# STRENGTHENING THE ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION OF THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS

## in Asia-Pacific

## Lessons Learned and Ways Forward

**Suggested citation**
United Nations Environment Programme (2022). Strengthening the Environmental Dimension of the Voluntary National Reviews in Asia-Pacific: Lessons Learned and Ways Forward. Bangkok.

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UN environment programme

IGES
Institute for Global Environmental Strategies

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

| | |
|---|---|
| **ADB** | Asian Development Bank |
| **CSO** | Civil society organisation |
| **CSD** | Commission on Sustainable Development |
| **CIDC** | Committee for International Development Cooperation |
| **CSD** | Committee for Sustainable Development |
| **DBCC** | Development Budget Coordinating Committee |
| **DCC** | Development Coordinating Committee |
| **DFAT** | Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade |
| **DNPM** | Department of National Planning and Monitoring |
| **ERW** | Explosive Remnants of War |
| **FUR** | Follow-up and Review |
| **FDI** | Foreign direct investments |
| **GHG** | Greenhouse Gas |
| **GDP** | Gross Domestic Product |
| **GNH** | Gross National Happiness |
| **HLPF** | High-Level Political Forum |
| **IGES** | Institute for Global Environmental Strategies |
| **IMC-SDGs** | Inter-Ministry Committee on SDGs |
| **INDC** | Intended Nationally Determined Contribution |
| **LDCs** | Least developed countries |
| **LNOB** | Leaving no-one behind |
| **MEAs** | Multilateral Environmental Agreements |

| | |
|---|---|
| **MOI** | Means of implementation |
| **MDGs** | Millennium Development Goals |
| **BAPPENAS** | Ministry of National Development Planning |
| **MPI** | Ministry of Planning and Investment |
| **MoPD & R** | Ministry of Planning, Development & Reform |
| **NDA** | National Development Agency |
| **NEDA** | National Economic and Development Authority |
| **NESDC** | National Economic and Social Development Council |
| **NPC** | National Planning Commission |
| **NSP** | National Strategic Plan |
| **NSDP** | National Sustainable Development Plan |
| **NTF** | National Task Force for Sustainable Development |
| **ODA** | Official development assistance |
| **PPP** | Purchasing power parity |
| **SDGs** | Sustainable Development Goals |
| **SDSN** | Sustainable Development Solutions Network |
| **UXO** | Unexploded Ordnance |
| **UNEP** | United Nations Environment Programme |
| **UNESCAP** | United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific |
| **UNDESA** | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs |
| **VLR** | Voluntary Local Review |
| **VNR** | Voluntary National Review |

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# FOREWORD

This report, **Strengthening the Environmental Dimension of the Voluntary National Reviews in Asia-Pacific: Lessons Learned and Ways Forward** presents findings from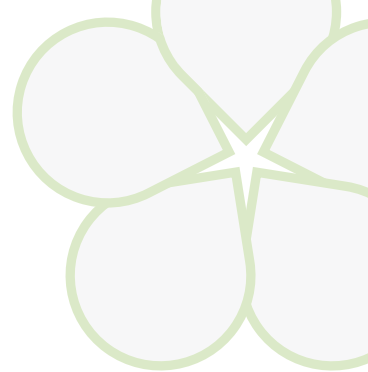 a project jointly implemented by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES). The project reviewed 50 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from 36 Asia and the Pacific countries from 2016 to 2021.

In this context, the report presents an important account of environmental dimension implementation and reporting on SDGs across the Asia and the Pacific region. It reconfirms the need for urgent action, including by building public awareness and ensuring stakeholder participation, to address the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, while also calling for accelerated efforts on the SDGs.

The experiences and lessons learnt from the 50 Voluntary National Reviews illustrate that the VNR can be an effective mechanism to strengthen implementation, monitoring and reporting on the environmental SDGs and related targets. The report highlights how VNR production process can help countries review progress and ratchet up their ambitions towards achieving the SDGs, and as an effective tool to raise awareness and mobilize action while building consensus on priority areas and support a whole-of-society approach.

The report identifies gaps and provides recommendations for future cooperation. In addition to confirming a growing awareness about the importance of nature to human wellbeing, the report reveals that action on the environmental SDGs in Asia and the Pacific has been slow and generally insufficient, and that required environmental data remains lacking. Accordingly, all countries in the region will need to enhance collaboration and pursue higher levels of ambition on the entirety of the SDGs and related targets. Doing so will involve recognizing that many social challenges have environmental implications that require integrated, rights-based solutions.

Key findings of this report were shared at the virtual side events held during the 2022 UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in New York, and the Third Global Conference on Strengthening Synergies between the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Tokyo, Japan.

We strongly hope that this report can further inform and inspire governments, civil society and other stakeholders across Asia and the Pacific for preparation of future VNRs, as well as accelerate action on the environmental dimension of the SDGs in the lead up to 2030.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Annual reports issued by the United Nations make it clear: the Asia and Pacific region is lagging on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At current rates, the SDGs are slated to be achieved by 2065—in other words, a full 35 years behind schedule. Although there has been progress on select SDGs (mainly with regard to SDGs 7 and 9), the region is not making sufficient enough progress or is regressing on most of the Goals. The trend is especially worrying for the subset of environment-related SDGs. As we near the half-way point of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, it is therefore useful to examine how the region has performed on the main reporting mechanism for the Goals: namely, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

This report is the outcome of a collaborative project between the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) aimed at reviewing 50 VNRs produced by 36 countries in Asia and the Pacific, which were submitted to the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development over the period of 2016-2021. One of the main objectives set out by the project was to harness the knowledge and experiences accumulated by countries in the process of producing their VNRs, both as a vehicle and a national strategy for SDG implementation and reporting. The review was intended to extract common elements in the formulation process as well as good practices, challenges, lessons learnt, and assess key areas that can illustrate where the region stands on VNR development. Particular attention is placed on the environment and challenges, governance, and data and indicators. The findings of the review are captured in this report; key messages and recommendations from the review follow below.

Many countries in the Asia and Pacific region have conducted at least one VNR, while several have carried out more than one. Countries that have yet to undertake their VNRs and those that have completed one review are advised to go through the VNR process during the upcoming reporting cycles set out by the HLPF.

Several countries, including India and Samoa, focus their VNR processes on bringing in marginalized voices based on the principle of "leaving no-one behind" (LNOB). It is important in this regard to recognize that LNOB is multifaceted and that leaving no one behind requires a consideration of age, gender, race, ethnicity, location, disability or migratory status. LNOB remains a central commitment of the 2030 Agenda, and the need to reach those who are furthest behind has never been greater. Other countries could strengthen their focus on LNOB in future VNRs. Additionally, VNRs should not just be a result of processes anchored in countries' capitals or large cities, but capture a broader range of local in-country realities.

**Sequential and frequent VNRs are recommended for all countries in Asia and the Pacific between now and 2030.**

The VNRs represent an important exercise for countries to tackle the complex and interlinked nature of the SDGs. This report finds that countries tend to deepen their review from the second VNR onwards and engage with more technical matters such as data, indicators and monitoring as they move past their first VNR. More frequent VNRs also have the benefits of reviewing and potentially strengthening actions on environment-related SDGs.

**The VNRs should be coherent over time and linked thematically to past reviews to assess progress on recognized challenges, lessons learnt, etc.**

Respecting the revolving focus of the HLPF, it is recommended that VNRs deal with the entire set of SDGs and their interactions where and when possible. The review exercise is likely to be completed only four or five times per country before 2030 to shed light on all relevant development aspects, especially with regard to environmental interactions with societal and economic dimensions.

**In order to increase transparency concerning the VNRs' data collection and production process, it is recommended that countries consider including standardized annexes that present statistical indicators and list consulted stakeholders.**

In evaluating the content and structure, the review identified that less than half of the VNRs included annexes. Of these, there were few examples of common annex templates. Annexes are contextual and depend on country-specific situations. VNRs tend to follow a common structure informed by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) guidance. However, sections and chapters on SDG integration, sections on statistical data, and institutional mechanisms are not very common in the VNRs at present and might become a focus in future VNRs. Moreover, VNRs could benefit by outlining more substantive linkages with human rights and gender equality in order to ensure that the overarching principles of Agenda 2030, such as LNOB, are not forgotten.

**Environmental content in VNRs is increasing but more coverage of environmental challenges is needed.**

More recent VNRs tend to contain more environmental content than earlier VNRs—though the COVID-19 pandemic has overshadowed the environment in certain VNRs. There is a tendency to highlight environmental challenges linked to climate change and the Paris Agreement in more recent VNRs. It is important that future VNRs broaden these efforts by making linkages to other development processes, not only for the sake of coherence, but to generate momentum for action. For example, references made to the prospective Global Biodiversity Framework can help to generate momentum

for biodiversity-related SDGs, as synergies between biodiversity, climate and SDGs processes can be mutually reinforcing. Going forward, it is important to consider how key international processes might be more meaningfully integrated into VNR processes, and vice versa—for instance, through the United Nations issue-based coalitions initiative and other collaborative platforms.

**Efforts should be made to close the gap between findings of annual Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) reports and others in order to corroborate what is communicated in most VNRs on environmental challenges.**

At the regional level, it would be advantageous to expand capacity building and peer-learning exercises that compare and debate various findings in terms of challenges and solutions, thereby facilitating the exchange of best practices and areas for future cooperation.

**Greater attention is needed on spillovers and cross-border externalities in the VNRs.**

SDG performance is still dependent on spillovers and displacement of ecological and material footprint. This is neither environmentally sustainable nor socially just. In this last decade of Agenda 2030, it is important to revise relevant metrics to establish a better balance between good performance on the environmental SDGs and good performance on the SDGs overall.

**Additional support for environmental data collection and analysis is recommended. Several countries recognize the importance of environmental sustainability. Most are, however, unable to review their progress on environment-related SDGs and related targets due to lack of data and indicators.**

Regarding data and indicators, it is recommended that UNEP, in collaboration with UNDESA, strengthen the reporting of environment-related indicators in VNRs in general and those under SDGs 8, 12, 9, 3, 11, 15, 5 and 14 in particular. Concrete guidelines should be provided on how to develop indicators, including the global SDG indicators, when data is available and national indicators when data is not available. A reporting of the status or progress of relevant SDG targets, together with a proposed format on use of indicators for reporting as set out in an Annex to VNRs would also be helpful in this regard.

# CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

## Agenda 2030 and the SDGs

This review takes place in 2022, almost seven years after Agenda 2030 and the SDGs were universally adopted by all United Nations member states, two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, and mid-way between 2015 and 2030.  Recent regional evaluations of the Asia-Pacific region's SDG performance suggest that, with the exception of very few SDGs, the region overall is not on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030 (Asian Development Bank [ADB] and United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP] 2019; Olsen et al. 2020). In fact, should the region continue along its current trajectory, it may achieve no more than 10% of the 169 SDG targets (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 2021).

To some extent, there is reason for hope that these trends will change. Countries have made progress on SDG 3 on Health and Wellbeing; SDG 9 on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure; SDG 1 on Poverty Eradication; as well as SDG 2 on Food Security and Eliminating Hunger.

Similarly, SDG 4 on Quality Education, SDG 10 on Reduced Inequalities, and SDG 17 on Partnerships have improved marginally. However, regional reviews of the SDGs have emphasized that progress remains too slow to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

The area that is arguably most worrying is the environment. There are no environmental goals or targets among those listed above that indicate progress. In addition, the environment-related SDGs as a whole represent those that have made the least progress, and even regressed in some cases (UNESCAP 2022). It is with good reason that the leading organizations in the international community are calling for accelerated action on SDGs 12, 13, and 14 (UNEP 2021).

The above backdrop serves as one of the main justifications for the present regional review. The reasons for slow or stalled progress are in many ways known.

Some of the well-understood causes include a consistent lack of data and indicators, especially for the environment, which are a crucial compass for stocktaking, progress and review, and planning (UNEP 2021). Many of the items set out for measurement under the SDGs have never been assessed before, and, in most instances, were not included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is especially the case in areas of development that integrate socioeconomic and environmental concerns, or areas that require data disaggregation.

Another reason for the slow progress is the continued emphasis on conventional growth priorities. With few exceptions, countries in the region have largely prioritized areas such as economic development, employment, industrialization, urbanization and infrastructure development rather than maintaining a safe and healthy natural environment. While this is true for many parts of the world, a related reason why progress has been lacking on the environmental front is that there remain evident trade-offs between development and environmental conservation, which are seldom weighed or addressed in policy and planning.

Without question, all countries in the region, and especially industrializing countries, face multiple challenges but have limited financial and human capacities to address them. They may thus have restricted options for priority setting with little recourse but to focus on core areas from the MDG era such as poverty eradication, water, health, basic infrastructure, and education at the expense of the environment. It is also clear that there are critical human development concerns related to environmental sustainability that cannot be neglected: socioeconomic development policies often fail to account for environmental impacts such as accelerating degradation, which in the long run negatively jeopardizes development

gains in areas such as food security, health, poverty, industrial development and human rights. The fundamental importance of the environment as a precondition for all other aspects of human development is therefore worth underlining.

Governance systems and institutions are an important factor in understanding ways of balancing priorities between economic, social and environmental areas of development. Establishing inclusive governance arrangements that promote participation, accountability, and the effective and transparent execution of rule of law can help in realizing integrated decision-making required to reconcile diverging development priorities. Institutional frameworks that expand and deepen multi-stakeholder cooperation at the national and local levels remain important for guiding both decision-making and the allocation of resources to development concerns. Once again, these challenge areas are especially prominent in the subset of SDGs related to the environment but also concern other important areas such as gender.

The current global pandemic has brought added complexity to the implementation and delivery of the SDGs. At the same time, COVID-19 has also strengthened arguments for pursuing more environmentally sustainable development, and the critical role of the SDGs in serving as an organizing framework for resilient, just, and equitable development that enhances the environmental foundations upon which human civilization depends.

Despite a general lack of progress, some countries are exceeding others on the SDGs, also in relation to the environment. This report analyses 50 VNRs **developed by 36 Asia-Pacific countries in 2016-2021 (see Annex 1)** with a view towards extracting useful information and guiding countries

on ways to improve their VNR process.[1] It is hoped that this will help to strengthen action on SDGs by documenting areas where better performing countries excel—and lesser performing countries do not. In so doing, this report focuses on the VNRs at large but gives special attention to how the environmental dimensions of sustainable development are discussed and reflected in the VNRs.

### ✿ Country Performance in Asia-Pacific

Before sharpening the focus on the environmental dimension in this review, it is worth establishing some facts about the Asia-Pacific countries' SDGs performance. The region is home to least developed countries (LDCs) and countries that have a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (purchasing power parity (PPP)) ranging

from less than USD 10,000 (Afghanistan, Cambodia, Nepal, PNG, Vanuatu) to those with between USD 10,000 and 30,000 per capita GDP (PPP) (Bhutan, China, Fiji, Indonesia, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam), as well as countries with high GDPs per capita ranging from USD 40,000 to over USD 100,000 (PPP) such as Australia, Brunei, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, and Singapore. There are also many other middle-income countries that stand in between these three groupings.[2]

Countries around the world are reviewed and scored in the annual SDSNs SDG Index Reports (2016-2021). This report examines the scores of countries in the Asia-Pacific region that have completed at least one VNR within the designated time period. In doing so, the report shows that the average score among the countries has increased slightly (Figure 1) across all SDGs over time.

While the overall trend is positive, persistent environmental and developmental

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1   All VNRs that were analysed in this review can be found at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/ This reference will not be repeated throughout the report, but the country and year of VNR will be indicated (Country, Year) where information or findings are referenced.

