

POLICY BRIEF

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Advancing Follow-up and Review for the SDGs: Lessons from the 2021 Voluntary National Reviews

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Highlights

Follow-up and review (FUR) are vital for countries to understand their progress on the SDGs. Designing and implementing a comprehensive FUR mechanism is challenging due to the complexity presented by the large number of indicators and the lack of data across multiple dimensions of sustainable development. In addition to reporting and monitoring performance, an effective system should build accountability, support evidence-based policymaking, and advance the transformative change envisioned in the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

Recommendations:

- Integrate SDG FUR principles in the national FUR framework.
- Develop an integrated FUR framework that informs planning and monitoring cycles.
- Direct investments and reaffirm commitments to improve statistical capacity and the data ecosystem.
- Promote multi-stakeholder participation and coordination of approaches.

The Need for Improved Follow-up & Review

Follow-up and review (FUR) mechanisms help countries to translate the SDGs into a nationally owned vision and objectives by assessing the outcomes of action taken towards achieving the SDGs and using this knowledge to facilitate organisational learning, reveal gaps and areas requiring support, and enhance cooperation across institutions. Developing robust mechanisms requires FUR to be centred on each country's existing systems and priorities (D'Errico et al. 2020). FUR for the SDGs needs to be conducted at the national and local levels, as a continuous, iterative process that is integrated into existing monitoring systems to inform better policies and serve as a management tool for decision-makers. Given the potential trade-offs between SDG targets, an efficient FUR that can help to ensure public sector accountability and accelerate the transformation envisioned in the 2030 Agenda requires countries to go beyond measuring progress to evaluate implementation and how targets are achieved. This critical evaluative dimension is a missed opportunity in most VNRs, which rarely include an examination of policy and programme implementation and effectiveness.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for robust and timely data with appropriate assessments to support an inclusive, resilient, and sustainable recovery. FUR is more

important than ever in building back better. As countries monitor and report on other frameworks (e.g., the Paris Agreement on climate change), it is necessary to minimise duplication of efforts in developing and investing in FUR. This brief explores mechanisms and practices adopted in FUR for the SDGs. It recommends priorities for governments to strengthen their FUR to keep SDG progress on track and improve coherence with monitoring systems for other frameworks. The analysis and recommendations are based on a review of VNRs presented by countries in 2021 (see Note).

Current Practices

Development of National and Sub-national Mechanisms

In their 2021 VNRs, 34 of 40 countries reported developing national-level SDG FUR mechanisms. Only 15 of these countries have subsequently developed similar sub-national mechanisms. A frequently reported practice is mapping and aligning SDG indicators with existing national policy frameworks and using the existing national database to track SDG progress. Countries including Colombia, Cuba, Niger, and Paraguay have incorporated the SDGs into national development plan monitoring systems. This is necessary but far from sufficient. Rather than a static planning intervention, developing an effective SDG FUR mechanism requires evaluative thinking to be incorporated throughout the entire process so the mechanism adapts to the evolving sustainable development scenario in the country.

In many countries, local and sub-national governments have begun monitoring SDG progress, but these efforts are nascent. Helsingborg and Malmö in Sweden have integrated SDGs into their monitoring frameworks and developed indicators for SDG progress. Egypt has tasked its governorates with updating their SDG localisation reports annually by evaluating SDG achievement progress. Cuba has established a mechanism for assessing outcomes and impact targets through programmatic reporting at the local level.

A Whole-of-Society Approach

National governments have the primary role in evaluating SDG progress through developing institutional arrangements for FUR. The broad scope of the SDGs requires the involvement of multiple agencies at all levels. Multi-stakeholder participation is needed to ensure inclusivity and transparency and address data availability issues for effective FUR (Tsolov 2021). Few countries indicated formal involvement of non-state actors in the review process. Denmark and Norway have conducted two separate comprehensive assessments of progress towards

achieving each SDG, by the government and by civil society representatives. Denmark has established a Partnership for SDG Data, which brings together government and non-government stakeholders.

