another area of emphasis relating to youth engagement in Germany is Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The multiple references in the VNR to ESD suggest that Germany is committed to helping young people to understand the impact of their actions on the world and make responsible, sustainable decisions from an early age.

Indonesia

Indonesia has set up three channels aimed at involving young people in the SDGs: namely, VNR Preparation, SDG Centers and Campus Ambassadors Project, and Internet-based Inclusive Monitoring and Data Collection. The main channel for this engagement in Indonesia is inviting youth organizations to participate in the VNR Preparation consultations. The VNR provides information on those consultations, as well as the youth recommendations and policy responses. The sharing of this information, in turn, arguably helped to increase accountability for SDG implementation (Ministry of National Development Planning & National Development Planning Agency, 2021). Another similarly motivated initiative in Indonesia are the SDG Centers and Campus Ambassadors; these centers are intended to disseminate and promote SDGs on and off university campus through related educational activities. A third initiative that is unique to Indonesia are Inclusive Monitoring and Data Collection. The origins of this initiative trace to the COVID-19 pandemic when the government sought to use the internet to solicit inputs from young people (with a particular emphasis on vulnerable young groups living in the remote areas) on how to improve SDG decisions (Ministry of National Development Planning & National Development Planning Agency, 2021). As an emerging economy with population expansion, Indonesia still faces challenges in collecting robust data; however, it is also working around some of these hurdles by, for instance, utilizing citizen- or company-generated data.

Finland

One of the more notable illustrations of a youth engagement mechanisms is Finland’s “Agenda 2030 Youth Group.” Formed in 2017 under the initiative of then Vice-Chair of the National Commission on Sustainable Development, the Group aims to include more young people in SDG decision-making processes and public dialogue while also informing less aware young people about the SDGs (Finland Prime Minister’s Office, 2020). The group is comprised of 14 people (between the ages of 15 to 28) who represent various backgrounds across the country. In addition, the members are often invited to high-level meetings, such as drafting the National Sustainable Development Strategy, budgeting, and VNR Preparation. Three selected members play active roles in public dialogue, utilizing social media platforms. Importantly, these activities

are insulated from outside interference and frequently initiated internally, which led to the organization of a conference entitled “Our Climate 2030.” The outcome document from this conference was utilized as the reference at the following national election. In addition, Finland has created the Finish National Youth Council or *Alliansi* to support member recruitment and administrative coordination with the government in these areas (Finland Prime Minister’s Office, 2020).

Japan

Similar to Finland, Japan has also established youth-led platform for the SDGs called the “Next-Generation Platform for Promoting SDGs.” Created in 2018 under an initiative of the then Prime Minister, the Platform comprises seven Steering Committee Organizations. While the commitment to young people is recognized in the VNR, the launch of Japan’s Next-Generation Platform reflected the government’s effort to make that commitment more concrete. However, some questions have emerged about the effects of the Platform since the members are mainly working on the activities of each representative organization, and there are no overarching activities initiated by the Platform itself. At the same time, it also merits noting that one of member from the Platform has participated in the “SDGs Promotion Round Table” consultations along with other adult stakeholders. Another way that Japan has sought to expand youth participation is strengthening ESD within renewed National Curriculum Standards—an effort that aims to foster “the builders of a sustainable society” across school education (Government of Japan, 2021, p. 49).

5. Discussion

All of the surveyed countries acknowledge the significance of involving young people in SDG processes and support various initiatives to make progress along these lines. These include the establishment of youth platforms, contributions to VNR development, and educational activities. However, the extent to which young people are granted actual power to influence policy development and decision-making in each of these initiatives may still vary across countries. This section discusses the insights gained regarding youth engagement in sustainability processes through four related lenses identified in the previous study (Fukuda and Zusman 2024): 1) Aims and Justification, 2) Power-sharing, 3) Transparency and Accountability, and 4) Support. Recognizing the connections across these four areas, this section will discuss 1) and 2) in a separate subsection and then turns to 3) and 4).

Clear Aims and Justification and Shared Power with Youth

Engaging young people in decision-making is a global trend. However, questions remain over the aims for involving youth and how is power shared with young people. In comparing the five countries, modest but important patterns and differences emerge in the articulated aims and types of power sharing arrangements.

Some of these patterns and differences can be seen by looking at Indonesia. Like many countries, Indonesia links youth participation to the SDGs' core principle of "Leave No One Behind." However, Indonesia does not merely stop at referring to this principle. It also makes concrete efforts to ensure youth

from different backgrounds and regions would not be excluded from sustainability processes. While this effort arguably grew from an attempt to help young people contribute to the SDGs during the pandemic, Indonesia has continued to create accessible online surveys that would collect responses to be used in the decision making. Importantly, the surveys were intended to targeting vulnerable youth, including those in rural areas.