2   Not all countries could be included in this exercise. 10 countries in the region do not have sufficient data to allow a comparison based on this data. This in itself is a situation that should be remedied.
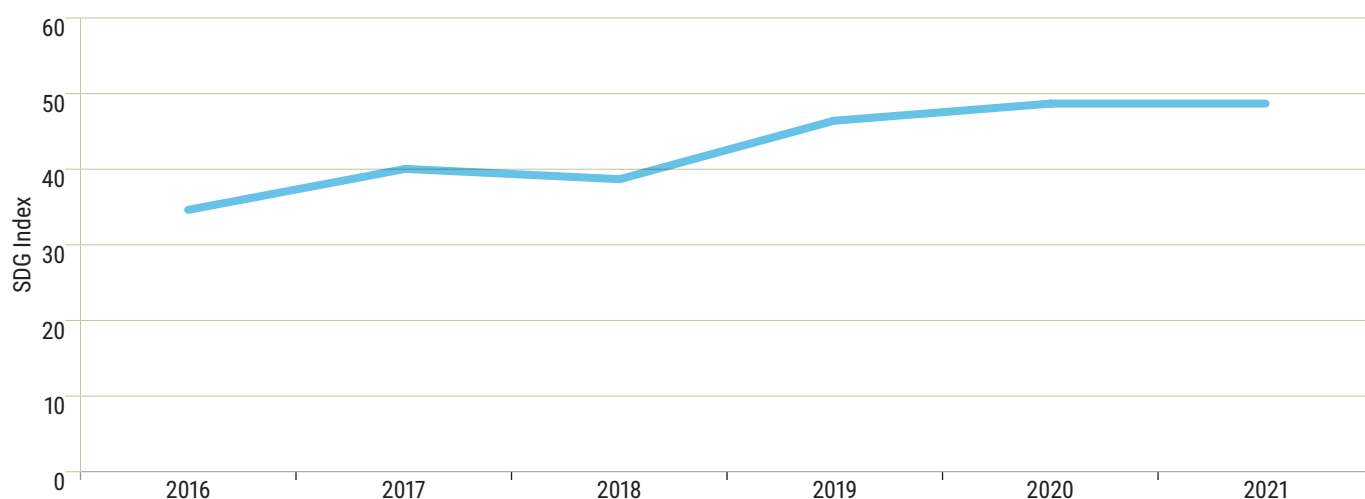


Source: Sachs et al. (2016) ; Sachs et al. (2017) ; Sachs et al. (2018) ; Sachs et al. (2019) ; Sachs et al. (2020) ; Sachs et al. (2021)

**Figure 1    Regional VNR countries aggregate average score 2016-2021**
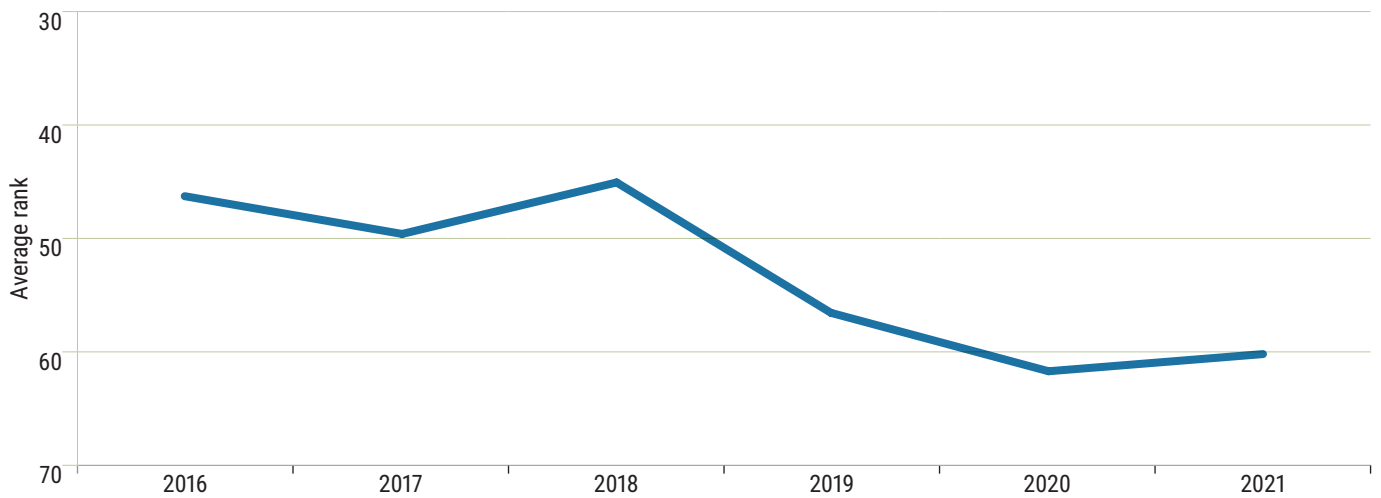
Source: Sachs et al. (2016) ; Sachs et al. (2017) ; Sachs et al. (2018) ; Sachs et al. (2019) ; Sachs et al. (2020) ; Sachs et al. (2021)

**Figure 2  Average aggregate rank VNR countries in the region 2016-2021**

challenges may have slowed the pace of change relative to other countries. As suggested in Figure 2, the average country ranking (globally) comparatively worsened for reviewed countries in the Asia-Pacific region in relation to other regions. The y-axis in Figure 2 shows that average rank of countries that were reviewed in this report decreased compared to global progress on the SDGs.
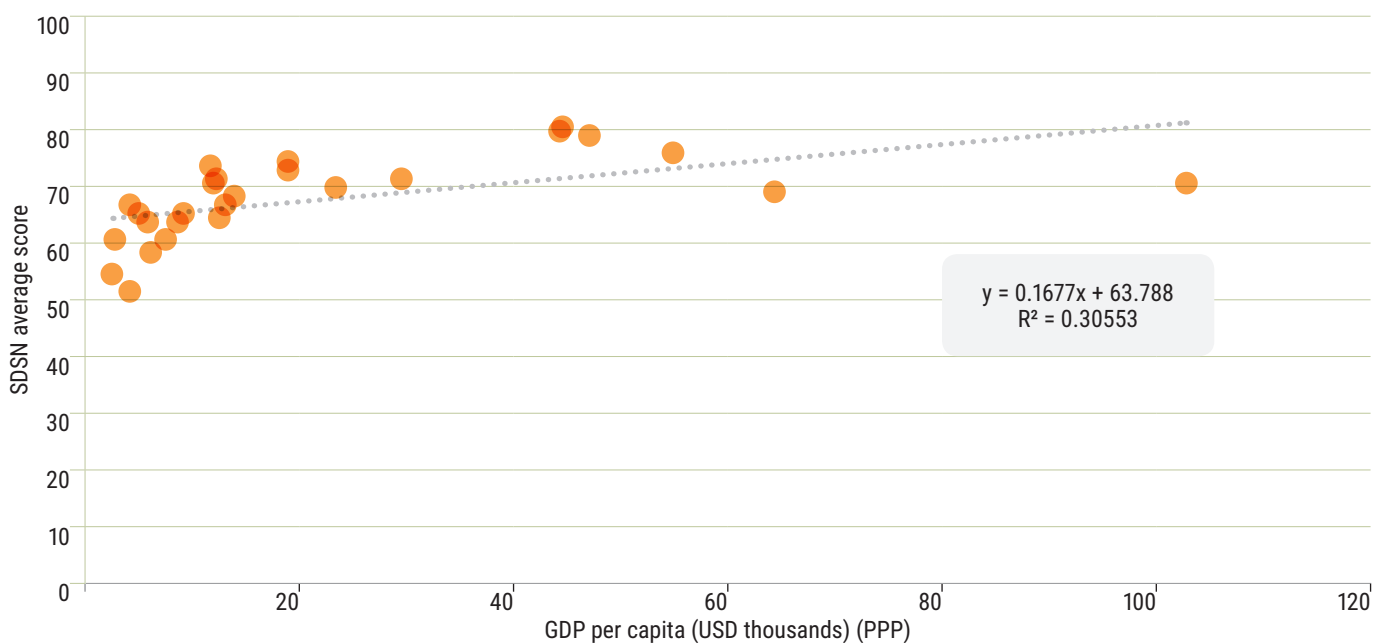


Source: Sachs et al. (2016) ; Sachs et al. (2017) ; Sachs et al. (2018) ; Sachs et al. (2019) ; Sachs et al. (2020) ; Sachs et al. (2021) ; World Bank (2022)

**Figure 3  GDP per capita PPP compared to SDSN average score**

Results also vary when looking at which countries performed better according to SDSN's 2021 SDG Index Report. On one hand, the data suggests that more wealthy countries tend to perform better (Figure 3); however, these countries are also more likely to have the largest (i) spillover effects (Figure 4), and (ii) ecological footprints (Figure 5). This suggests that their performance may be fueled by external inputs and outputs that are not accounted for in the country's national balance sheet.

Substituting the spillover score with ecological footprint per capita also provides similar results (Figure 5). Figure 5
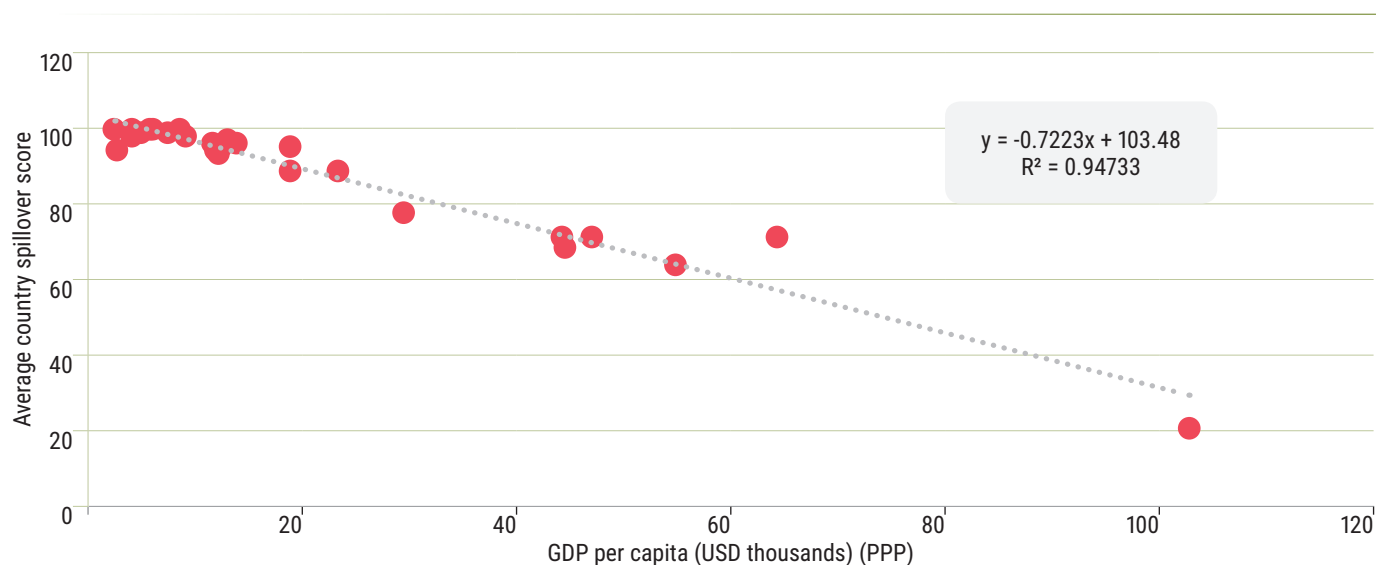


$$y = -0.7223x + 103.48$$
$$R^2 = 0.94733$$

Source: Sachs et al. (2016) ; Sachs et al. (2017) ; Sachs et al. (2018) ; Sachs et al. (2019) ; Sachs et al. (2020) ; Sachs et al. (2021) ; World Bank (2022)

**Figure 4**   **GDP Per capita PPP compared to spillover score**
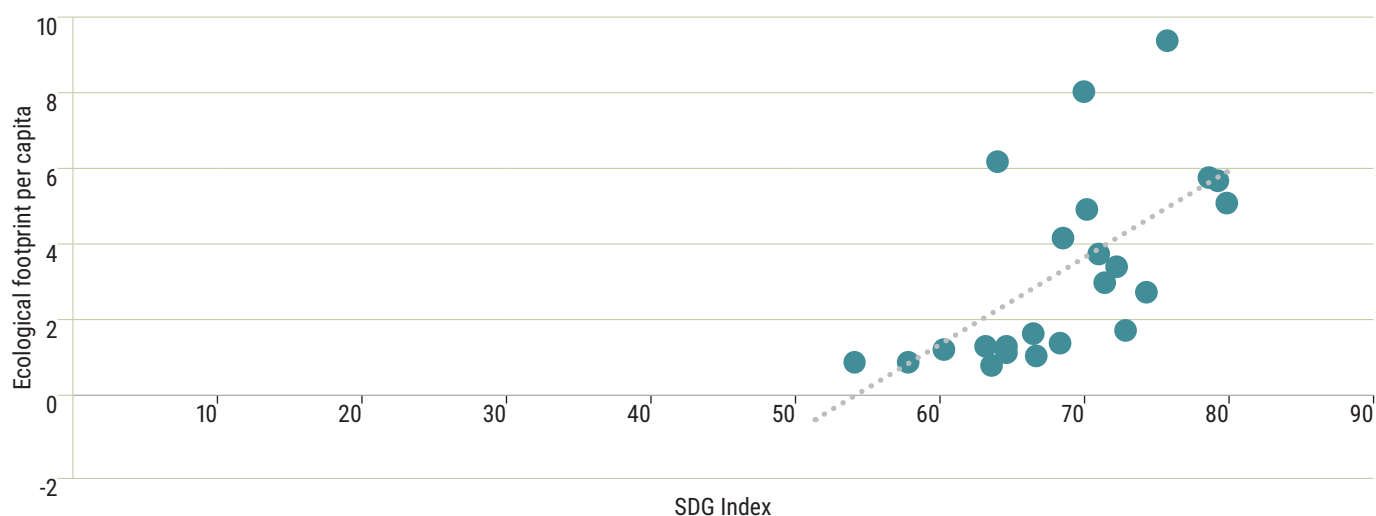


Source: Sachs et al. (2016) ; Sachs et al. (2017) ; Sachs et al. (2018) ; Sachs et al. (2019) ; Sachs et al. (2020) ; Sachs et al. (2021) ; World Population Review (2022)

**Figure 5**   **Ecological Footprint compared to average SDSN score**

indicates that countries that score higher on SDSN's scale also generally have a greater ecological footprint. One way of interpreting this data is that conventional socio-economic development priorities have an important corresponding impact on the environment. A second inference is that the SDGs have most often been interpreted with particular focus on development rather than sustainability.

# Focus and Methodology

The analysis focused on five main areas (i) **the VNR process**; (ii) **environmental content and challenges**; (iii) **data and indicators**; (iv) **institutional arrangements, financing and governance**; and (v) **others**. These areas were selected because existing reviews at the regional level suggest they represent challenge areas for progress on the SDGs. Further, reviewing the VNRs themselves is a valuable exercise now that the world is half way into the SDGs timeframe. It is thus important to extract what countries are—and are not—reporting in their VNRs and how they are structuring and carrying out the VNR exercise itself. Collecting and reviewing the region's current experience with the VNRs can help countries plan and undertake successive VNRs to further strengthen the reviews between now and 2030.

**Collecting and reviewing the region's current experience with the VNRs can help countries plan and undertake successive VNRs to further strengthen the reviews between now and 2030.**

In the data collection stage of the review, researchers collected qualitative and quantitative data from each VNR. The gathering of the data was based on a suite of questions. The questions, listed in the Annex, were developed through several rounds of review and in close consultations with experts in the field. Those consultations gradually widened and deepened the focus of the assignment. Following six turns of examining and discussing the proposed review questions, reviewers agreed to organize the data into six focus areas as listed below.

| Focus area 1 | Background Information |
|---|---|
| Focus area 2 | Process of VNR creation |
| Focus area 3 | Content analysis general environment |
| Focus area 4 | Content analysis data and indicators |
| Focus area 5 | Metagovernance analysis |
| Focus area 6 | Concluding summary assessment |

**Focus area 1** captured basic background information such as the year of the VNR and its main substantive concentration.

This section also included score and rank of the annual SDSN reports. The section also indicated whether the country score was increasing or decreasing, as well as the main environment-related challenges as set out by the SDSN report. Information was also provided on the country's main institutions tasked with general oversight on the SDGs. Moreover, the section also examined whether there had been parallel civil society or "shadow reports" elaborating on the VNR of the country; and whether there was additional environmental information in those reports not included in the VNRs themselves.

**Focus area 2** sought to collect information on the VNR development process. This included which institutions are chiefly responsible for VNR production. It also included basic information regarding the length, main chapters, details about the production process and stakeholder engagement.

**Focus area 3** focused on extracting general environmental information. It also looked at coherence between successive VNRs, as well as whether any clear commitments regarding the environment were contained in the VNR. The review in this section also utilized text analysis and mining to calculate the frequency of terms concerning environmental issues listed in VNRs and whether the VNRs incuded sections or chapters dedicated to the environment. The focus area further examined whether and how progress was discussed; and if

environmental issues associated with the respective SDGs were recognized. It also compiled information on any good practices pertaining to the environment.

**Focus area 4** then focused on examining data and indicators in relation to the environment. Here, reviewers assessed whether the VNR of each country identified a national indicator system or if the official UN system was used for data monitoring. Reviewers also looked at whether the VNR country employed a unique approach to indicators or data with regards to the environment; how data was reported; how many of the environmental targets (71) and indicators (92) were mentioned in the VNR.[3] The section also sought to understand whether data and indicator gaps were mentioned. If these gaps were referenced, the focus area extracted relevant information on the sources of those gaps as well as the presence of data and information sharing mechanisms the countries used.

**Focus area 5** focused on governance, making use of a "metagovernance" lens to conduct a textual analysis of the VNRs. This lens could help assess the extent and balance between government/ hierarchic, market-oriented, and network/ information-based approaches or styles to governing the implementation of the SDGs.

Finally, **focus area 6** was dedicated to a qualitative assessment of the VNR itself, where reviewers highlighted any outstanding items in the readings of the VNR.

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3   UNEP identified 71 targets and 92 indicators on the environmental dimension of the SDGs. See for instance the 2021 UNEP report Measuring Progress (https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/ handle/20.500.11822/35968/SDGMP.pdf) for more information on these targets and indicators.

# RESULTS OF THE REVIEW

## VNR Process and Content

Follow-up and Review (FUR) is part and parcel of Agenda 2030 and wider SDG implementation. According to the Agenda 2030 (United Nations (UN) 2016; United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) 2016; UNGA 2015) FUR is guided by several principles; namely, that reviews are voluntary and country-led, take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development, and respect policy space and priorities of UN member states. Reviews set out to track progress for delivering on the SDGs in an interrelated and integrated manner, while also maintaining a longer-term perspective that can be helpful for identifying achievements, challenges, and critical success factors.

Reviews are designed to remain open, inclusive, participatory, and transparent for all concerned stakeholders, including by focusing on people-centered, gender responsive and human rights-based approaches for LNOB. Moreover, FURs work to build on existing platforms and processes, while also avoiding duplication, and evolving over time. In this connection reviews are intended to be rigorous and evidence based, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable, and disaggregated by income.

It is clear that the envisioned VNRs constitute the main review procedure for countries on the SDGs and as such, represent an important opportunity for countries to openly share progress and challenges with carrying out the SDGs. At the same time, it is also evident that, because the SDGs represent the most cohesive and integrated development agenda to date, there is currently no precedent for reporting on some of the more interrelated and crosscutting issues reflected in the SDGs.

