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# Accelerating Progress on SDGs Requires Greater Focus on SDG Implementation Policies and Budgets in Specific Goal & Target Areas

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# SDGs are Off Track



➤ Especially the environmental dimensions

## Common Reasons

- **Insufficient financing**
- **COVID-19**
- **Wars**
- **Geopolitical competition**

Blame external factors

- **Little discussion of what countries are actually doing**
- **Little discussion of the role of policies and budgets**

Need more discussion of concrete possible actions

SDSN recommended more research on policies

# Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) – Official Mechanism for Monitoring SDG Progress

## Existing Research on VNRs

- Documents lack of progress
- SDG national institutional framework
- VNR preparation process
- Discussion of specific topics (leave no one behind, interlinkages, challenges, etc.)

### SDSN:

- Quantitative indicators, policy trackers
- Examples: declarative statements, NDCs, SDG coordination body, etc.



- Focus on what's easy to research
- Generally, they do not focus on actual policies or budgets (what countries are actually doing)



### Hypothesis:

- Insufficient progress may be due to insufficient effort (policies & budgets)

# My research on VNRs (3 studies)

➤ Analyzed policies and budgets in VNRs

COUNTRIES	DATA	YEARS
1. G20	All SDGs	2016-2021
2. ASEAN	Environmental policies	2016-2020
3. ASEAN	All SDGs	2016-2020

## Notes:

- Focused on domestic policies, not international cooperation policies or budgets
- Focused on national governments, not sub-national governments, businesses, NGOs, etc.

# VNRs Actually Include Many Policies

**G20**

**4,112 Policies**

(Average 228/Country)

**ASEAN**

**1,573 Policies**

(Average 175/Country)

**Moreover**

- Countries don't include all policies; VNRs are not comprehensive (e.g. air pollution policies)
- Undercount may be substantial

**Note:**

- Number of policies is not the best indicator of effort
- But they clearly indicate some kind of effort
- Need more investigation of actual policies

# Distribution of G20 Policies Among SDGs

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
7.0%	7.3%	9.1%	7.8%	6.1%	4.1%	5.2%	8.4%	7.1%
10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
4.8%	5.4%	5.6%	5.3%	4.7%	5.1%	5.9%	1.1%	

Differences among SDGs are not very large on average

## Notes:

- There is more variation within individual countries
- Cumulative as of 2021
- SDG 17 low because the study focuses only on domestic policies

# G20 Policies Seem Mostly Substantial

Policy Types	Percent
1. Major laws, policies, strategies, enforcement	47.4%
2. Money-related (tax, spending, finance)	11.9%
3. Physical infrastructure, land management	6.4%
4. Projects, programs	16.5%
5. Information (education & training, monitoring, data, certification, registration, public awareness)	8.0%
6. Other	9.7%

# Budgets



## G20

- Most reported budget items, but not systematically
- Cumulative total: \$ 2.7 trillion
- Largest: India (\$ 689 billion)

## ASEAN

- Most didn't report budgets
- Some small amounts were reported

## Implications

- Policies have associated spending, so policies are underreported.
- Most policies are related to SDGs.

Therefore

- Government SDG spending is significantly underreported.
- Most spending is related to SDGs.



# Global Government Spending

**Global Government Spending (2021)**

**\$ 16.5 trillion**

- Most government spending is probably related to SDGs
- So this is probably close to real SDG spending by governments

➤ **Need more spending on SDGs**  
➤ **Additional \$2 tril. would have been 19% of global GDP**

**Global GDP (2021)**

**\$ 96.5 trillion**

- Global government spending is about **17% of global GDP**
- Therefore, it has a lot of room to grow

# SDG 11 Policies in VNRs – G20 Countries

Up to 2021

Country	SDG 11 Policies	Total SDG Policies	SDG11 % of Total
Argentina	11	201	5.5%
Australia	10	301	3.3%
Brazil	0	47	0.0%
Canada	12	178	6.7%
China	13	128	10.2%
France	5	75	6.7%
Germany	14	198	7.1%
India	9	285	3.2%
Indonesia	2	384	0.5%