Recognising the critical role of the private sector in achieving the SDGs, eight countries reported that they had initiated corporate sustainability reporting. Malaysia has mandated all publicly listed companies to publish sustainability reports. Similarly, Denmark is encouraging large companies to integrate SDGs in their reporting. Adopting and scaling up a whole-of-society approach is key for countries to improve the availability and quality of data and to develop collective ownership of the SDG FUR.

Integration with Other Approaches

The SDGs and other frameworks related to climate action and disaster risk reduction are mutually reinforcing. However, efforts to integrate the monitoring systems for these frameworks remain in their infancy. Czechia has integrated relevant SDG reporting within its National Climate and Energy Plan. Bhutan has integrated its SDG monitoring mechanism with its Gross National Happiness framework and climate change policy. Six other countries are reportedly in the process of integrating databases and SDG FUR mechanisms with other sustainability-related frameworks. These integration efforts will support FUR processes by sharing data and determining common policy directions (UNFCCC 2017). Investing in integrated FUR systems through joint metrics (comprising indicators, targets, parameters, and indexes) and data collection will allow countries to assess progress against different frameworks without creating additional layers of reporting (Brooks et al. 2018) and improve coherence in implementing the interconnected frameworks.

Information Technology and Digital Transformation

Governments acknowledge the importance of digitalising SDG FUR systems. In the 2021 VNRs, 17 countries reported having employed ICT for FUR or initiating the process. Egypt has developed an electronic system linking all public projects with the SDGs and an interactive online platform for multi-stakeholder reporting on contributions towards achieving the SDGs. COVID-19 has further highlighted the need to leverage ICT mechanisms for data production and utilisation to improve decision-making processes. However, many countries are lagging in digital infrastructure access, limiting the potential benefits to the SDG FUR. Countries with sufficient technology must work on effective ICT applications to evaluate SDG progress.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided for policymakers to develop more efficient forms of FUR for the SDGs at the national level.

1. Integrate SDG FUR Guiding Principles in the National FUR Framework

A national SDG FUR requires a process guided by the principles established for FUR in the 2030 Agenda — FUR must be (i) open; (ii) inclusive; (iii) participatory; (iv) transparent; (v) support reporting by all relevant stakeholders; (vi) people-centred; (vii) gender-sensitive; (viii) respect human rights, and (ix) focus on the poorest, most vulnerable, and those furthest behind (UN 2015, 32). Integrating criteria relevant to the Paris Agreement, such as consideration of ecosystems, could bridge the SDG FUR and the Paris Agreement monitoring and evaluation system. Policymakers should start by incorporating an equity-focused and gender-responsive (EFGR) perspective in framing national FUR strategies. This can lead to socially inclusive evidence-based policymaking (Bamberger et al. 2016). EFGR integration can be achieved by ensuring that indicators for gender and reducing inequalities are used to analyse poverty, developing mechanisms for social accountability and citizen feedback. Norway is adapting its national reporting platform by creating disaggregated data for SDG indicators based on leaving no one behind. Considering the disproportionate COVID-19 impacts, applying an EFGR approach should be a high priority for the national FUR framework.

Policymakers must ensure that national indicators tailor the global SDG indicators contextually, with additional nationally relevant indicators developed as required. Due to the complex relations between SDG targets and indicators, an evaluation mechanism can be designed through systems approaches and theory-based evaluation strategies to understand connections between interventions and their outcomes (D'Errico et al. 2020).