In recognition of this, the United Nations proposed reporting guidelines (UNGA 2016), which included the following proposed elements of a VNR (Figure 6):

1. Opening statement
2. Summary
3. Introduction
4. Methodology and process for preparation of the review
5. Policy and enabling environment
   a. Creating ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals
   b. Incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals in national frameworks
   c. Integration of the three dimensions
   d. Goals and targets
   e. Thematic analysis
   f. Institutional mechanisms
6. Means of implementation
7. Next steps
8. Statistical Annex
9. Conclusion

**Figure 6** **Common VNR sections as per UN guidance**

This review focuses on the preceding SDG implementation period, running from 2016 through 2021. In that period, Asia-Pacific countries presented 50 VNRs. More than half (23) of UNEP member states in the region have prepared and presented one VNR, almost one third (12) have prepared and presented two VNRs, and one country (Indonesia) has completed and presented a VNR three times. Five countries in the reviewed region have yet to prepare and present a review (Cook Islands, Iran, Myanmar, Niue, and Tuvalu) although some of those missing from this review are or were slated to present their VNR in 2022. Figure 7 illustrates this trend graphically.

Figure 8 outlines the regional distribution of the 50 VNRs over the 2016-2021 period. Aggregated globally, 176 countries presented 247 VNRs during the same time period. Comparing this with the six existing UN regions in the world, we find that the Asia-Pacific region has produced almost 20% more VNRs than other regions (average is 41.67 VNRs). Over the reviewed period, we can observe a trend of alternating increase and decrease over time, with a high of 12 VNRs produced in 2019. Overall, however, the number of VNRs are seen to be steadily increasing per year.

*Conducting such reviews requires enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes: to this end, reviews would benefit from support from UN and other development partners.*
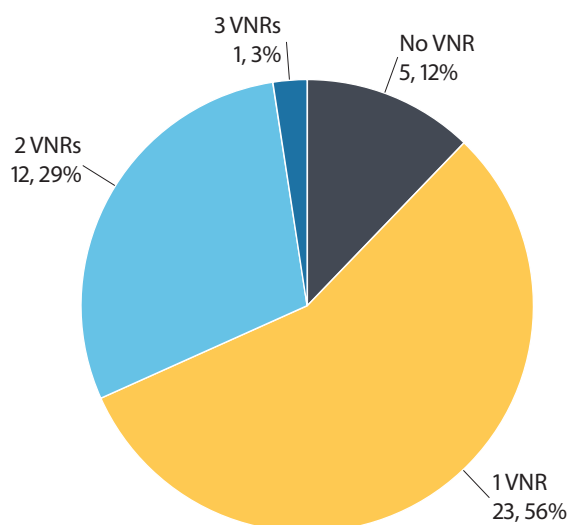


**Figure 7** **Frequency of VNRs 2016-2021**
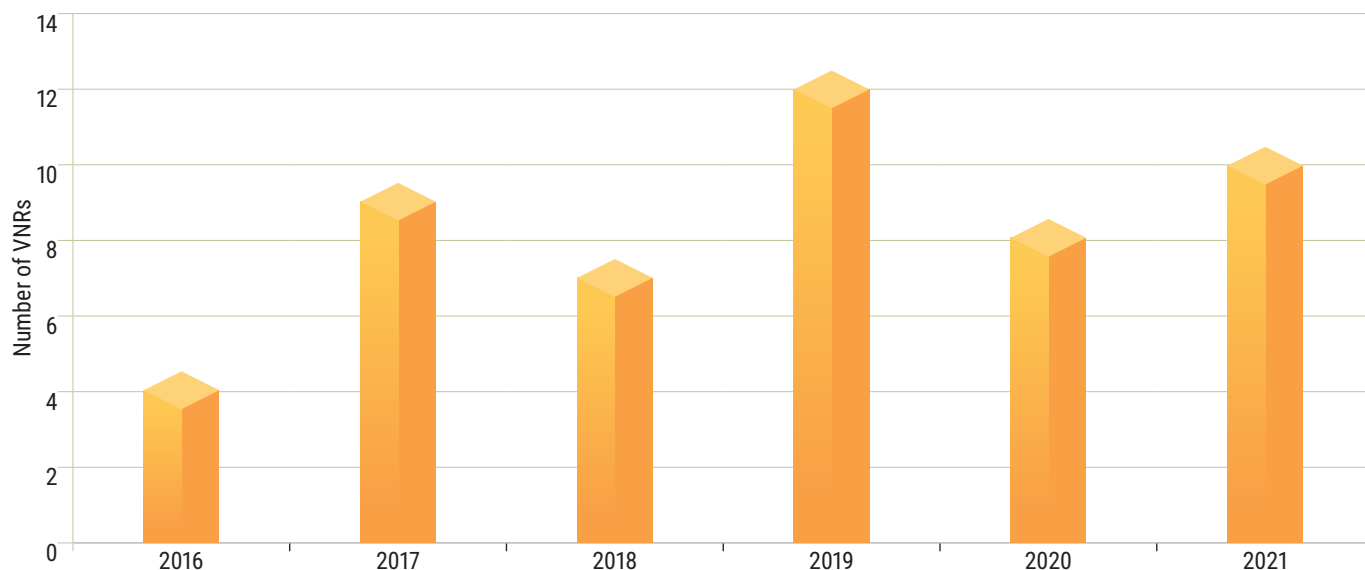
**Figure 8** **Frequency of VNRs per year in the region**

## ✿ Common Structure

VNRs have relatively closely followed the guidance provided by the United Nations. The average length of VNRs is 86 pages (including annexes). Across the reviewed VNRs, the longest was 385 pages (Indonesia 2021),[4] and the shortest was only 22 pages (Maldives 2017).
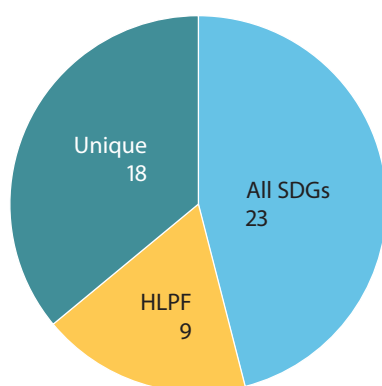


**Figure 9** **Type of VNR**

The reviewed countries that had prepared more than one VNR tended to produce more comprehensive VNRs on their second submission, suggesting that there is a deepening engagement with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda over time. However, this trend might also be influenced by other factors, because VNRs also vary depending on whether they discuss: (i) all SDGs; (ii) HLPF limited focus SDGs; or (iii) a unique approach (Figure 9). In this context, "all SDGs" represents the most common format with 46% of all the reviewed VNRs in this report categorized in this way. This VNR format is characterized by having all SDGs reviewed in a sequence, from SDG 1 to SDG 17. With regard to (ii), only 18% of the sample maintain a HLPF-limited focus, meaning that these VNRs only review the SDGs that are examined at the HLPF of a given year (see Table 1). Lastly, in terms of (iii), this unique approach represents a total of 36% of the VNRs. Here the countries have chosen to organize the SDGs in a different manner than reviewing SDG 1 through SDG 17, instead opting to review all the SDGs with a specific typology of their preference,

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4   With annex, the Indonesian VNR was in fact 786 pages, far exceeding average length of all other VNRs produced in the region.

| Table 1 | Revolving focus of the HLPF | |
|---|---|---|
| **Year** | **SDGs** | **Environmental-related SDGs** |
| 2016 | No focus on particular SDGs | |
| 2017 | 1 2 3 5 9 14 17 | 14 |
| 2018 | 6 7 11 12 15 17 | 6 7 11 12 15 |
| 2019 | 4 8 10 13 16 17 | 13 |
| 2020 | No focus on particular SDGs | |
| 2021 | 1 2 3 8 10 12 13 16 17 | 12 13 |

Source: United Nations (2022)

or by not reviewing all of them but focusing on SDGs outside of the HLPF cycle.[5]

A little under half of the reviewed VNRs include annexes, where the average length of the annexes is 27 pages. However, several countries also include content in their main VNR that other countries put in the annexes; this content is often sections or chapters on statistics, data and indicators. In fact, the most common type of annex included in VNRs were statistical annexes or a list of indicators with data. In total, 19 VNRs included a statistical annex. The second most common type of annex involved featuring a list of which stakeholders that were consulted, with six VNRs including this information. Last but not least, there are also a few VNRs with annexes that discuss which policies are linked to the countries' SDGs, and which agencies/members are responsible for implementation. Statistical annexes could be given a more prominent position, due in part to the fact that statistics and data gaps have been identified as a

main area of concern for the region, especially for environmental goals and targets (UNESCAP 2021).

**Some countries include statistical information, stakeholder engagement details, or lists of relevant policies as annexes to their VNRs.**

The sections that countries decided to include in their VNRs were to a large extent influenced by the United Nations guidance template shared above aimed at guiding countries in their development of VNRs. Accordingly, the most to least common sections in the reviewed VNRs are illustrated in Figure 10.

Figure 10 shows the ranking of frequency of sections that countries tended to include in their VNRs - 35 out of the 50 of reviewed VNRs (70%) had such sections. Sections on policy and enabling environment were often included, as were sections on means of implementation (MOI). Sections outlining next steps were roughly as frequent as sections that set out to review goals and targets, but this might also be due to the fact

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5   Lao PDR (2018) reviews all SDGs in sequence but have an 18th Goal on UXO (Unexploded Ordnance). Likewise, Cambodia (2019) follows the HLPF cycle of the year but also have the 18th Goal on Explosive Remnants of War (ERW). Both these VNRs are the therefore categorized as having a "unique approach" in this report.
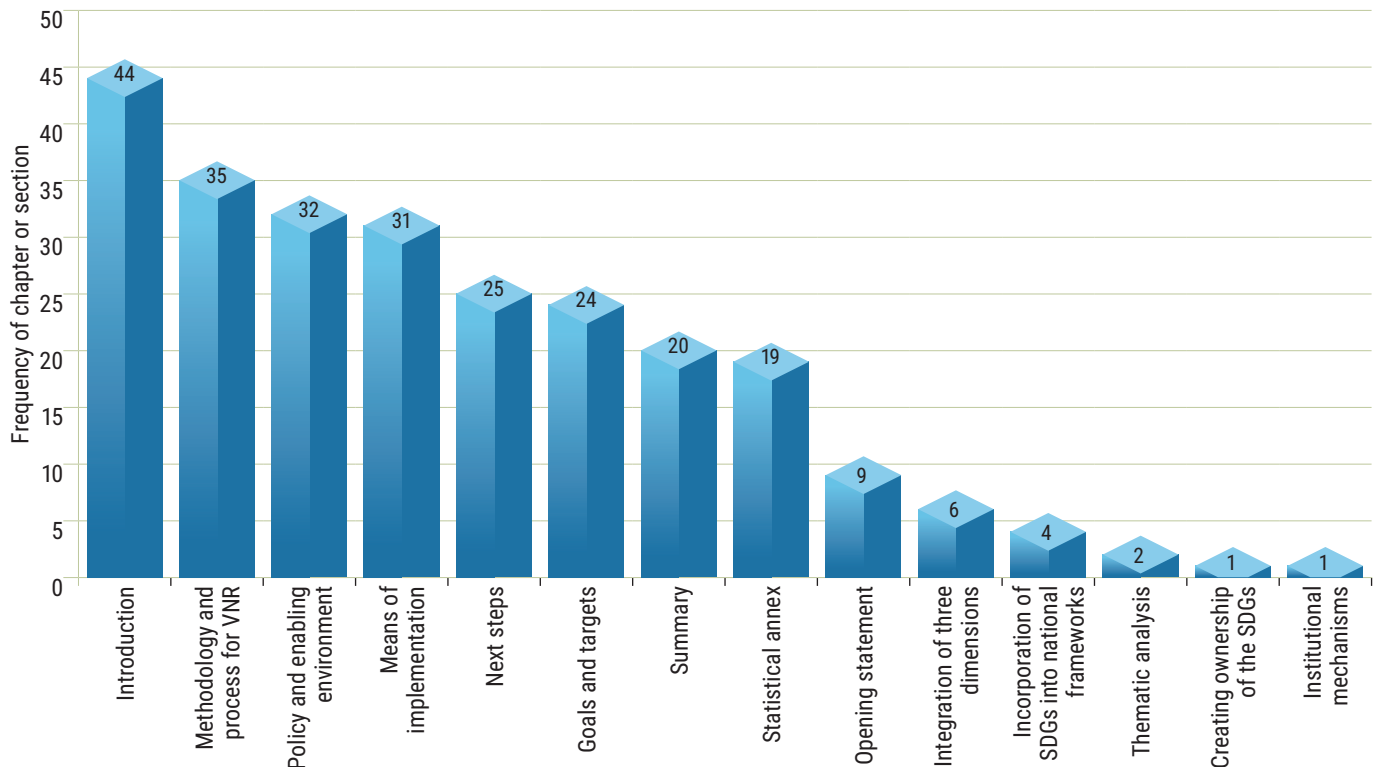
**Figure 10**    **Common sections in VNRs**

that many early country VNRs did not assess country performance on the SDGs but instead featured the relationship between the goals and existing national development strategies.

## Sections and chapters that were not as often included were those that focus on integration, statistical data, and institutional mechanisms. These could benefit from having dedicated sections and chapters in future VNRs.

Sections and chapters that were not as often included were those that focus on integration, sections on statistical data, and institutional mechanisms. Many of these issues were discussed in other sections of the VNRs. As such, the existence of separate sections should not necessarily be interpreted to suggest that countries failed

to recognize these concepts in their VNRs. At the same time, the existence of separate sections also hints at which sections and thematic areas might be lacking and which could benefit from a dedicated focus in future VNRs.

## Production Process and Stakeholder Engagement

The production processes for the VNRs are quite similar among most of the countries with small variations between them. Frequently the institution tasked with undertaking the VNR-process announces that the VNR is to be conducted by having an initial meeting for this purpose. At this stage, many representatives from line ministries and government agencies responsible for respective SDGs are engaged. Thereafter, the coordinating ministries or government agencies may call for a series

of consultations with relevant stakeholder groups – local governments, NGOs, CSOs, national statistics organizations, technical experts, academia, private sector, development partners etc. – where information on the progress and challenges associated with implementation of the SDGs is shared and exchanged. Consultation sessions are occasionally followed up with workshops to provide more in-depth understanding of the production process, such as on data and information gathering and review. These workshops are also sometimes organized in partnership with international development partners or relevant CSOs, if the focus entails particular SDGs and relevant topics[6]. Towards the end of the process, stakeholders are often extended an opportunity to share comments on the final draft report and verify its contents. It is not always clear the extent to which this stage of the VNR process is inclusive, such as whether the review successfully involves grassroots organizations or marginalized groups that were previously excluded from discussions.

Figure 10 above also shows that sections describing the production process of the review were almost always (94% of reviewed VNRs) included in the VNRs. Only two countries did not do so: China (2016) and New Zealand (2019). In the case of China's 2016 submission, it is clear that the VNR was unique, resembling more of a plan than a standard VNR. This may have been a strategic consideration as China would have prepared the document in late 2015, or early 2016, when the SDGs had only just been agreed upon or before VNR guidelines on structure were more widely shared. Nonetheless, production sections commonly tend to describe not only the engagement process but also the specific stakeholders

that had been engaged in the VNR production, either directly in drafting sections ((Malaysia 2017; Malaysia 2021)), in pre-drafting stage consultations (Cambodia 2019, Lao-PDR 2018), or in post-drafting stages (Indonesia 2019).

Going forward countries can consider to include more detail on their stakeholder engagement as important element of the VNR. They could describe who was involved and how they were involved, as there is a qualitative difference between substantive engagement and co-design of chapters and sections to merely having ex-post consultations with a token few organizations or individuals.

One might infer that making VNR processes more inclusive presents an opportunity to conduct outreach among various constituencies that are, one way or another, engaged in the country development process. However, it could be observed that only a few VNR examples highlighted the importance of engaging marginalized groups as part of practicing the principle of LNOB. In this context, India and Samoa offer examples on where the engagement processes focused on including more marginalized voices. This reflects a good practice that other countries should consider including in future VNRs. Another good practice with regard to stakeholder transparency associated with the VNRs is to include a list in the annex of specific consulted stakeholders, which some countries also carried out (Australia 2018; Bhutan 2021; Indonesia 2021; Kiribati 2018; Marshall Islands 2021; Micronesia 2020).

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6    This was most frequently observed in the beginning of the SDGs era, when awareness was still relatively low on the SDGs.

Going forward, more countries could consider including greater detail and clarity about different stakeholders and how they were consulted.

## ✿ Highlights of VNR Production Practices

The preceding section provided information on the general production process countries undertake in developing their VNRs. Based on this summary, it is worth highlighting some good practices from the rich content contained in the region's VNRs.

One such good practice can be found in Bhutan. Bhutan (2018) used its production process as an opportunity to engage and foster ownership of the SDGs by making use of a communication strategy aimed at engaging stakeholders in the localization, implementation, monitoring and reporting of the SDGs. This was coupled with a nationwide citizen survey aimed at better understanding people's aspirations and expectations from the government regarding delivery of the SDGs.

Another potentially replicable practice comes from India. India's (2020) second VNR described the convening of a VNR Forum in order to help facilitate multi-stakeholder consultations. The Forum brought together 14 specific population groups, as part of a wider effort to ensure no-one was being left behind in the VNR production process. A communications strategy, along with joint studies on financing for the SDGs, was also included as part of this process.

Yet a third useful example comes from Lao PDR. Lao PDR's (2021) second VNR included a description of government-led efforts to engage with public officials from all of the country's 18 provinces so

as to increase their understanding about the SDGs and debate potential strategies for their implementation. Other activities included organizing an awareness and advocacy programme on the 2030 Agenda with students and academics within local universities.

Another illustration of a good practice involved the inclusion of diverse voices in Mongolia. In particular, Mongolia (2019) held focus group discussions with stakeholders deemed at-risk of being left behind. A forum entitled "Children - SDGs", was also held specifically to reflect their concerns within the country's VNR.