Country	SDG 11 Policies	Total SDG Policies	SDG 11 % of Total
Mexico	9	114	7.9%
R. Korea	6	70	8.6%
Russia	15	275	5.5%
S. Arabia	5	160	3.1%
S. Africa	4	212	1.9%
Turkey	28	400	7.0%
UK	44	463	9.5%
<b>Average</b>	12	218	5.4%
<b>Total</b>	187	3491	5.4%

# SDG 11 Environmental Policies in VNRs – ASEAN Countries

Country	SDG 11 Env. Policies	Total SDG11 Policies
Brunei	13	24
Cambodia	10	14
Indonesia	0	0
Lao	5	6
Malaysia	6	8
Philippines	0	0
Singapore	13	28
Thailand	4	15
Viet Nam	8	10
Total	59	105

Up to 2020

- The exact number of policies is not the key point.
- The presence of policies means some kind of effort, activity.
- Absence of policies (or few policies) in VNRs does not mean that the country has few or no policies. Policies may exist but not be in the VNR.
- The research community needs to analyse the actual contents of the policies in order to understand reasons for the extent of SDG progress.

# Overall Perspective



- Policy research should focus on proposing more effective policies
- VNRs should focus more on policies to address achievement gaps

Example SDG Target

Already Achieved Level

Achievement Gap

Existing Policies and Budgets

New policies & budgets  
being considered  
(in many VNRs)

Old

New

# Policy Trackers

A graphic of a target with a yellow bullseye, red and blue rings, and black outer rings. Three horizontal lines, representing darts, are shown hitting the bullseye.

- It is a good idea to create and use policy trackers (preferably quantitative) to track SDG efforts as recommended by SDSN.
- However, they are difficult to create.
  - Very labor intensive.
  - Policies are difficult to compare between countries
- Detailed policy information is needed to create policy trackers.
- Developing policy trackers would be a good focus for international collaboration among NGOs, think tanks, universities, etc.
- Policies from VNRs as compiled by this study could provide a starting point.

# Datasets of SDG Policies

COUNTRIES	DATA	YEARS
1. G20	All SDGs	2016-2021
2. ASEAN	Environmental policies	2016-2020
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## How to use datasets:

- Find policies on specific topics or SDGs
- Examples: environment, agriculture, health, etc.

**Advantages:** Can find policies classified under various SDGs

**Cautions:** Countries did not list all of their policies in their VNRs

# Limitations

A graphic of a target with concentric rings in white, blue, red, and yellow. Three black arrows are shown hitting the center yellow bullseye.

- Policy research is labor-intensive
- Information in VNRs is not comprehensive
- Each country has many policies, policies are complex, and many are contradictory. Difficult to synthesize a summary of policies (to create a policy tracker).
- Budgets: difficult to track and classify
- Language: policies in many countries are not in English
- Nevertheless, VNRs are a good starting point for beginning policy research

# Conclusions

- The research community should strengthen its analysis of VNRs and make stronger recommendations.
- Lack of policies and budgets is not the main reason for insufficient progress on SDGs
- Need more research on actual SDG policies (“back to basics”)
  - Appropriateness
  - Level of ambition
  - Effectiveness
- VNRs and VNR research should focus more on addressing achievement gaps
- Need to recommend more appropriate and ambitious policies to address achievement gaps





# BASED ON

A graphic of a target with a yellow bullseye, red and blue rings, and several arrows hitting the center. The target is positioned behind the 'BASED ON' text.

Elder, Mark, and Elli Newman. 2023. 'Monitoring G20 Countries' SDG Implementation Policies and Budgets Reported in Their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)'. *Sustainability* 15 (22): 15733. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152215733>.

Elder, Mark, and Gemma Ellis. 2022. 'ASEAN Countries' Environmental Policies for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)'. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-022-02514-0>.

Elder, Mark. 2020. *Assessment of ASEAN Countries' Concrete SDG Implementation Efforts: Policies and Budgets Reported in Their 2016-2020 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)*. Hayama, Japan: Institute for Global Environmental Strategies. <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/asean-sdg-vnrs/en>.



# Thank you!

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