Policy and data gap assessments to inform 2030 Agenda implementation

Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should be informed by assessments of policies and data gaps. Such assessments are critical for informing policy priorities and national targets, indicators and baselines.

Key messages

- Voluntary National Review reports suggest that an emerging standard practice is for governments to assess policies and data to inform 2030 Agenda implementation. Standard practice suggests that there is a need for countries to ensure inclusive and participatory approaches to assessment processes.

- Governments should conduct an assessment that identifies gaps in existing policies and programs, examines data availability, and sets out baselines from which to measure progress and assess where additional efforts are needed. These assessments should occur at national and sub-national levels.

- The outcomes of assessments should be made publicly available and inform the selection of national priorities, targets and indicators for 2030 Agenda implementation. The results of data assessments should set baselines from which to measure progress and inform investments in statistical capacity to monitor and report on progress.

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Introduction

In 2015, world leaders adopted the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda, which introduced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sets out a transformative plan for people and planet. It aims to promote shared prosperity, environmental sustainability and progress on sustainable development that leaves no one behind. Realizing the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda requires a whole-of-society approach. Governments, citizens, civil society organizations, academia and the private sector all have roles to play in contributing to sustainable development outcomes.

Nearly four years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, many countries have put in place building blocks for its implementation as shown by reviews of government reporting to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Many countries have integrated the SDGs into policy frameworks. Institutional and governance mechanisms have been established to oversee and evaluate progress on implementation. Partnerships across sectors are forming, while systems for monitoring and evaluation are being put in place. However, progress has been mixed across countries, particularly in terms of the extent to which countries have localized implementation of the 2030 Agenda, integrated its transformative elements into policies and practices, and developed enabling environments that promote whole-of-society contributions to sustainable development.

Policy and data gap assessment

Policy and data gap assessments are critical for informing policy priorities and national targets, indicators and baselines for 2030 Agenda implementation. Such assessments help ground approaches to implementation in an evidence-based understanding of gaps in policies, programs, data and progress. The United Nations Development Programme's guidance note on data and monitoring for the 2030 Agenda states that an evaluation of available statistics is the starting point for SDG monitoring. As noted in the policy brief on policy integration and coherence in this series, assessment of existing policies and programs is also an initial step in developing effective policies for 2030 Agenda implementation.

This policy brief outlines emerging standard and good practices with respect to policy and data gap assessments for 2030 Agenda implementation. It is based on a review of countries reporting to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development over the 2016–18 period through Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports, which collectively serve as a key element of international follow-up and review of 2030 Agenda implementation. Also, interviews were conducted with six civil society organizations and one government institution in six countries[1] to complement and validate information presented in VNR reports. The brief provides an overview of emerging practices along with recommendations on how governments can improve their efforts. An annex with detailed information on the specific good practices highlighted in this brief serves as a useful resource for governments and other stakeholders that are keen to adopt and promote good practices for 2030 Agenda implementation.

What is a good practice?

TRANSFORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF THE 2030 AGENDA

A good practice is an activity or approach that demonstrates incorporation of one or more of the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda. The agenda is human rights-based and focuses on the inclusion of, and change for, the poorest and most vulnerable by promoting their inherent dignity and human rights through efforts to leave no one behind. Efforts are informed by inclusivity, solidarity and participation. The 2030 Agenda is universal in that it applies to all countries and people. The economic, social and environmental pillars of the 2030 Agenda are of equal importance, with the SDGs being integrated and indivisible—achievements under any one goal are linked to progress on others. Implementation of the agenda should occur with respect for planetary boundaries and inter-generational responsibility, recognizing the need to protect the planet's resources now and for future generations. Importantly, good practices respect the aspirational nature of the 2030 Agenda, demonstrably moving beyond standard practices or business-as-usual approaches. Finally, the 2030 Agenda is grounded in commitments to transparency and accountability.

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1 Interviews were carried out with civil society organizations from the following countries: Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Nigeria, and Switzerland (two interviewees). This brief also includes a number of good practices based on VNR reports for other countries, but it should be noted that information for these countries could not be validated beyond additional Web-based searches.

HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

INTEGRATED AND INDIVISIBLE

INCLUSIVITY AND PARTICIPATION

PROGRESS WITHIN PLANETARY BOUNDARIES

INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

ASPIRATIONAL

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Good practice is assessing policies and data in light of the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda. Assessments involve identifying gaps in policies and data to support integrated approaches to implementation as well as efforts to leave no one behind and promote inter-generational equity.

ASSESSING POLICIES AND DATA

Policy and data assessments are a means to identify gaps, establish baselines and set priorities. They evaluate available policies and statistics given national and global priorities. Good practice is using assessments to identify key areas where acceleration is needed to leave no one behind in policy development, plans and monitoring needs.