In some instances, governments also adopted practices that helped expand inclusion. To illustrate, Solomon Islands (2020) circulated a survey of 15 questions targeted towards public agencies, private sector actors, and civil society organizations, using these inputs to inform selected sections of the VNR draft. It is nonetheless worth highlighting that this might not be feasible in all contexts; Papua New Guinea, for example, had to cancel many of the planned consultations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, a wide variety of different stakeholders were engaged in the VNRs, including: gender-related entities, media organizations, student groups, youth organizations, labour associations, ethnic minorities, political parties, herders and internal migrants, children, law-enforcement personnel, community leaders, and faith-based organizations.

## VNRs and Civil Society Reports

Many VNRs are complemented by parallel national review processes led by non-state actors. These reports are sometimes called 'shadow reports', 'spotlight reports' or simply 'civil society organization (CSO) reports'. The CSO reports frequently comment on the country's VNR, sometimes critically, while also discussing themes and issues perceived as not being sufficiently covered.

While the process involved with developing CSO reports often differs across countries, the focus of these reports vary - sometimes not coinciding with the focus of the official VNR itself. Out of the 50 reviewed VNRs, 28 countries (58%) were found to have a corresponding CSO report published (Figure 11).

Moreover, an average of four to five CSO reports were found to be published each year over the designated study period, with a high of seven reports issued in 2017 against

nine VNRs produced. The chart below follows the alternating ebb-and-flow trend of increase and decrease ever year matching the frequency of VNR reporting.

Relationships and partnerships between government and civil society vary across countries in the region. Generally supporting the production of a parallel review can be considered a process that reinforces action on the SDGs, and governments should encourage it.

The review identified that in many cases, the organizations responsible for producing CSO reports are those with mandates on social justice, resulting in many CSO reports highlighting those aspects of sustainable development instead of the environment. Issues highlighted in those
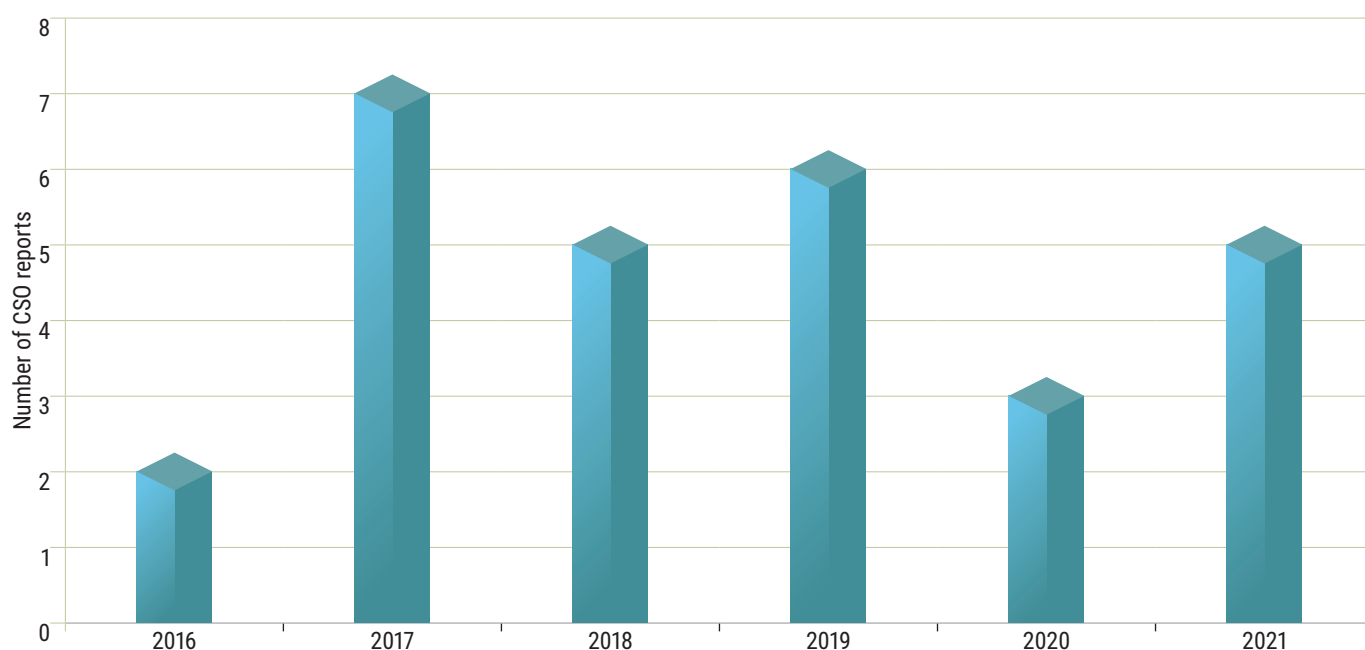


**Figure 11**   **Frequency of CSO reports on VNRs per year in the region**

reports included corruption (Afghanistan), sexual & reproductive health and rights (Australia), and access issues to for example drinking water, along with socially unequal impacts of disaster risk on the poor (Nepal), cities (Republic of Korea), and governance (Sri Lanka).

At the same time, a number of CSO reports also focused on environmental issues that were sometimes less emphasized within official VNRs. Highlighted issues included marine litter, overfishing, lack of monitoring of corporate capture of development (Thailand), as well as illegal logging, waste management and recycling (Lao PDR). Some CSO reports also discussed the environment comprehensively, and captured environmental concerns across several SDGs (New Zealand, Nepal, Malaysia), including environmental aspects covered under SDGs 6, 7, 11, 13, 14 and 15 (Philippines).

Lastly, several CSO reports tackled issues related to the social-environmental nexus, including climate change and its disproportionate impacts on the poor (Pakistan), or environmental education (Nepal). In several cases, specific SDGs such as 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 were discussed in context of social challenges, such as building fossil fuel thermal plants (especially coal) in developing countries, the failure to mainstream natural capital in business, as well as the lack of sustainable public procurement, among others (Japan).

**UNEP and other UN agencies could consider to support CSO reviews of environmental issues consistently across its member states in the region. The review need not be contentious but could focus on revolving themes that supplement the VNRs constructively.**

## ❇ Financing for Implementation

Examining the scope of VNRs and related emphasis on financing for implementation provides insights into how far countries have advanced in allocating resources or adopting enabling reforms that can help achieve the SDGs.

For instance, many countries in the region reference financing of the SDGs to different degrees in their respective VNRs. Some VNRs dedicate entire sections of the review to financing (Papua New Guinea 2020); however, in most of the VNRs, references to financing are located in the section outlining "Means of Implementation". Another difference concerns whether the VNR describes finance supporting specific SDGs versus whether the VNR summarizes general commitments to financing.

**Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and less developed countries emphasize the importance of ODA and require commitment from their development partners in addition to domestic resource mobilization.**

A few trends can be observed about the broader economic status of countries financing the SDGs. Firstly, several of the VNRs did not make specific reference to financing, which was most often the case among developed countries: Australia, Brunei Darussalam, New Zealand, and Singapore. These countries often provide a more overall outlook on the financing of specific sectors (Singapore 2018), or provide information on the role of central banks in greening the economy (New Zealand 2019). In contrast, many Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and less developed countries clearly emphasize the importance of official development assistance (ODA) and note the need

for financial support from development partners to supplement domestic resource mobilization. Afghanistan describes this in both of its VNRs, with a greater emphasis in VNR 2021, citing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on national accounts.

The most common description of financing is a mix of different methods. Bangladesh (2017), for example, references domestic resource mobilization, foreign direct investments (FDI), ODA and remittance flows as part of wider government-led efforts to implement the SDGs. In the country's second VNR, Bangladesh also focuses on increasing inward remittances from overseas workers (Bangladesh 2020). Other countries tend to stress the importance of creating a favourable investment climate for FDI, such as Bhutan (2018), whereas others highlight the need for increased tax mobilization (Samoa 2020).

Some countries such as Mongolia (2019) and Cambodia (2019) refer to SDG financing but avoid communicating a clear strategy apart from calling for new forms of financing. Other countries discuss efforts to mainstream SDG concerns into government budgets, such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (2021) and Viet Nam (2018).

Overall VNRs tend to lack sufficient detail or discussion around financing for SDG implementation. Future VNRs could benefit from having more content on financing of the SDGs as that could reveal some of the barriers to implementation.

In some cases, countries that have completed more than one VNR document demonstrate progress made on allocating supportive finance for the

SDGs. For example, in its second VNR, the Philippines (2019) outlined ambitions to establish a Sub-Committee tasked under the country's Development Budget Coordinating Committee (DBCC), to assist with coordinating planning and budgeting while also ensuring that SDG-supportive programmes and projects are adequately funded. Similarly, Malaysia (2021) provided specific information on funding and financing sources for each respective SDG, where relevant.

## ✿ Continuity between Successive VNRs

Previous sections of this report demonstrated that of the 50 VNRs reviewed, 27 derive from countries that have produced at least two in the reviewed period (2016-2021). Indonesia remains the only country to have produced three VNRs to date. Out of the 27 VNRs that countries had produced as second (or third) VNRs, 14 can be identified as being a "follow-up", where connections to previous VNR could be readily identified.

In this regard, those "follow-up" VNRs link to preceding reports by way of reference, which varies from a more general description to a deeper elaboration on potential progress, challenges overcome, and lessons learned etc. The former is illustrated by Afghanistan's (2021) second VNR, which references its 2017 VNR several times, but does not provide further details other than stating that the second VNR builds on the findings and commitments of the first.

Likewise, Samoa (2020) references the country's previous VNR by underlining that its 2016 submission was among the first in the world be presented at the preceding HLPF. However, in so doing, Samoa merely reviewed the earliest stage of SDG

achievement without assessing the wider alignment of Agenda 2030 with the country's national development strategy, effectively meaning that the 2020 VNR comprised Samoa's first stocktake of SDG implementation. This finding is not exclusive to Samoa, but characterizes several of the VNRs produced and presented in the first review round of 2016.

Countries' second or third VNRs link to the preceding reviews at least by reference, but some do more extensively. It is recommended to link thematically to past reviews to check for progress on recognized challenges.

Nepal (2020) and the Philippines (2019) also reference earlier VNRs several times, with Nepal linking to its previous VNR in the findings and recommendations to ensure that the 2020 VNR continued where the 2017 VNR left off. The Philippines draws this link under a section discussing milestones achieved and lessons learned on the delivery of each SDG under review.

Another example of linking to previous VNRs is Thailand's 2021 submission, which compares data from the previous VNR to demonstrate where progress has been made. India (2020) references progress made since its last report in 2017, which is used as a common data point for comparison throughout its review. Lao PDR (2021) dedicates an entire chapter to the progress on achieving the SDGs in the years following the submission of the country's first VNR.

In addition, Bangladesh (2020) references its previous VNR by listing specific achievements that had been captured in the corresponding report. Examples range from references to the finalisation of the country's national action plan on the SDGs, the country's launch of a data repository system for SDG tracking, as well as efforts to localize the SDGs with the participation of sub-national authorities.

While a number of VNRs mentioned SDG localization in broad terms, only a few provided more specific details on this localization, such as relevant implementation mechanisms. India's VNR, for instance, only provided general reporting on progress at national and local levels.

Malaysia (2021) is another example where the second VNR provides a more robust evidence-base when compared to the country's first submission in 2017; the review does this by expanding its scope to focus on nine goals while also discussing outcomes from the first phase of implementation under its National SDG Roadmap (2016-2020). Bhutan (2021) extensively references its previous VNR, including by providing an update on relevant processes made across the entirety of SDGs since 2018. In so doing, Bhutan highlights that its 2021 VNR was prepared with a view towards capturing progress achieved following the adoption of its 12th Five Year Plan (2018-2021). In this context, the 2021 VNR notes priority concerns identified in its first VNR are being addressed through the 12th FYP , elaborating on progress made in SDG monitoring activities based on improvements in data availability and the wider use of SDG indicators.

# Governance

This section presents a summary of how selected countries approach governance of the SDGs generally and compares that to governance arrangements used in preparing the VNRs. The section also discusses metagovernance of the SDGs. Metagovernance can be defined as "… a means by which to produce some degree of coordinated governance, by designing and managing sound combinations of hierarchical, market and network governance, to achieve the best possible outcomes…" (Meuleman and Niestroy 2015) Different aspects of metagovernance were identified through text analysis and mining of key terms within the 50 VNRs, revealing possible trends and relevant priorities in relation to the SDGs (Table 2).

## Main Institutions Focusing on the SDGs

The main institution(s) responsible for the SDGs in the reviewed countries were found to be aligned with institutional structures designed for effective implementation of Agenda 2030 across different national contexts. Although these institutional arrangements varied—often due to differences in political systems—a number of common features can be identified.

**Most often a SDG -secretariat, -committee or -taskforce has been created as the main institution focusing on SDGs. It usually takes the form of an inter-departmental group, with responsibilities for different SDGs distributed across many ministries.**

For instance, the review noted that often an SDG -secretariat, -committee or -taskforce is established as the main institution focusing on delivery of the SDGs. These structures usually take the form of an inter-departmental group, with responsibilities for respective SDGs diffused over many ministries.

Brunei Darussalam (2020), for example, established a "Special Committee for the Implementation of the SDGs", made up of senior officials from relevant ministries

| Table 2 | Governance styles-key words | |
|---|---|---|
| **Government - binding** | **Market - voluntary** | **Network – information based** |
| Protect | Growth | Cooperate |
| Law | Corporate | Stakeholder |
| Conserve | Market | Engage |
| Monitor | Promote | Participate |
| Tax | Technology | Consultation |
| Enforce | Business | Network |
| Justice | Compete | Academia |
| Rule | Partner | Society |

and agencies. Indonesia (2017; 2019; 2021) established a "SDG National Coordination Team" consisting of a Steering Committee, Implementing Team, Working Group, Sub-Working Group and Expert Team. The Maldives (2017) put in place a "National Ministerial Coordination Committee" of cabinet ministers to support the implementation of the SDGs, together with help from a Technical Committee, with an SDG division at the Ministry of Environment and Energy that helps in coordinating this work. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea also opted for a National Task Force for Sustainable Development (NTF) and Technical Committee (TC) for implementation of SDGs. In Micronesia (2020) and Timor-Leste (2019), the leading institution for both is a "SDG Working Group" – an example of a multi-stakeholder approach.

Likewise, Samoa's (2020) SDGs Taskforce is comprised of governmental departments that serve as core members of the body. Palau (2019) set up several SDG Working Groups led by ministries as well as in conjunction with civil society representatives, which was overseen by an SDG Coordinating Unit in the national government. In Lao PDR (2018; 2021), responsibilities over the SDGs were found to be shared by the National Steering Committee for SDG implementation, chaired by the Prime Minister, and a National SDGs Secretariat, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Planning and Investment, which also is tasked with tracking progress of implementation. At the time of the submission of its first VNR, Thailand (2017; 2021) established a National Committee for Sustainable Development (CSD), chaired by the Prime Minister, which was described as the country's highest body responsible for sustainable development. At the time of Thailand's second VNR, this task had been assigned to a sub-committee under CSD – the Sub-Committee on the Advancement of the SDGs – together with

the support of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) as a coordinating focal point.

As demonstrated by the case of Lao PDR and Thailand, it is not uncommon for the Prime Minister's Office to play a leading role in SDG coordination, which signals both political commitment and leadership on the part of government authorities. Similarly, Malaysia (2017; 2021) established a National SDG Council, chaired by its Prime Minister, which endorses and monitors SDG implementation and progress. The Council is, in turn, supported by a National Steering Committee, headed by the Director General of the Economic Planning Unit (EPU), from the Prime Minister's Department. Under this framework, Malaysia has also designated a National Technical Committee made up of seven working committees that are tasked to focus on substantive, thematic and sectoral matters related to SDG implementation in the country.

Similarly, Mongolia (2019) has established a National Council for Sustainable Development, which falls under the remit of the country's Prime Minister. In Bangladesh (2017; 2020) SDG delivery is led by the Sustainable Development Goals Implementation and Review Committee headed by the Principal Coordinator (SDGs Affairs) located in the Prime Minister's Office. For Tonga (2019), the Prime Minister Office's Planning Division coordinates the implementation of the SDGs. In Nepal (2017; 2020), both the Prime Minister and the National Planning Commission (NPC) Chairman, chair the high-level SDGs Steering Committee, with the NPC Vice Chairman chairing the SDGs Coordination and Implementation Committee. In Japan (2017; 2021) there is a "SDGs Promotion Headquarters", headed by the Prime Minister and comprising all ministers that aims to foster close cooperation among relevant ministries and government agencies.

While most leading institutions on the SDGs are multi-sectoral in nature, a number are also recognized to have a leading ministry in charge, often those responsible for planning or development. In Cambodia (2019), the Ministry of Planning leads the delivery of the SDGs and serves as the focal point for overall implementation. Kiribati (2018) has appointed an SDG Taskforce that consists of members of the Development Coordinating Committee (DCC), which is the main governing body overseeing all national development in the island state. The Solomon Islands (2020) approached the SDGs through their Ministry of Development Planning and Aid Coordination. In Papua New Guinea (2020), the Department of National Planning and Monitoring (DNPM) acts as the lead convener for Agenda 2030 in the country. Pakistan (2019) has seven SDG Support Units on federal, provincial and area levels, which are guided by the federal Ministry of Planning, Development & Reform (MoPD & R) and provincial and administrative area Planning & Development Departments. Viet Nam (2018) also designates its Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) as lead agency for the SDGs. Other countries make efforts to align SDGs with their national development plans: the Marshall Islands' (2021) National Strategic Plan (NSP) Committee also functions as its SDG Committee (called the SDG-NSP Steering Committee); Vanuatu's (2019) 2030 The Peoples Plan also represents the country's National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) through the year 2030. Likewise, in the Philippines (2016; 2019), the country's National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) is responsible for coordinating SDG implementation in relation to the monitoring of its development plans.