Denmark similarly refers to the "Leave No One Behind" principle. Comparable to Indonesia, its commitment to those principles is also backed by supporting text and mechanisms. For example, Denmark includes a dedicated section in its 2021 VNR recognizing the participation of "vulnerable children and young people and child poverty." In addition, Denmark's National Youth Council (DUF) also plays a significant role in supporting engagement of a wide range of young people from different backgrounds. The DUF is able to realize this objective, in part, because it operates as an independent third-party organization that is separate from the government but benefits from stable funding. This allows it to effectively collect diverse opinions and ensure balanced representation so that young people from many different stations can influence relevant processes.

In Japan, youth have demonstrated the capacity to establish and manage their own organizations, subsequently gaining recognition by affiliating with government-initiated platforms. While these achievements are noteworthy, the inherent characteristics of youth organizations—including frequent membership turnover requiring ongoing recruitment, the need to establish channels with government entities, and independent efforts to represent a broad spectrum of youth voices through self-funded surveys despite limited resources—may limit their ability to access power and influence decisions. The struggle to consistently generate innovative input expected by the government, potentially leading to their perspectives being undervalued, may not be attributable to the youth themselves but to underlying structural issues in the mechanisms supporting their engagement.

Appropriate Support with Transparency and Accountability

Beyond stating clear aims and sharing power, providing appropriate support to youth and accountability is also important for enabling meaningful participation. Across all five countries, much of the efforts to provide support and boost transparency are made within the context of education and awareness-raising about the SDGs. The integration of SDGs into formal education systems is particularly notable in Japan and Germany, evidenced by their strong promotion of ESD. Other countries also point to the value of ESD although at higher levels, such as Indonesia's establishment of SDG Centers within universities and the appointment of student "campus ambassadors" to foster peer-to-peer awareness.

While the importance of imparting foundational knowledge about the SDGs is undeniable, the purpose of education arguably warrants more consideration. More concretely, greater reflection is required on whether the primary focus is on disseminating information about the SDGs or cultivating the competencies for actively advancing them. A significant risk exists that all of the countries continue to focus on the mere transmission of SDG-related knowledge. Given that the core aim of the SDGs is transformative change, and

with a decade since their adoption, the initial phase of general awareness-raising should arguably be evolving towards more action. To truly accelerate societal transformation, it is crucial that the next generation acquires the necessary capacities for enacting change, moving beyond simply understanding the SDGs. Expanding this scope is particularly important given the findings suggesting that most of the surveyed countries tend to associate youth issues with specific agendas, limiting spaces for young people to express their opinions across multiple sectors.

6. Conclusion

This discussion paper has explored the diverse platforms, practices and mechanisms employed across five countries, building upon prior research to understand youth engagement in the SDGs implementation. The comparison indicates that while many governments have made considerable efforts to involve young people, further support is likely necessary to move beyond what could be perceived as a tokenistic "tick-box" approach. With shared clear aims and justifications and genuine power, supplemented by the transparent and accountable mechanisms with appropriate support can give rise to meaningful youth engagement.

Despite a marked increase in global discussion around youth engagement, literature comparing multiple country cases in this area remains limited. With many countries now entering their third or fourth cycle of VNR reporting, a substantial body of data exists for more cross-country comparisons. This paper helps to address this gap. Future research could delve into the dynamics of youth engagement through more data-drive comparative analyses, which could support similar analyses across a larger number of countries.

The expansion of this work would be important globally as well as for the countries featured in this paper. It would similarly be helpful to conduct deeper dives into participation in the surveyed countries. With the exception of Denmark, the four other countries analyzed in this research are submitting their VNRs at the HLPF 2025. Observing how these countries review the progress—or stagnation—in youth engagement in their national SDG implementation promises to offer additional insights into how participation does or does not work. Meaningful youth engagement is crucial for building intergenerational trust and social cohesion, and for ensuring the inclusion of forward-looking ideas that inform policies impacting young people (United Nations, 2023). Ultimately, a deeper understanding of what fosters effective youth participation in the SDGs across diverse contexts is essential for achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Disclaimer: The contents of this discussion paper are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not represent the views of IGES.

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Appendix

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Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)

Integrated Sustainability Centre

2108-11 Kamiyamaguchi, Hayama, Kanagawa, 240-0115, Japan

Email: isc-gov@iges.or.jp

URL: www.iges.or.jp

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