2. Develop an Integrated FUR Framework that Informs Planning and Monitoring Cycles

An integrated national FUR platform can be developed by building the SDG FUR mechanism into development planning and monitoring cycles vis-à-vis existing policies and programmes. This avoids introducing an additional reporting layer for various bodies and helps collate information across the diverse sectors contributing to the SDGs. Most countries take this approach, appointing a government agency or unit to oversee the process. An alternative approach is to develop

a new system, such as a specialised reporting platform for the SDGs. Mexico has developed an independent SDG FUR through a specialised technical committee to formulate contextualised indicators and develop a centralised information portal for tracking SDG progress. This approach is particularly well suited to countries lacking a comprehensive national development plan and an associated statistical system. Whether policymakers opt to have a separate system or build it into the existing one, FUR should inform policymaking and ensure coherence with other frameworks. A targeted mandate at the national level should be in place, led by the national statistical office or the relevant national agency to ensure coordination between stakeholders and evaluate implementation across all frameworks.

It is recommended to increase parliamentary involvement in SDG FUR by including oversight of the 2030 Agenda implementation and outcomes. Developing a performance-based planning and appraisal system will aid the integrated FUR by ensuring coordination across agencies and sectors, and improving system transparency and accountability.

3. Direct Investments and Reaffirm Commitments to Improve Statistical Capacity and the Data Ecosystem

Data gaps — timeliness, disaggregation, and geographic coverage — are a major impediment to effective FUR. Investments targeting further development of digital mechanisms are needed to develop the data infrastructure. Digital platforms can bring together multiple stakeholders for information sharing and reporting. This improves the availability and timeliness of data, as some SDG indicators are relevant to FUR for other frameworks. For example, the indicators for climate-sensitive development, disasters, and health are relevant to adaptation monitoring under the Paris Agreement. Maintaining common development data can facilitate data integration between FUR for both frameworks.

Investment in improving local and subnational statistical capacities leverages the power of collaboration to generate disaggregated data at the local level. It is essential to ensure the sustainability of project-specific ICT mechanisms by financing their maintenance and improvement. Financing innovative approaches like big data analytics, geospatial data, and crowdsourced data will help address data gaps. Creating a unified hub for these data is essential to boost transparency and accountability. Investments in digital infrastructure for data management should be complemented with investments in capacity building for data users, both governmental and non-governmental. Strong political will is needed to fill data gaps, as sufficient statistical capacity does not equal data availability.

A clear mandate, data sharing between departments, and dedicated resources are required for the designated agency playing the leading role in FUR to successfully address data gaps through coordination and collaboration.

4. Promote Multi-stakeholder Participation and Coordination of Approaches

Multi-stakeholder working groups are essential for systematic FUR at the national and sub-national levels. An example is the working group on SDG Indicators for Municipalities in Germany, which is developing localised indicators and implementing relevant activities to achieve the SDGs. A participatory approach is required, with four steps: (i) define FUR objectives and indicators; (ii) gather quantitative and qualitative data; (iii) analyse data; and (iv) assess the required interventions to inform policymaking. Policymakers should create an enabling environment and adapt existing mechanisms for multi-stakeholder participation in the data ecosystem, e.g., through partnerships and training. The development of a Monitoring Review and Accountability Framework (MARF) with simplified interpretations of the SDGs can be used to structure dialogue and coordination between the government and other stakeholders.

Engaging stakeholders enhances coherence in reporting for multiple frameworks and can scale up FUR activities. Introducing SDG-based FUR for development programmes and policies will result in improved SDG reporting and promote co-responsibility in FUR. This will further facilitate the creation of cross-sectoral information management systems, which can improve data coverage for monitoring and evaluating the impact of initiatives for the SDGs and other frameworks. Policymakers must make concerted efforts to ensure accountability across departments, such as developing a government-wide policy on open data and creating public listings of SDG and climate adaptation data.

Note

In 2021, 42 countries submitted VNRs. This policy brief is based on research analysing the 40 VNRs available through the UN SDGs Knowledge Platform. The methods used for the content analysis included keyword searches focused on specific sections of reports. The factors considered were: (i) mainstreaming mechanisms (SDG mapping, prioritising, adapting indicators); (ii) assessment of interlinkages between goals and targets; (iii) FUR (mechanisms at national and local levels, integration with other frameworks, involvement of state and non-state actors, private sector reporting, principles on which the system is based); and (iv) the use of ICT.

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