Another key ministry that has occasionally been tasked with primary responsibilities on the SDGs across various countries is one that also serves as a counterpart to planning or development ministries, namely the Ministry of Economy. Afghanistan's (2017;2021), High Council of Ministers has been responsible for implementation of the SDGs in the country, working in close cooperation with a A-SDGs Secretariat stationed under its Ministry of Economy. Fiji (2019) designated its Ministry of Economy to carry out the country's sustainable development agenda under which a SDG Taskforce has also been established.

In five countries, the majority of coordinating functions on the SDGs are listed under the portfolio of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such as Singapore (2018); Australia (2018) makes use of an inter-departmental group comprised of senior government officials, co-chaired by the Prime Minister and Cabinet Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Republic of Korea (2016) outlined in their first VNR that Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Environment were designated as the two leading ministries for delivery of the SDGs, together with the country's Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and the Committee for International Development Cooperation (CIDC). At the time of producing its first VNR, New Zealand (2019) had yet to adopt a formal institutional set-up for dealing with the SDGs, however, the government's website lists the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade as the primary agency for sharing information on the SDGs. In Japan, work on the SDGs both domestically and internationally is led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with other ministries also in charge of relevant aspects of the Agenda 2030.

Other countries, such as Bhutan, India, and Sri Lanka have taken a more innovative approach to the design of institutional arrangements on the SDGs. For instance, Bhutan (2018; 2021) linked the SDGs to its concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) while also opting to assign the country's GNH commission as a High-Level SDG

Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister. India's (2017;2021) newly established National Institution for Transforming India, shortened as NITI Aayog, serves as the premier policy think tank of the government and has been mandate to serve as the country's leading institution on the SDGs. Sri Lanka (2018) established an entirely new ministry in 2015 – the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Wildlife – which has primary responsibilities for delivering on Agenda 2030.

It is also important to note that some countries have assigned national statistical offices and affiliated organizations an important role to play in leading action on the SDGs. The Singapore Department of Statistics (Singapore 2018) and the Philippine Statistics Authority (Philippines 2019) represent two examples of ways statistical bodies have been afforded such a role.

**Most often central ministries of planning, development or foreign affairs spearhead SDG activities in countries. On the one hand this can benefit the SDGs as they are part of the central planning structure of the government. However, there is a risk that environmental concerns remain peripheral, given the non-essential roles and responsibilities of national environmental authorities in SDG implementation domestically.**

The SDGs in China (2016; 2021) are aligned closely with existing national plans, and coordinated by an inter-ministerial mechanism comprising 45 ministries. Relevant ministries also operate as lead agencies, with local governments assuming main responsibilities over implementation,

together forming a vertical governance structure involving central, local, and primary authorities for action on the 17 SDGs and 169 targets.

## Institutions in Charge of VNRs

In most cases, the institutions in charge of the VNR in reviewed countries represent the same bodies tasked with overseeing the delivery of the entire 2030 Agenda. However, since the VNR itself is a review of how the SDGs have been implemented, development of VNRs often involves information-gathering that does not always align with responsibilities of the main institution tasked with carrying them out. Many countries have therefore created VNR sub-committees or taskforces within affiliated institutions for this purpose, or have alternatively tasked another institution with preparing VNRs. Table 3 lists the common institutions in charge across countries.

As mentioned previously, many countries have assigned VNR sub-committees or taskforces specifically for purposes of drafting and preparing VNRs (Table 4). Kiribati (2018) has a VNR Secretariat , consisting of members from the National Economic and Planning Office and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, which together receive support from a National SDG Consultant. Timor-Leste (2019) has established a VNR Secretariat under the Office of the Prime Minister that collaborates closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, as well as the General Directorate of Statistics. Bhutan (2018; 2021) has a multi-sectoral VNR Task Force stationed under its Gross National Happiness Commission Secretariat. Thailand's (2017) first VNR outlined the role of a dedicated taskforce consisting of various members working in close conjunction with the National Statistical Office for preparation of

| Table 3 | Institutional arrangements for SDGs in countries |
|---|---|
| **Country/VNR** | **Institutional arrangement** |
| Afghanistan (2017, 2021) | A-SDGs Secretariat which sits in the Ministry of Economy |
| Fiji (2019) | Ministry of Economy |
| Australia (2018) | Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade |
| Cambodia (2019) | Ministry of Planning |
| Nepal (2017, 2020) | National Planning Commission |
| Papua New Guinea (2020) | Department of National Planning and Monitoring |
| Malaysia (2017, 2021) | National Steering Committee, nested under National SDG Council |
| Lao PDR (2018, 2021) | National SDG Secretariat |
| Samoa (2020) | SDG Taskforce |
| Micronesia (2020) | SDG working group led by the Department of Resources and Development |
| Tonga (2019) | Prime Minister's Office in consultation with national stakeholders |
| Viet Nam (2018) | Ministry of Planning and Investment |
| Pakistan (2019) | Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform |
| India (2020) | Governmental policy think tank Niti Aayog |
| Democratic People's Republic of Korea (2021) | National Task Force for Sustainable Development and Technical Committee |

Source: compiled from VNRs (2016-2021)

the country's VNR. Thailand's second VNR submission noted that this structure was replaced by a similar, but newly established Working Group comprised of the National Statistical Office and government sector focal points responsible for all of the respective SDGs.

Sri Lanka (2018) also assigned VNR production to a specific task force, with the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka facilitating most of the VNR report preparation. Solomon Islands (2020) established a VNR coordination committee led by the Ministry of National Planning and Development Coordination to facilitate the VNR process. Bangladesh (2017; 2020) set up an inter-ministerial "SDGs Implementation and Review Committee", comprised of Secretaries from 20 Ministries, tasked with coordination responsibilities for SDGs implementation and review. Brunei Darussalam (2020) opted for a Special Committee co-chaired by its Ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs for VNR preparation. In the Marshall Islands (2021), the country's VNR Working

Group was tasked with overseeing the VNR process under their NSP/SDGs Steering Committee. In contrast, Palau (2019), gave specific authority to VNR Coordinating Units, made up of representatives from several different agencies. Singapore (2018) made use of an Inter-Ministry Committee on SDGs (IMC-SDGs) established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, assigning different agencies roles for drafting selected sections.

Other countries have assigned different ministries for overall coordination of the VNR process. In Indonesia (2017; 2019; 2021) the Ministry of National Development Planning (BAPPENAS) led the coordination of production of all VNRs. In its latest VNR, the Philippines (2021) designated NEDA to lead VNR preparation, with the Philippine Institute for Development Studies tasked with drafting the report. Nauru's (2019) Planning and Aid Division under its Ministry for Finance spearheaded the review process with the guidance of a technical working group established to advise the Ministry on

| Table 4 | **Countries' VNR institutions** |
|---------|--------------------------------|
| **Country** | **Institution in Charge of VNR** |
| Afghanistan | A-SDGs Secretariat |
| Australia | Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade |
| Cambodia | Ministry of Planning |
| Nepal | National Planning Commission |
| PNG | Department of National Planning and Monitoring |
| Malaysia | National Steering Committee under National SDG Council |
| Lao PDR | National SDG Secretariat |
| Samoa | SDG Taskforce |
| Micronesia | SDG working group led by the Department of Resources and Development |
| Tonga | Prime Minister's Office |
| Viet Nam | Ministry of Planning and Investment |
| Pakistan | Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform |
| India | Niti Aayog (government think tank) |
| DPRK | National Task Force for Sustainable Development and Technical Committee |
| Kiribati | VNR Secretariat |
| Timor-Leste | VNR Secretariat |
| Bhutan | VNR Task Force under Gross National Happiness Commission Secretariat |
| Thailand | Dedicated taskforce with National Statistical Office, later Working Group |
| Sri Lanka | Task force and Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka |
| Solomon Islands | VNR coordination committee, led by the Ministry of National Planning and Development Coordination |
| Bangladesh | SDGs Implementation and Review Committee (Secretaries from 20 Ministries) |
| Brunei | Special Committee, co-chaired by ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs |
| Marshall Islands | VNR Working Group oversaw the VNR process under the NSP/SDGs Steering Committee |
| Palau | VNR Coordinating Units |
| Singapore | Inter-Ministry Committee on SDGs (IMC-SDGs) est. by MOFA and MOE |
| Indonesia | Ministry of National Development Planning |
| Philippines | National Economic and Development Authority and Philippine Institute for Development Studies |
| Nauru | Planning and Aid Division under the Ministry for Finance |
| Maldives | Ministry of Environment and Energy and the SDG-division |
| Mongolia | National Development Agency (NDA) |
| China | Ministry of Foreign Affairs |
| Japan | Ministry of Foreign Affairs |
| Vanuatu | Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination and Vanuatu National Statistics Office |
| ROK | Ministry of Foreign Affairs |
| New Zealand | N/A |

Source: compiled from VNRs (2016-2021)

selected matters. In the Maldives (2017), the Ministry of Environment and Energy and its associated SDG-division was tasked with primary responsibilities for drafting the country's VNR report. In Mongolia (2019) the institution mandated to lead the VNR process is its National Development Agency (NDA), which also established a designated working group for VNR formulation and review. In both China (2021) and Japan (2017; 2021) the Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees the production of respective VNRs .

Similarly, Vanuatu's (2019) Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination, in coordination with the Vanuatu National Statistics Office, is responsible for implementing the NSDP M&E Framework and preparing the country's Annual Development Report. The Republic of Korea (2016) has nominated the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as its lead ministry for VNR production, together with general responsibilities over the SDGs. Specific information is missing from the VNR itself in the case of New Zealand (2019).



**Figure 12** **Share of governance focus across reviewed VNRs**

## Governance Balance within the VNRs

This review also conducted a word count of key terms associated with the three aforementioned governance typologies, namely (i) government; (ii) market, and (iii) network. Under the government header the review sought to identify binding approaches to governance; correspondingly market-based and/or voluntary approaches, as well as network-based governance styles and/or information-based approaches were also categorized.

As shown in Figure 12, the review of regional VNRs (excluding Samoa 2016) identified 43% as having a market-voluntary focus, followed by network-information based focus at 30%, with 27% having a government-binding focus. It is not entirely surprising that market-voluntary terms are the most mentioned, given that most countries in the region are export-oriented market economies, and therefore likely prioritise market solutions to a higher degree than the other two governance styles. An exception here is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) 2021 VNR −essentially the only centrally planned economy in the region− which found government-binding terms making up 49%, followed by market-voluntary terms at 32%, and network-information based terms at 19%. Small island developing states (SIDS) in the region follow a similar pattern as DPRK, with their VNRs tending to prioritize government-led actions. As was discussed earlier in the section above, it is also the case that many of the SIDS' VNRs put a strong focus on environmental issues, which perhaps reflects a preference for a governance style that relies on the central government.

# Environmental Concerns

As discussed in other sections of this report, the review also sought to identify areas where environmental concerns are most prominent in the VNRs. This section summarizes environment-related content from the 50 VNRs. Findings suggest that, in contrast to economic and social elements, many environmental concerns continue to be overlooked. Promisingly, however, the review also supported findings that attention to environmental issues increases in importance over time from initial VNRs to the most recent ones.

## ❁ VNRs' Focus on the Environment

Out of the 50 reviewed VNRs, two-thirds (66%) were found to have specific sections discussing the environment and/or reporting on environmental issues or SDGs.

Overall, review findings suggest that progress on environmental issues has been given varying levels of attention in the VNRs, often discussed to a varying degree of detail. There are a few possible explanations for this.

One explanation is that environmental issues have not been prioritized in the VNRs. For example, both of Afghanistan's VNRs (2017; 2021) devote little attention to environmental challenges, instead prioritizing other matters such as economic development or national security. Mongolia's submission from 2019 offers another example where the VNR focuses primarily on economic development, covering environmental concerns in a later chapter focused on air pollution.

The structure of the VNR was found to also influence the extent to which environmental issues are discussed. For instance, Nepal's (2017) first submission followed the 2017 HLPF cycle, which did not feature any of the environment-related SDGs, with its resulting VNR largely omitting these SDGs. Environmental issues did however feature prominently in Nepal's second VNR, which reviewed all 17 SDGs: the resulting report not only discussed progress and challenges with corresponding data and data-points but also targets aimed at documenting how far the country had progressed (Nepal 2020).

Consequently, second VNR submissions also require close consideration. It is common to observe that first VNR submissions tend to establish parameters and reference points for measuring progress, which the second VNR ideally revisits. This suggests that initial VNRs follow a more qualitative than quantitative approach, particularly when discussing environmental progress. For instance, Singapore (2018) reviewed environmental progress in its first and only VNR, qualitatively discussing challenges and
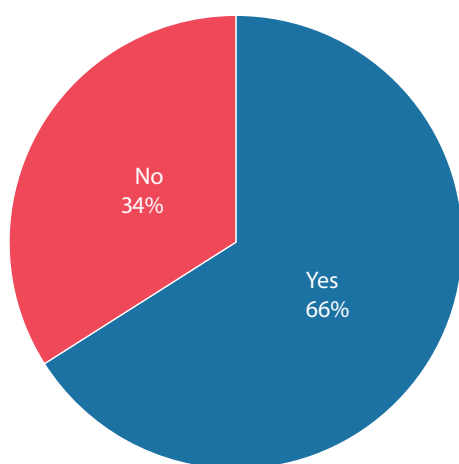


**Figure 13** **VNRs with dedicated environmental sections**

opportunities under each SDG. Likewise, New Zealand's (2019) only VNR submission discussed the environment systematically but did not include a numerical stock taking or measurements of targets in subsequent sections on the SDGs.

Sri Lanka's 2018 VNR is structured in such a way where activities are summarized in relation to each SDG. This is followed by sections outlining identified gaps and challenges as well as requisite next steps. Both of Lao PDR's VNRs (2018; 2021) feature the environment under sections on SDG implementation, including by highlighting both progress and challenges. In the country's second VNR, there is also a subchapter "Environmental protection and sustainable natural resources management," which offers an update on implementation and current status of data on this topic.

Thailand's first VNR (2017) entirely summarizes initiatives related to the SDGs, as well as shares some good practices on the same. Sections on the highlighted good practices concern specific SDG targets, yet also tend to avoid providing measurable or concrete evidence as to how a given practice might contribute to a target. Thailand's 2021 VNR discusses this in greater detail and provides information on progress in its executive summary; it also includes sections on policies and implementation arrangements in relation to different goals, including the environmental ones.

Similarly, Japan (2017; 2021) discusses environmental progress as well as offers several examples of domestic challenges and actions to address related issues in their first VNR. In comparison, the country's second VNR underlines environmental conservation as one of the identified eight priorities, in addition to discussing domestic and international challenges, actions and solutions, and good practices.

India's (2017) first VNR outlines a number of pilot initiatives the country is leading in the context of SDG 12, which includes the planting of mangroves, protection of coastal ecosystems and others. At the same time, there are no references to specific targets or indicators. India's 2020 VNR offers examples of good practices under respective environmental goals as well as a discussion of challenges and the way forward.

Indonesia (2017; 2019; 2021) discusses environmental progress in its first two VNRs (2017, 2019). However, the country's first VNR only discusses SDG 14, whereas the 2019 VNR reviews all the environment-related SDGs, providing trend analysis, outlining challenges and elaborating on ways forward. The country's 2021 VNR does not contain any specific sections on environmental progress.

Some countries offer a more qualitative discussion of environmental issues in their first VNR. Bangladesh (2017) provides a detailed statistical annex for the SDGs and targets that includes both baseline data and milestone targets for 2030. This does not cover the entire suite of goals and targets but focuses on targets 14.5.1 (Coverage of protected areas in relation to marine areas) and 14.7.1 (Sustainable fisheries as a proportion of GDP in small island developing states, least developed countries and all countries). Similarly, China's first VNR (2016) contains an annex that refers to existing policies and programmes aimed at helping deliver the SDGs, yet is not explicitly linked to the SDGs themselves or their targets. In China's second VNR, progress on climate change, especially with regard to efforts related to cutting carbon intensity, and on expanding forest coverage and improving air quality, are listed (China 2021).

Malaysia has completed two VNRs (2017; 2021). The first review offers a snapshot of

key development achievements concerning relevant environment-related SDGs, illustrated by statistics and figures that list, *inter alia*, budgetary allocation towards conservation activities, scale of protection efforts, national policy actions, good practice examples and involvement in international environmental regimes. Malaysia's second review provides time series data measured against relevant performance indicators, supported by national data sources to illustrate progress on the SDGs, including the environment-related SDGs.

The Philippines' first VNR (2016) did not include an environmental focus, but this changed in its 2019 VNR, where the environment is afforded much more attention. Here the VNR references several policy strategies and institutional initiatives that have been undertaken to address climate risk, including the country's current development plan (Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022), which sets out a number of strategies to address climate and disaster risks across various sectors (e.g., agriculture, infrastructure, and environment and natural resources). The review also references the updating of sectoral and framework plans with a view towards incorporating climate change and disaster risk parameters. It also describes a National Integrated Climate Change Database and Information Exchange System that has been designed to function as the government's main platform for consolidating and monitoring climate change-related data and information from a wide range of government and non-government sources.

In sum, although a number of VNRs indicate that countries recognise the importance of environmental sustainability and attendant efforts, many are not able to review their progress on environmental issues because of a lack of data and indicators. Without such information, it is difficult to quantitatively measure progress, resulting in

an inability to establish initial baselines for certain targets.

Accordingly, these data challenges are especially dire in SIDS. For example, while environmental progress is discussed in Micronesia (2020), Solomon Islands (2020) and Tonga (2019), to a limited degree, such cases mostly concentrate on challenges and ways forward. Although detailed data is scarce for the Marshall Islands (2021), the country's VNR also contains a 'traffic light' assessment of the SDGs to illustrate different levels of progress. Palau (2019) and Vanuatu (2019) provide more comprehensive discussions on environmental progress, highlighting linkages to policy objectives and domestic development priorities. Samoa (2020), one of the few SIDS with a second VNR, includes a section devoted to environment-related SDGs entitled "Planet" that provides a qualitative discussion of environmental issues and intended actions.