INFORMING IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS WITH GAP AND BASELINE ASSESSMENTS

Good practice is ensuring that information from gap and baseline assessments informs overarching and sectoral policies related to the 2030 Agenda. Findings should translate into appropriate policies, plans, programs, budgets, and monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems.[2]

EVIDENCE-BASED

Governments agreed that follow-up and review processes should be evidence-based, informed by country-led high-quality data with appropriate levels of disaggregation. Good practice is investing in high-quality disaggregated data ensuring that national statistical offices and other official data producers have the necessary resources and capacities to collect, analyze and disseminate data for reporting on the SDGs. Gap assessments should be used to identify priority areas where investments are needed to establish baselines and monitor progress.[3]

INCLUSIVE AND PARTICIPATORY

As with all aspects of 2030 Agenda implementation, good practice is ensuring inclusivity and participation to leave no one behind and support local ownership. Approaches to assessing policies and data as well as establishing related priorities and baselines should engage diverse stakeholders, in particular historically marginalized communities.[4]

Standard practices

Assessing policies or data in light of the SDGs is a standard practice. Over 2017–18, 56 of 88 reporting countries stated that they carried out an assessment of policies or data for all SDGs. Eight countries carried out an assessment for some SDGs, while six countries noted that an assessment is planned. In this context, however, half of the countries that carried out assessments (28) noted that they had examined policies and data, suggesting that this approach may be an emerging standard practice. Assessments tend to be conducted by responsible government institutions, with only a limited number of countries demonstrating the use of inclusive and participatory processes to assess policies and data.

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2   The policy brief on policy integration and coherence examines good practices in this area.

3   Good practice in this area is outlined in the policy brief on monitoring and evaluation.

4   The policy brief on multi-stakeholder engagement provides an overview of principles for effective multi-stakeholder engagement that apply to all stages of 2030 Agenda implementation.

Countries that assessed policies tend to provide information in VNR reports regarding the extent to which the SDGs and their targets are aligned with or integrated into national policies, with some countries providing details on the percentage of targets that are aligned. The results of data assessments tend to be presented in terms of overall data availability, which includes indicator availability according to the level of methodological development and available data. That said, information on available data for specific indicators is rarely presented, even in the statistical annex—aggregate figures tend to be provided for specific SDGs. Information on gaps in terms of progress on 2030 Agenda implementation is also presented by some countries in their goal-by-goal analyses (however, this information is not explicitly linked to the assessment carried out or showcased as results of the assessment).

Good practices

Good practice is assessing existing policies at national and sub-national levels in terms of supporting the SDGs and transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda. Such assessments include examining policies and priorities in light of SDG targets and indicators, efforts to leave no one behind and integrated approaches. Good practice is examining alignment between existing policies and the SDGs, identifying gaps, and establishing priorities for 2030 Agenda implementation. Ensuring that the results of assessments inform policies, plans and monitoring efforts is a good practice.

Data assessments include two key good practices. The first is examining data availability for global, national and sub-national SDG indicators. Good practice includes identifying indicators that are already available, indicators that can be calculated from existing data, and indicators that are not available (data are not collected at the national level and proxy data do not exist). The second includes establishing baselines that inform benchmarks and progress against sub-national, national and global targets.

Taken together, policy and data assessments provide the basis the identification of priority targets and indicators at sub-national and national levels. This good practice helps to ensure ownership and relevance of the 2030 Agenda in implementation, as well as direct investments with respect to improving statistical capacity to monitor progress.

Finally, good practice is carrying out policy and data assessments through inclusive consultation processes that engage historically marginalized communities and ensure shared ownership over resulting priorities and baselines. Transparent communication of the results of assessments, including baselines, and demonstration of how they have been integrated into policies, plans, and monitoring and reporting efforts are also good practices.

POLICY AND DATA ASSESSMENTS

VNR reports indicate that a range of countries have assessed their policies and data in light of the 2030 Agenda. Many have made use of the United Nations Development Programme's Rapid Integrated Assessment, a tool developed to assist governments in examining their policies against the 2030 Agenda at national and sub-national levels. The tool focuses on linkages across targets, relevant indicators and implementing institutions and is meant to serve as a first step to inform 2030 Agenda implementation. VNR reports for **Albania**, **Benin**, **Bhutan**, **Guinea**, **Jamaica**, **Mali**, **Niger**, **Saudi Arabia**, **Sri Lanka** and **Tajikistan** noted use of the Rapid Integrated Assessment. The tool has assisted countries in identifying the level of alignment between their policies and the 2030 Agenda, including targets. For example, the Rapid Integrated Assessment for **Albania** showed that 58 of the country's targets are aligned with the 169 SDG targets, 72 are partially aligned, 19 are not aligned and 20 are irrelevant in the country's context. In 2017, Albania carried out a policy area assessment that showed further alignment between national policies and SDG targets and provided information on data that are available to monitor global indicators. The assessment also looked at whether 2030 and intermediate targets have been met.