Both Bhutan's (2018; 2021) VNRs contain extensive coverage of environmental progress. Their 2018 VNR provides a detailed table that outlines progress tracked with respect to each of the environment-related SDGs together with more detailed information on policy actions, programmatic activities and other strategic initiatives to implement the SDGs highlighted in separate subsections. This provides a rather comprehensive account of government-led efforts to deliver on environmental sustainability objectives. Bhutan's 2021 VNR builds on this analysis by presenting a broad stock take of actions and initiatives taken across the environment-related SDGs. In addition to listing key developments made under specific SDGs covered under the HLPF 2021 review cycle, it also provides additional relevant information about advancements made with respect to other SDGs tracked under its Dewa Platform, a newly-developed integrated dashboard used to monitor GNH, SDGs and FYP progress.

## Good Practices on the Environment

In addition to the qualitative information summarized above, a number of VNRs contain a wealth of good practices on the environment. Some VNRs highlight practices that countries support sharing more widely. Samoa's (2021) second VNR, for example, contains a section on good practices for several of the reviewed SDGs. Key highlights include the establishment of marine reserves and protected areas for mangrove and sea grass environments to support healthy fish stocks, with a view to benefit subsistence fisher folk in rural communities, and strengthen the country's tourism and fisheries sectors.

Some countries also mention Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) in their VNRs. In total, 10 countries cite different MEAs in their VNRs, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Fiji, Japan, Micronesia, Palau, Samoa, Singapore, Tonga, and Viet Nam. Some countries reference MEAs in the context of current actions being carried out, such as SDG indicator 12.4.1, for example. In this connection, it would be desirable to include a more substantive discussion about linkages between MEA activities, priorities, reporting duties and efforts to implement the SDGs in future VNRs.

Local knowledge is often rich and valuable for sustainability solutions. For this knowledge to really surface to decision-making levels, political structures must also allow it. Cambodia's (2019) decentralizing/transferring of environmental responsibilities to subnational authorities, and improvements in monitoring and inspection of pollution/environmental violations can thus be seen as a good practice.

Additionally, various local cultural actions and activities also have the potential to be promoted as good practices for wider knowledge sharing. One example is the Maldives and its pole and line fishing method, which is practiced widely among fisher folks in the island country. Instead of using nets, this method catches fish one-by-one, luring bigger fish with tiny baitfish, which in turn eliminates wasteful bycatch. Another good practice includes a web-based fisheries information system tool entitled "Keyolhu", which provides experts with information on reported catch areas and related fish purchasing data aimed at promoting a more sustainable fishing industry (Maldives 2017).

The review of VNRs also identified that in many cases, local knowledge, acquired from both local women and men, can help to guide and inform policy. For instance, Cambodia's VNR (2019) documents efforts to decentralize government responsibilities to subnational authorities, with a view towards improving monitoring and inspection of pollution/environmental violations. However, national institutions have a clear role to play in this process as well. Cambodia notes work on the mainstreaming and coordination of climate issues via the formation of national bodies (i.e., National Council for Sustainable Development), including the allocation of annual public expenditures to better integrate climate change issues into national and sectoral plans. Similarly, Kiribati (2018) highlights its decision to assign climate change responsibilities to the Executive Office of Te Beretienti (President).

Waste management and recycling represent additional challenges where many countries highlight more effective actions are needed. Malaysia (2017) references the launch of 'No Plastic Bag' campaigns in order to reduce pollution. The country's 2021 VNR also describes progress with implementing

SDG 12, including improvements in recycling rates, together with a call from government for more regular business sustainability reporting.

Mongolia's submission (2019) shows that the country has sought to revise and improve its National Biodiversity Action Plan 2015-2025 to be fully compatible with the Convention on Biodiversity 2015 and Aichi targets. The VNR also discusses the establishment of State Special Protected Area focused on protection and conservation of terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity, with a goal to cover 30% of the country's total area by 2030. New Zealand (2019) references the adoption of its Living Standards Framework as an alternative metric of development progress—beyond conventional economic measures such as income and GDP— including its making use of indicators on well-being and sustainable development.

## Environmental Challenges

The review also compiled information on environmental challenge areas most often referenced in SDSN Index reports, extracted from data published in the years corresponding with country VNRs. Only the most problematic environmental issues and challenges were recorded and counted across SDGs. It is interesting to note that common environmental challenges were most often listed in relation to SDGs 14 and 15; other issues, while numerous across countries, were not mentioned in the VNRs to any significant extent.

Table 5 illustrates the spread of environmental issues and challenges across the SDGs as highlighted in SDSN reports. Figure 14 shows the frequency of terms across the SDGs, indicating that environmental issues are discussed more frequently in some SDGs than others.

**Table 5   Core environmental challenge areas identified in SDSN Index Reports**

**2 ZERO HUNGER**
- Sustainable nitrogen management
- Export of pesticides

**6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION**
- Wastewater treatment
- Freshwater withdrawal

**7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY**
- Access to clean fuels and technology for cooking
- $CO_2$ emissions from fuel combustion for electricity and heating

**11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES**
- Annual mean concentrations of $PM_{2.5}$

**12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION**
- Municipal solid waste (kg/capita/day)
- Electronic waste
- Production-based $SO_2$ emissions
- $SO_2$ emissions embodied in imports or exports (kg/capita)

**13 CLIMATE ACTION**
- Energy-related $CO_2$ emissions
- $CO_2$ emissions embodied in imports
- $CO_2$ emissions embodied in fossil fuel exports
- $CO_2$ emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production

**14 LIFE BELOW WATER**
- Protected marine sites
- Clean ocean waters
- Fish from overexploited or collapsed stocks

**15 LIFE ON LAND**
- Terrestrial protected areas
- Freshwater protected areas
- Red list of species survival
- Deforestation

Source: Sachs et al. (2016) ; Sachs et al. (2017) ; Sachs et al. (2018) ; Sachs et al. (2019) ; Sachs et al. (2020) ; Sachs et al. (2021)

An important caveat here is that much of the data remains lacking for a number of the environmental SDGs (see section on data and indicators below), leading to the potential discounting of other environmental problem areas. Data was extracted from SDSN reports for the years in which countries produced their VNRs; if data was unavailable, information was instead drawn from the 2021 SDSN Index Report.

**VNRs rarely mention in depth many environmental challenge areas identified by the international community. Some of these challenges as well as others such as the importance of green job creation, could be included in future VNRs. International spillover and ecological footprints could also be discussed in VNRs.**

When comparing the challenges listed in the SDSN reports against country VNRs,

one observation that can be made is that there are clear differences between what is captured by each. Given the continued lack of action on environment-related SDGs across the region, this reflects a need for cross-referencing challenge areas between both SDSN and VNR reporting, so as to ensure that a broad gambit of important environmental issues are recognised.

In addition to the above gaps, data on the gender-environment nexus is almost non-existent with only two VNRs (Bhutan 2021, Cambodia 2019) beginning to address the gender-environment nexus in the VNRs, and one other (Brunei 2020) highlighting gender support programmes for various capacities including the environment. Although it is almost certain that several other countries are making headway on SDG 5 and on gender responsive budgeting and planning, a lot of that information is yet to make its way into the VNRs, making it difficult to review progress in this area. In an effort to LNOB, the collection of



Source: Sachs et al. (2016) ; Sachs et al. (2017) ; Sachs et al. (2018) ; Sachs et al. (2019) ; Sachs et al. (2020) ; Sachs et al. (2021)

**Figure 14**   **Frequency of environmental challenges across SDGs in annual SDSN Index Reports**

disaggregated data by age, sex and key populations remains crucial. Inclusive gender-sensitive data improves the accuracy of environmental assessments and further supports the formulation of gender-responsive environmental po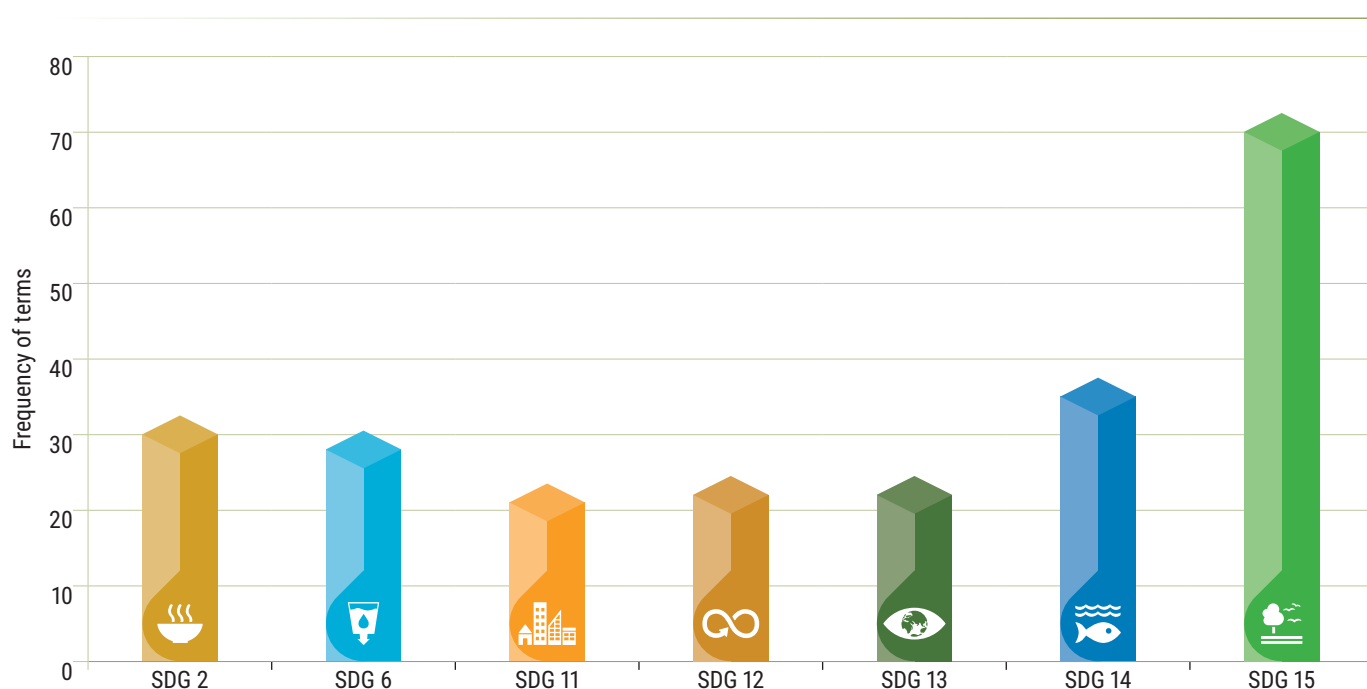licies that can better address the local context alongside the needs of specific ecosystems. Using the full set of SDG indicators to measure progress not only enhances reporting abilities, but also complements and adds depth to the VNRs (United Nations Environment Programme 2021) .

### ❁ Frequently Mentioned Environmental Issues

One way to analyze the environmental focus of the VNRs quantitatively involved conducting a word search and count of environmental keywords.

A textual analysis tool was employed to extract all words from all 50 VNRs. The top ten most frequent environmental terms were extracted together with the top ten most often mentioned social and economic terms. This was done with the caveat that several identified terms potentially have meanings that extend beyond strict thematic boundaries. Nonetheless this exercise was done to compare the weighing of environmental, social and economic terms and to provide some hints about the overall orientation and emphasis of the reviewed VNRs.

Table 6 outlines the terms that were identified as top ten most frequently mentioned terms across the three dimensions of sustainability.

The table offers several interesting insights. First, when comparing the total occurrences across environmental, social and economic themes, it becomes apparent that some of the most frequently mentioned environmental terms, such as "water" (7456), or "climate" (6242), comprise only nearly half of the two most frequently mentioned socially themed terms, including "education" (11116), or "health" (12298). The economic terms "economy" (8460), and "growth" (5434) outnumbered the environmental terms but not the social terms. Put differently, it becomes clear that social issues are featured most frequently in the VNRs, followed by economic terms, with environmental terms occurring least frequently.

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**Table 6**  **Frequency of thematic key words across VNRs**

| Environment | | Society | | Economy | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biodiversity | 1584 | Child | 5468 | Economy | 8460 |
| Climate | 6242 | Birth | 1670 | Business | 3438 |
| Environment | 4148 | Education | 11116 | Employment | 3972 |
| Forest | 2776 | Gender | 3682 | Finance | 3836 |
| Water | 7456 | Health | 12298 | GDP | 2554 |
| Green | 1958 | Human | 3848 | Growth | 5434 |
| Emission | 1564 | Justice | 1634 | Infrastructure | 4402 |
| Ecosystem | 1454 | Inclusion | 4198 | Technology | 4018 |
| Pollution | 1356 | Poverty | 5901 | Income | 3188 |
| Renewable | 1346 | Social | 7484 | Innovation | 2630 |
| **Total** | **29884** | | **57299** | | **41932** |

Source: **compiled from VNRs (2016-2021)**
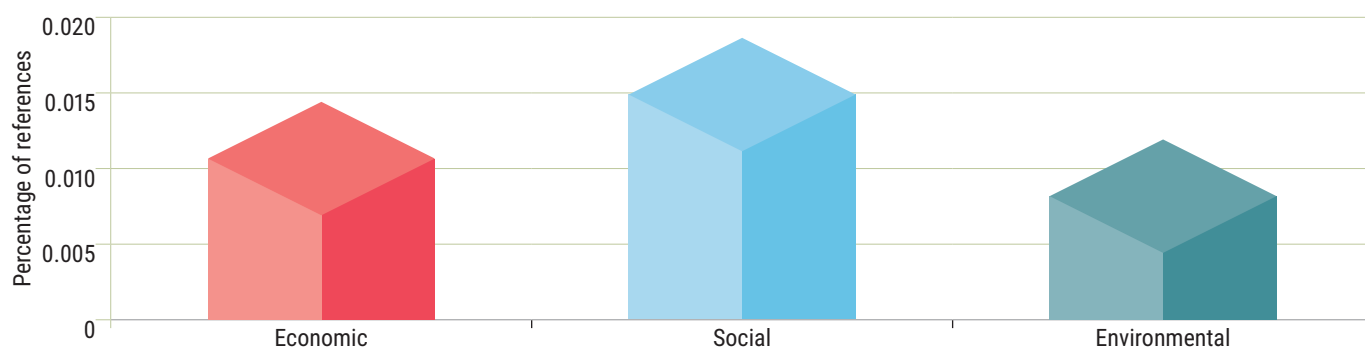
**Figure 15** **Average frequency for top ten words**
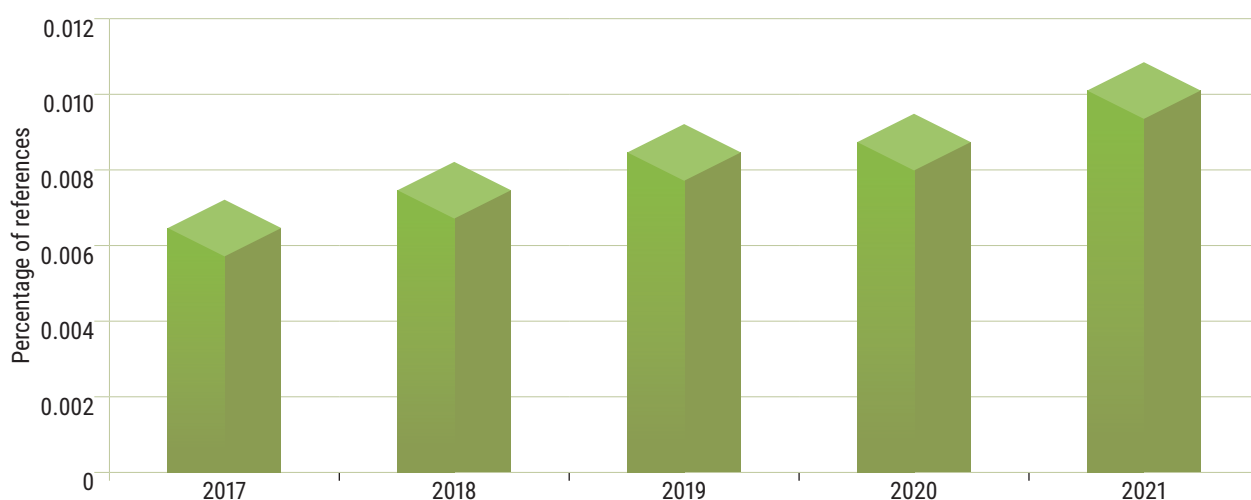


**Figure 16** **Comparison of environmental key words over time**

The review thereafter examined the frequency of identified environmental terms over time. The analysis did not look qualitatively into the context of these terms, but instead sought to record their presence and frequency. Nonetheless, it becomes clear that there is a gradual increase of these terms over time.

Noting that the frequency of environmental terms was shown to slightly increase over time, another observation was that slightly over half of reviewed countries which have completed at least two rounds of VNR reporting also tend to mention environmental issues more frequently in their second (or third) VNRs. This also corresponds with earlier observations that subsequent VNRs tend to deepen the focus and treatment on the SDGs overall, including but not limited to the environment-related SDGs.[7]

## 🌸 Climate Change-Related Terms

The review also assessed the extent to which the Paris Agreement and Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) are referenced in the VNRs. Findings

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7    2016 was not included in Figure 16 as that year only 2 VNRs were produced.
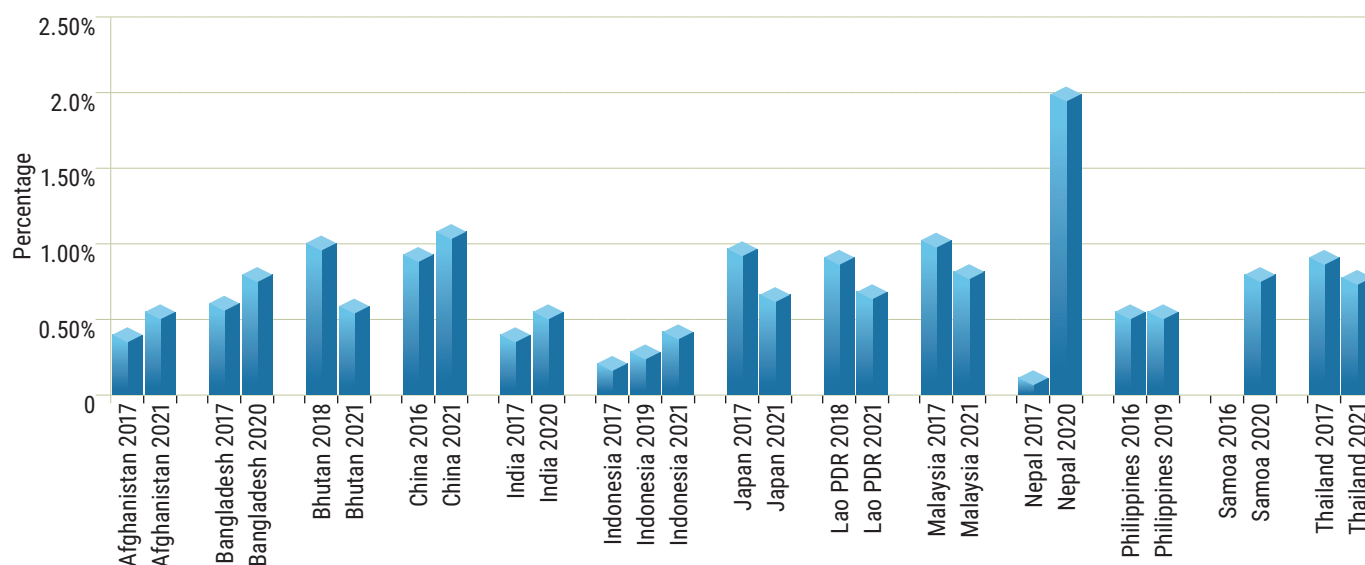
Source: compiled from VNRs (2016-2021)

**Figure 17** **Proportion of environmental key words in successive VNRs**

indicated that the mention of climate-related information in country VNRs progressively increases over time, as illustrated in Figure 18.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that other international processes

are often factored into the preparation of VNRs. In much the same way, the anticipated post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework could also potentially benefit by subsequent VNRs devoting equal attention to biodiversity-related SDG targets as well as commitments from the new agreement.
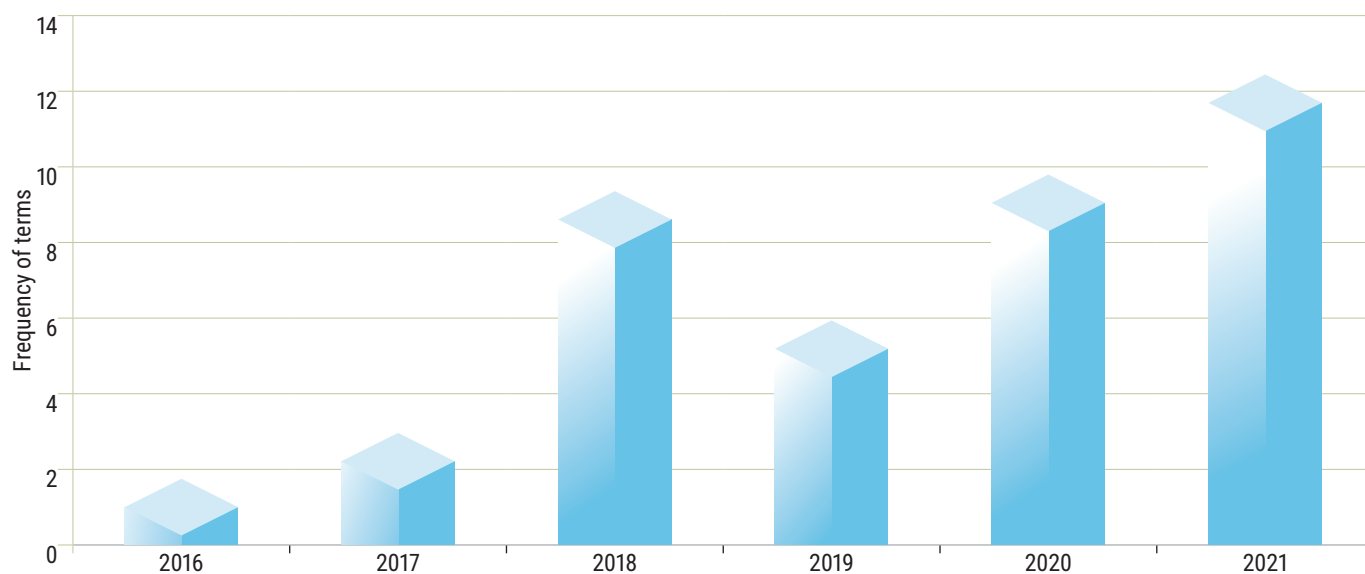


**Figure 18** **Climate agreement terms over time**

# Environmental Data and Indicators

The review further examined the status of indicators, data availability and statistical reporting practices contained in the VNRs by analyzing the environment-related SDG targets and indicators , including the full list of 15 goals, 71 targets and 92 indicators.[8] This included making use of a structured form covering UNEP's list looking into additional elements such as whether the target/indicator was reported in the VNR, whether the same/similar/different indicator was applied, evidence of progress, as well as other aspects, including overall challenges at the goal level. A detailed Excel file was prepared in line with these criteria. Table 7 illustrates the structure that was used to guide the review process.

## ❀ Main Findings Regarding Statistical Information and Data Readiness

A number of countries have adopted an SDG monitoring and reporting framework that is aligned with national circumstances and priorities. A majority of countries

have made use of global SDG indicators when appropriate; some have developed complementary national indicators; some have modified the global indicators to tailor them to national context. In the case of the latter, this most often occurred when: (i) the global SDG indicators in question were classified as Tier II and III indicators; (ii) the global indicators were not relevant to the countries (e.g. some poverty-related indicators were considered not relevant for the Republic of Korea; SDG 14 related indicators were not relevant to land-locked countries such as Lao PDR); (iii) the global indicators in question were used for global monitoring (e.g. Indicators 1.5.3, 12.1.1, 12.4.1, 14.2.1, 15.9.1, etc.) and therefore not suitable for national monitoring; (iv) the global indicators were not aligned with national context; and (v) relevant national indicators were readily available with consistent data. In general, the adoption of global SDG indicators was not found to be high among the countries reviewed. Moreover, the use of national indicators was identified as a common practice due to data availability

| Table 7 | **Structure of the VNR review on environment-related indicators words across VNRs** | | | | | | |
|---------|--------|---------------------|-------------|--------------------------|----------|------|----------------|
| **Goal** | **Target** | **Global SDG Indicator** | **Country Year** | | | | |
| | | | **Reported (Y)** | **Same/Similar/Different** | **Progress** | **Note** | **Key challenges** |

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8   It is possible to argue that all 169 SDG targets are, in one way or another, related to the environment. However UNEP considers 92 SDG indicators which are most relevant to the environmental dimension of the SDGs (UNEP)

and existing links with national planning and statistical systems.

There was a wide disparity of statistical information observed across the VNRs. In some cases, VNRs included a statistical annex with a structured table providing baseline, status, and 2030 national targets. In contrast, other VNRs offered statistical data as part of a broader discussion on the SDGs, sometimes as listed tables, and or within the text itself. In many instances, only qualitative information was provided. Future efforts to track progress on the SDGs would benefit from ensuring written descriptions of the SDGs are supported with tables or statistical annexes.

A common issue identified across all reviewed VNRs was the existence of

data gaps. While some countries used different national indicators in certain instances, others made additional efforts to ensure data was available. Japan's 2021 submission, for instance, attempted to use global indicators as widely as possible, including by providing the definition of the indicator, as well as how national authorities sought to measure it.

## Reporting Level of Environment-Related SDG Indicators

Following a review of the overall status of reporting for 92 environment-related SDG indicators across the 50 VNRs, a statistical analysis was conducted both at the goal level (Figures 19 and 20) as well as for each respective VNR (Figures 21 and 22).

Figure 19 illustrates the level of reporting on environment-related indicators across the 50 reviewed VNRs. Overall, only 29% of the 92 environment-related indicators were found to be reported in the VNRs. Based on the aggregation at the goal level for 15 SDGs, reporting of environment-related indicators ranges from 41% for SDG 7 to 8% for SDG 8. SDGs 7, 13 and 17 show a higher level of reporting for environment-related indicators in the reviewed VNRs while SDGs 8, 12, 9 and 3 suggest a lower level of reporting.

Both for individual countries as well as for each VNR, the level of reporting on the 92 environment-related indicators ranges from 100% in Bangladesh's VNR (2020) to nearly zero, especially in the early stage of VNR preparation over the years 2016 or 2017. Another observed trend included a gradual increase on the level of reporting concerning environment-related indicators, especially among more recent VNRs and those countries that have conducted more than one VNR. As case in point: Bangladesh's VNR in 2017 reported 29% of the environment-related indicators, which grew to 100% in



**Figure 19**  **Level of reporting on the 92 environment-related SDG indicators across the 50 VNRs**
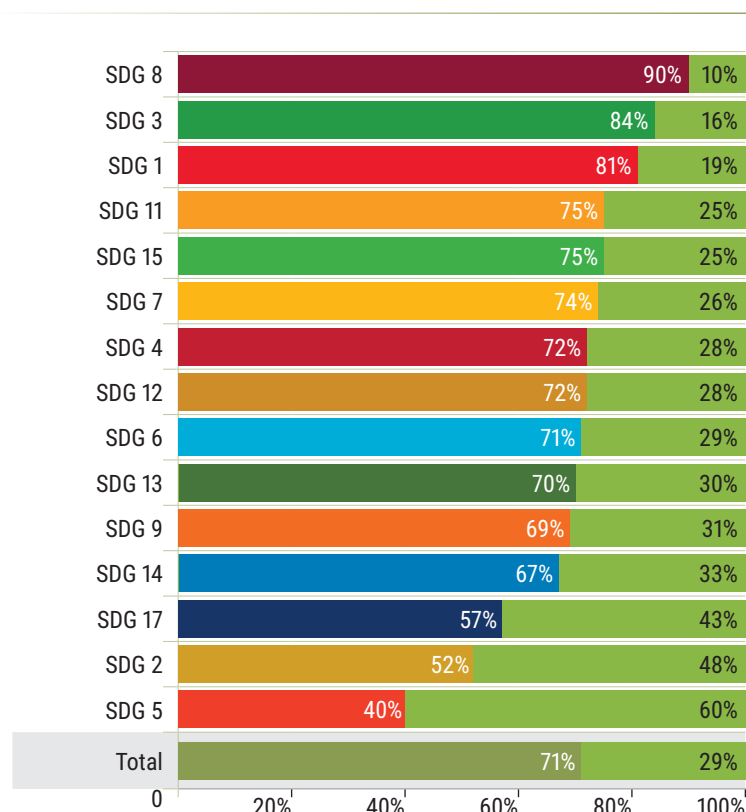
* The left side of the bar indicates global indicators used for reporting on the goal.

**Figure 20  Proportion of global indicators used across the SDGs in the VNRs**

SDG implementation. Similarly, a clear increasing trend was observed among countries either using global SDG indicators, or maintaining a similar level in reporting on environment-related indicators in more recent VNRs than in previous VNRs, especially if countries conducted more than one VNR. For example, 67% of environment-related indicators were aligned with global SDG indicators in Japan's VNR 2017, which increased to 92% in its subsequent VNR in 2021. Similarly, the extent to which countries use global indicators or apply their own varies to a great extent across the reviewed VNRs and SDGs. A case in point was SDG 5, where 60% of the reported environment-related indicators were different from the global indicators.

Several examples of countries using national indicators for reporting on environment-related indicators instead of global indicators are outlined in Annex 3.

Based on these results, it is recommended that UNEP, in collaboration with UNDESA, work to strengthen the reporting of environment-related indicators in VNRs in general and especially those under SDGs 8, 12, 9, 3, 11, 15, 5 and 14. Accordingly, clear guidelines should be provided on how countries should make use of indicators—including global SDG indicators when data is available and national indicators when data is not available. A second recommendation is that UNEP and other partners should advise countries on the most effective methods for reporting on the status or progress of relevant SDG targets, together with a proposed format that outlines the use of indicators. This could potentially be appended to country VNRs as an annex for clarity and consistency.

its 2020 submission. For Indonesia, VNRs 2017, 2019 and 2021 reported 16%, 40% and 63% of the environment-related indicators, respectively. Similar cases can also be observed for the Philippines, China, Lao PDR, Afghanistan, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Samoa and Thailand.

For individual country VNRs, the review identified an increasing tendency to use global SDG indicators when reporting on environment-related indicators. This ranged from 100% in Bangladesh's 2017 VNR to zero in the case of China's 2016 VNR, in which the latter mainly reported on national policies and mechanisms for

| Country/Year | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Bangladesh 2020 | 100% |
| Papua New Guinea 2020 | 75% |
| Indonesia 2021 | 63% |
| Samoa 2020 | 60% |
| Japan 2021 | 55% |
| Sri Lanka 2018 | 55% |
| Thailand 2021 | 53% |
| Fiji 2019 | 52% |
| Viet Nam 2018 | 52% |
| Marshall I. 2021 | 42% |
| Indonesia 2019 | 40% |
| Thailand 2017 | 40% |
| India 2020 | 39% |
| Lao PDR 2021 | 38% |
| Solomon Islands 2020 | 37% |
| Mongolia 2019 | 36% |
| DPRK 2021 | 34% |
| Palau 2019 | 33% |
| Malaysia 2021 | 32% |
| Micronesia 2020 | 32% |
| Cambodia 2019 | 30% |
| Brunei 2020 | 30% |
| New Zealand 2019 | 29% |
| Bangladesh 2017 | 29% |
| Tonga 2019 | 28% |
| Japan 2017 | 26% |
| Australia 2018 | 24% |
| Singapore 2018 | 24% |
| Lao PDR 2018 | 23% |
| Kiribati 2018 | 23% |
| China 2021 | 22% |
| Nepal 2020 | 20% |
| Maldives 2017 | 18% |
| Vanuatu 2019 | 18% |
| Indonesia 2017 | 16% |
| Timor-Leste 2019 | 15% |
| Bhutan 2018 | 13% |
| Nauru 2019 | 13% |
| Bhutan 2021 | 12% |
| Malaysia 2017 | 10% |
| Pakistan 2019 | 9% |
| India 2017 | 9% |
| Afghanistan 2021 | 8% |
| Afghanistan 2017 | 7% |
| Philippines 2019 | 4% |
| China 2016 | 3% |
| Nepal 2017 | 3% |
| Philippines 2016 | 0% |
| ROK 2016 | 0% |
| Samoa 2016 | 0% |
| Total | 29% |

**Figure 21**   **Percentage of environment-related indicators reported across the reviewed VNRs**

| | Global indicators | Other indicators |
|---|---|---|
| Bangladesh 2017 | 100% | |
| Tonga 2019 | 100% | |
| Kiribati 2018 | 100% | |
| Philippines 2019 | 100% | |
| Bangladesh 2020 | 98% | 2% |
| DPRK 2021 | 97% | 3% |
| Palau 2019 | 95% | 10% |
| Mongolia 2019 | 94% | 6% |
| Japan 2021 | 92% | 8% |
| Nauru 2019 | 92% | 8% |
| Fiji 2019 | 83% | 17% |
| Malaysia 2021 | 83% | 17% |
| Papua New Guinea 2020 | 83% | 17% |
| Thailand 2017 | 81% | 19% |
| Indonesia 2021 | 81% | 19% |
| Timor-Leste 2019 | 79% | 21% |
| Lao PDR 2018 | 78% | 22% |
| Samoa 2020 | 75% | 25% |
| Solomon Islands 2020 | 74% | 26% |
| Afghanistan 2021 | 71% | 29% |
| Lao PDR 2021 | 69% | 31% |
| Japan 2017 | 67% | 33% |
| Bhutan 2018 | 67% | 33% |
| Nepal 2017 | 67% | 33% |
| Micronesia 2020 | 66% | 34% |
| Viet Nam 2018 | 65% | 35% |
| India 2020 | 64% | 36% |
| Thailand 2021 | 63% | 37% |
| Indonesia 2019 | 62% | 38% |
| Sri Lanka 2018 | 61% | 39% |
| New Zealand 2019 | 56% | 44% |
| Nepal 2020 | 56% | 44% |
| Malaysia 2017 | 56% | 44% |
| Cambodia 2019 | 46% | 54% |
| Bhutan 2021 | 45% | 55% |
| Singapore 2018 | 41% | 59% |
| China 2021 | 40% | 60% |
| Brunei 2020 | 39% | 61% |
| India 2017 | 38% | 62% |
| Australia 2018 | 36% | 64% |
| Indonesia 2017 | 33% | 67% |
| Afghanistan 2017 | 33% | 67% |
| Pakistan 2019 | 25% | 75% |
| Maldives 2017 | 24% | 76% |
| Marshall I. 2021 | 21% | 79% |
| Vanuatu 2019 | 15% | 85% |
| China 2016 | | 100% |
| Philippines 2016 | 0% | |
| ROK 2016 | 0% | |
| Samoa 2016 | 0% | |
| Total | 71% | 29% |

\* The left side of the bar indicates global indicators used for reporting on the SDGs.

**Figure 22**  **Proportion of global vs. other indicators used in VNRs**

# DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This review focused on examining VNRs from countries in the Asia-Pacific region produced between 2016 and 2021. Many of the reviewed areas in this report are interlinked and dependent on each other and, as such, have been organized into different sections for clarity and ease of reference. These include sections focused on discussing the VNRs more generally, especially concerning structure and preparation; those pertaining to governance, both in terms of institutions and metagovernance; as well as common approaches for SDG implementation that were highlighted in the VNRs themselves. Related sections discussed the environmental content of VNRs, including good practices and challenge areas, as well as key findings on data and indicators across the SDGs and specifically on environmental goals and targets. This final chapter summarizes the findings and provides recommendations that countries, UN bodies and other relevant stakeholders

may consider moving forward, particularly on ways the VNR process can be further strengthened as mechanism for follow-up and review on Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

Many countries in the region have conducted at least one VNR, and several have completed two. In 2022, the world is halfway into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. On this basis, and taking into account findings that the region is only on track to achieve around 10% of the SDGs by 2030 (UNESCAP 2022), the report recommends increasing the frequency of VNR preparation up until 2030. Countries that have yet to undertake VNRs (Cook Islands, Iran, Myanmar, Niue, and Tuvalu) and those that have only completed one VNR should make efforts to prioritize the VNR process in upcoming reporting cycles. At the same time, countries that have undertaken more than one VNR should be ready to deepen their engagement with the review process in the lead up to 2030.

Furthermore, VNRs should also aim to be forward-looking and coherent over time. The review found that at present most countries' second or third VNR submissions link to preceding reviews at least by reference. Accordingly, it is recommended that countries further work to strengthen coherence by linking thematically to past reviews as well as updating on progress concerning recognized challenges, lessons learnt, etc. In view of the revolving focus of the HLPF review cycle, it is also recommended that VNRs address the full set of SDGs and related interactions when possible. In short, the HLPF global review cycle should not necessarily impinge on what countries select to review in-depth at the national level. In so doing, the global review exercise—likely to be completed only three or four times per country before 2030— will provide a more comprehensive examination of all development priorities, especially with regard to the environment and its relationship with social and economic concerns.

It is also clear that the VNRs are an important exercise for stocktaking progress and understanding the complex interactions between different SDGs. From the 50 reviewed VNRs, it appears as though countries are committed to the VNR process, as it provides an important opportunity to report, review, and synthesize information on sustainable development at various levels. In this way, the reviews serve both as an important country response to the global review process led by the HLPF, but also a compendium of policies and intended directions on the SDGs. This, in turn, helps to improve government transparency and accountability, as citizens are able to access relevant information on actions public officials are (or are not) taking on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Building on this momentum will involve continued efforts aimed at enhancing public

awareness about the importance of the SDGs up until and beyond 2030.

Moreover, opportunities exist to improve SDG reporting by highlighting gender data across the SDGs. SDG 5 is integral to the entire 2030 Agenda, and thus achieving gender equality requires a dual approach as SDG 5 is both a cross-cutting and a standalone goal. Countries are encouraged to collect gender-disaggregated data and to report on the gender-environment nexus as this is crucial in ensuring progress towards environmental sustainability, as well as contributing towards the achievement of SDG 5 as a standalone goal. Statistical annexes containing gender budgeting and legal frameworks as well as related gender data in the environmental context would help highlight data insights, availability, gaps and national strategies that complement achievement of the SDGs.

This review also found that countries appear to progressively deepen their review from the second VNR onwards including by engaging with more technical matters such as data, indicators and monitoring. This strengthened focus on the SDGs also has additional benefits in terms of examining the status of the environment-related SDGs, which again supports the case for more frequent and sequential VNRs. Moreover, the review identified that the more recently developed VNRs tend to cover more environmental issues than those submitted in earlier years, although the COVID-19 pandemic has taken precedence in a number of VNRs. This trend also concerns references to climate change and the Paris Agreement, which are now featured more prominently in VNRs. From this perspective, it can be inferred international processes, including the highly-anticipated Global Biodiversity Framework, will lend additional support to implementation of the environment and biodiversity-related SDGs. In preparation

for this, the UN could work to generate recommendations on how parallel processes can be more carefully integrated into the VNR development process.

Beyond the SDGs, the fundamental principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda should not be forgotten. Several countries, including India and Samoa have designed their VNR processes with a dedicated focus on bringing in marginalized voices reflecting their commitment to the idea of LNOB, which includes various considerations such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, migratory status and others. This is a good practice that other countries should consider in the preparation of future VNRs. However, the review also found that the inclusion of local actors in VNR development was not a common occurrence. Greater involvement of subnational authorities in the VNR process would generate a better understanding of local realities—including by way of uncovering good practices on SDG implementation— calling attention to the need for strengthening alignment between VNR and VLR (Voluntary Local Review) processes.

Another finding of the review was that VNR annexes are often contextual and are largely informed by country priorities. A little under half of the VNRs included annexes, with a broad diversity of contents. In order to enhance transparency of VNR data as well as the wider VNR process, this report recommends that countries make efforts to include annexes that provide statistical indicators and list consulted stakeholders. Similarly, as VNRs often follow a common structure informed by UN guidance, almost all VNRs contained sections that outline the VNR production process. While this is a welcomed development, specific sections and chapters discussing integration, statistical data, and institutional mechanisms for VNR preparation were not

often found. These sections would benefit from receiving more focus in future VNRs.

In terms of environmental challenges, the review noted observable gaps between what international reports have identified as priorities versus what is contained in most VNRs. One potential solution to address this issue involves organizing regional capacity building workshops to examine discrepancies, build awareness and promote peer learning. Although a number of countries were found to recognize the importance of environmental sustainability, the review found that a large majority are unable to review progress on environmental-related goals and targets due to a lack of quality data and indicators. This was especially the case for SIDS and LDCs, underlining the need for further policy and technical support from development partners on financing and other forms of capacity strengthening.

Another key finding of the review was that SDG performance remains largely contingent on spillover and displacement of ecological footprints between countries. Greater research in this area is needed to track, trace and visualize resource flows with a view towards strengthening the evidence-base for policy action. In this last decade of the 2030 Agenda it is important to revise development metrics to ensure that countries that score high on the SDGs are not inadvertently perpetuating unsustainable development.

With regard to data and indicators, it is recommended that UNEP, in collaboration with UNDESA, strengthen the reporting of environment-related indicators in VNRs in general and those under SDGs 8, 12, 9, 3, 11, 15, 5 and 14 in particular. Concrete guidelines (perhaps via a template) should be provided on how to use indicators, including global SDG indicators when data is available and national indicators when data is lacking.

This includes reporting on the status or progress of relevant SDG targets together with a format suggesting the use of the indicators for countries to include an annex to their respective VNRs. It is also important for reports to include data disaggregated by age, sex and key populations, as this can improve policy responses. Improved data, including gender data and indicators, not only fulfils the principle of LNOB, but such data would also provide more systemic insights into environmental risks to humanity especially the most vulnerable, whilst simultaneously complementing and adding depth to VNRs and demonstrable progress towards the SDGs.

**It is also important for reports to include data disaggregated by age, sex and key populations, as this supports further analysis thus leading to improved policy responses. Improved data, including gender data and indicators, not only fulfils the principle of 'leaving no one behind', but such data would also provide more systemic insights into environmental risks to humanity, especially the most vulnerable, whilst simultaneously complementing and adding depth to VNRs and demonstrable progress towards the SDGs.**

Another finding was that certain global SDG indicators, such as 13.1.2 "Number of countries that adopt and implement national disaster risk reduction strategies in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030", or 15.6.1 "Number of countries that have adopted legislative, administrative and policy frameworks to ensure fair and equitable

sharing of benefits", were developed for purposes of global monitoring, and thus are not suitable for national monitoring. Some countries modified these indicators, such as by downscaling to local levels (e.g. number of local governments). Based on the review of the 50 VNRs, it is recommended that relevant international and regional organizations report on global indicators, and thus should either be excluded from national monitoring frameworks or modified as needed.

At the same time, it is clear that not all indicators are relevant or appropriate. Some indicators reported by some countries as important were not included in the global SDG indicators, such as green jobs under SDG 8 (the Philippines VNR 2019), which is also related to UNEP's custodianship. In certain cases, some targets or indicators may link to UNEP's activities, e.g. Target 11.c on sustainable and resilient buildings using local materials (reported in Australia VNR 2018 and Singapore VNR 2018), but are not included in the UNEP list of environment-related targets and indicators. In this connection, it is recommended that any future indicators planned to be overseen by UNEP are proposed when global SDG indicators are periodically reviewed by the UNSD.

In certain cases, some SDG targets or indicators were reported not under their respective SDGs but under other SDGs. For example, Target 4.7 related contents were not reported under SDG 4 but under SDG 12 in the case of Bhutan's 2018 submission, as well as a number of other countries. Target 8.4 was usually reported not under SDG 8 but SDG 12. Singapore's VNR 2018 reported target 12.3 on food waste under SDG 2, whereas Target 14.6 was listed under SDG 2 in New Zealand's VNR 2019, etc. As above, it is recommended that UNEP help to review targets and propose ways

to more effectively align with the goals of the UNSD when SDG targets and indicators are reviewed.

On the other hand, some indicators, such as 13.2.2 on total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per annum may not reflect national targets (e.g. NDC or mid-to-long term mitigation targets) linked with national reporting to international processes (e.g. the Paris Agreement). The review found that some countries had modified the indicator to ensure it corresponded with national commitments. To this end, greater efforts can be made to align existing SDG indicators with relevant international agreements. It is recommended that UNEP further review this and make relevant proposals to the UNDESA as necessary.

The review also identified cases where data reported for the same indicator varied from year to year. This further suggests the need for strengthening coherence between multi-year VNRs. Moreover, in several cases, countries listed indicators or associated data without providing units of measurement, most often with regard to national indicators; this is another area that requires further attention. Likewise, in a few instances (e.g. Mongolia (2019) 15.a.1 and 15.b.1) the indicators remained the same but data was reported differently; in others, there were errors in terms of the coding of SDG targets. For example, in Cambodia (2019), Target 6.4 was reported as illicit financial and arms flows, which actually falls under Target 16.4; in the same way, Indicator 6.4.1 (i.e., percentage of people residing in urban areas with access to clean water) should be classified as Indicator 6.1.1. Accordingly, while recognizing the complexity of tabulating multiple data sets, there is scope to improve country data compilation, analysis and dissemination. In this regard, it is recommended that UNEP work to provide additional technical

support to developing countries with a view towards strengthening their capacity for quality reporting.

As outlined in previous sections, particularly in discussions around global versus national SDG indicators, inclusion of statistical information, and data readiness/ availability, the review found a general lack of transparency and consistency among countries both in terms of using and reporting on progress against the indicators. It is recommended that the VNRs include an annex compiling indicators used for national monitoring, with clear definitions (including specified units) details on correspondence with SDG targets and global SDG indicators, as well as state and time-series data on the indicator in question. It is recommended that UNDESA include this in its guidelines for VNR preparation.

Many countries report on national indicators via data portals providing both the status and relevant statistical data on SDG implementation. However, due to the volume of this information and the limited space allocated in VNRs, these details are not always included in the VNRs (e.g. Australia). Making further use of data portals can help in illustrating country efforts associated with the application of global indicators, as well assessing data availability and tracking progress. While this is beyond the scope of this report, which is limited to the review of VNRs, such an exercise can be considered as part of future research.

Reiterating claims set out at the beginning of this report: despite a wealth of important evidence on country progress made over the past eight years with regard to VNR preparation, the Asia-Pacific region continues to lag behind on implementation of the SDGs. At the present pace, achievement of the SDGs in the region is slated for 2065— roughly 35 years behind schedule. Against

this background, the hope of this report is that some of its provided recommendations can foster greater action on the SDGs in Asia-Pacific countries between now and 2030.

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# ANNEX 1

# LIST OF UNEP ASIA-PACIFIC COUNTRIES AND VNR SUBMISSIONS

| No. | UNEP Asia-Pacific Member Country* | Year of VNR | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Afghanistan | 2017; 2021 | 2 |
| 2 | Australia | 2018 | 1 |
| 3 | Bangladesh | 2017; 2020 | 2 |
| 4 | Bhutan | 2018; 2021 | 2 |
| 5 | Brunei Darussalam | 2020 | 1 |
| 6 | Cambodia | 2019 | 1 |
| 7 | China | 2016; 2021 | 2 |
| 8 | Democratic People's Republic of Korea | 2021 | 1 |
| 9 | Fiji | 2019 | 1 |
| 10 | India | 2017; 2020 | 2 |
| 11 | Indonesia | 2017; 2019; 2021 | 3 |
| 12 | Iran (Islamic Republic of) | none | none |
| 13 | Japan | 2017; 2021 | 2 |
| 14 | Kiribati | 2018 | 1 |
| 15 | Lao People's Democratic Republic | 2018; 2021 | 2 |
| 16 | Malaysia | 2017; 2021 | 2 |
| 17 | Maldives | 2017 | 1 |
| 18 | Marshall Islands | 2021 | 1 |
| 19 | Micronesia (Federated States of) | 2020 | 1 |
| 20 | Mongolia | 2019 | 1 |
| 21 | Myanmar | none | none |
| 22 | Nauru | 2019 | 1 |
| 23 | Nepal | 2017; 2020 | 2 |
| 24 | New Zealand | 2019 | 1 |
| 25 | Pakistan | 2019 | 1 |
| 26 | Palau | 2019 | 1 |
| 27 | Papua New Guinea | 2020 | 1 |
| 28 | Philippines | 2016; 2019; | 2 |
| 29 | Republic of Korea | 2016 | 1 |
| 30 | Samoa | 2016; 2020 | 2 |
| 31 | Singapore | 2018 | 1 |
| 32 | Solomon Islands | 2020 | 1 |
| 33 | Sri Lanka | 2018 | 1 |
| 34 | Thailand | 2017; 2021 | 2 |
| 35 | Timor-Leste | 2019 | 1 |
| 36 | Tonga | 2019 | 1 |
| 37 | Tuvalu | 2022 | (1) |
| 38 | Vanuatu | 2019 | 1 |
| 39 | Viet Nam | 2018 | 1 |
| | **TOTAL** | | **50 VNRs** |

*Cook Islands and Niue are not included in the Table of the Annex 1, as both countries are not UN Member States (www.un.org/en/about-us/member-states).

# ANNEX 2

# LIST OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

## Focus Area 1: Background Information

- Socio-economic and environmental context of the country

- Year of VNR

- SDSN country score each year

- Is country score increasing, decreasing, or varying?

- What are the country's main environment-related challenges per SDSN (Use SDSN data same year as VNR year(s))

- What are the main institutions focusing on the SDGs in the country?

- Does the VNR have any details regarding financing for implementation?

- Does the VNR clearly recognize the SDSN challenges or not?

- Does the VNR recognize same environmental challenges as any CSO spotlight/shadow report?

- What are missing environmental items when comparing VNR with shadow report?

- Link to shadow report

- VNR Focus: Describe the VNR's focus in 1-2 sentences

## Focus Area 2: Process of VNR creation

- Which are the institutions in charge of VNR in the country?

- How long is the VNR? (including the annex)

- VNR's main chapters/sections are:

- Does the VNR contain details of its production process?

- Summarize in 1 para the VNR production process here.

- Which stakeholders have been engaged?

## Focus Area 3: Content analysis general environment

- Does the country's VNRs link to previous VNRs?

- How is it linked?

- Does the VNR signal any clear new commitments or plans for such regarding the environment?

- If so, please list them here.

- Which environmental issues are mentioned most often in the VNR?

- Does the VNR contain sections or chapters that discuss the country's progress against the environmental SDGs?

- If progress is discussed, how is it discussed?

- For which SDGs are environmental issues recognized?

- Brief summary on good practice of environment dimension in the VNR

- List Any annexes in the VNRs

## Focus Area 4: Content analysis data and indicators

- Year of VNR

- Does the country have national indicator system for SDGs or does it use the UN proposed indicators?

- Does the country have any unique approach to indicators or data with regards to the environment?

- How are (SDG) data reported by line ministries?

- How many environmental targets (71) and indicators (92) are mentioned in the VNR?

- Please explain how these targets and indicators are discussed, i.e. whether it's just a list in the annex, or if they are comprehensively discussed.

- Are gaps in relation to data and indicators mentioned in the VNR?

- If so, what are the recognized gaps in environmental data?

- Are there data and information sharing mechanisms for SDG reporting?

- If yes, briefly summarize

## Focus Area 5: Metagovernance analysis

- Count total number of government/binding types of terms per VNR (see Metagovernance sheet

- Count total number of market/voluntary types of terms per VNR (see Metagovernance sheet)

- Insert total number of network/information types of terms per VNR (see Metagovernance sheet)

## Focus Area 6: Concluding summary assessment

- Brief description of this country's VNR work.

- Provide one assessment response per country, not per VNR.

# ANNEX 3

# EXAMPLES OF NATIONAL INDICATORS USED IN VNRS

| Examples of using national indicators for reporting environmental-related indicators in VNRs | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **SDG target** | **Global indicator** | **National indicator** | **VNR** |
| **7.3** By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency | **7.3.1** Energy intensity measured in terms of primary energy and GDP | Proportion of primary energy with GDP | Cambodia VNR 2019 |
| **14.1** By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution | **14.1.1** (a) Index of coastal eutrophication; and (b) plastic debris density | Percentage of marine pollution reduction. | Cambodia VNR 2019 |
| | | Percent of coastal waters that reached national quality Grades I and II or reduced % of coastal waters of Grade IV | China VNR 2021 |
| **6.2** By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations | **6.2.1** Proportion of population using (a) safely managed sanitation services and (b) a hand-washing facility with soap and water | Used two indicators: i) percent of population using an improved sanitation facility, total, rural and urban; and ii) percent of population practicing open defecation, total, rural and/urban. | Lao PDR VNR 2018 |
| **6.4** By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity | **6.4.2** Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources | Water use per capita | Palau VNR 2019 |