Bhutan reviewed policies and data to examine alignment and integration for its Eleventh Five Year Plan for 2013–18 and the 17 SDGs as well as progress on implementation. Bhutan's VNR report classified SDG indicators in terms of whether they have been fully adopted, have been partially adopted, are relevant but not adopted or are not relevant to the country's context. The government then classified data availability against the SDG indicators in terms of whether data are available (regularly collected according to high standards), partially available (data available on an ad hoc basis) or not available. Notably, the VNR report included an assessment of progress towards each SDG in terms of whether their targets have been achieved, are on track to being achieved or at risk of not being achieved. In **Denmark**, the Baseline for the Global Goals in Denmark project was launched to establish baselines. Working closely with Local Government Denmark, a set of baselines for SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities was prepared through an inclusive consultation process. **Sri Lanka** carried out an assessment of policies and data. The policy assessment looked at alignment between national policies and the SDGs. A review of statistical information was conducted to establish baselines. A report titled Status of Sustainable Development Goals Indicators in Sri Lanka and a website with the SDG indicator framework were prepared.

Other countries have examined policies, responsible government institutions and data as part of their gap assessments. **Benin** carried out assessments to identify sustainable development

priorities, including national targets and indicators. The assessment of ministries' annual work plans showed that all 17 SDGs are being addressed by at least four ministries. Areas where greater efforts are needed to align actions with the SDGs were identified. The country also identified 49 priority targets for 2030 Agenda implementation. Municipalities were engaged in this process and provided inputs into the national approach to 2030 Agenda implementation. **Ireland** carried out a mapping of policies and government institutions related to 2030 Agenda implementation. The country's implementation plan includes a matrix of lead and stakeholder departments and a SDG policy map that maps government policies, institutions and key priorities against the SDGs. **Spain** mapped efforts by government institutions to assess the current status of and baselines for SDG targets, diagnose constraints to progress and identify stakeholders involved in advancing progress. A publicly accessible database showing contributions from national government institutions was prepared. **Latvia** assessed the SDGs at the target level against national policies. The country looked at the relevance of SDG targets, identified responsible government institutions and mapped global indicators for the 169 targets to compare Latvia's performance. A conference was organized to discuss the SDG framework applied to Latvian policies. Mid-term assessments of sectoral policies will review gaps between SDG targets and Latvian policy indicators. In addition to an analysis of policy alignment with the 2030 Agenda, **Lithuania** carried out a data assessment. The national statistical office formed a working group of government institutions that compiled specific indicators to assess the SDG indicators and data availability in national and international databases. A list of national indicators on sustainable development was prepared, including information on responsible institutions. To nationalize the 2030 Agenda, **Senegal** identified a set of national-level targets for each SDG. The VNR report included SDG targets, global and national indicators, responsible government institutions, baselines (where available) and available data for 2015, 2016 and 2017. The country's targets for 2030 were also included for a number of indicators.

TRANSFORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF THE 2030 AGENDA

Some countries have carried out policy, data or baseline assessments that specifically address the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda. **Armenia** conducted a comprehensive assessment of policies, laws and regulations to examine alignment with the 2030 Agenda. A review of existing data identified the availability of disaggregated data. Working with development partners, the government also developed child-related SDG baseline indicators. Importantly, the initiative identified data gaps and ways to improve data collection to address gaps. It established a monitoring system for child rights in the context of the SDGs, supporting inter-generational equity.

Bhutan's 2016 Vulnerability Baseline Assessment set a baseline to track vulnerable groups and formulate appropriate policies to leave no one behind in 2030 Agenda implementation. The assessment identified those groups at risk of being left behind. Together with its 2016 Climate Vulnerability Assessment and 2018 Population and Housing Census, Bhutan is using the Vulnerability Baseline Assessment to better support vulnerable populations over 2017–22. Fourteen vulnerable groups were identified through the Vulnerability Baseline Assessment, which also looked at the causes of vulnerability, how policies and programs help or hinder groups at risk of being left behind, and opportunities for improvement.

Panama made use of the multi-dimensional poverty index to support an integrated approach to 2030 Agenda implementation. The index was used to identify conditions for vulnerable groups and understand the multi-dimensional nature of poverty in the country. Relevant and disaggregated information to support government action was produced and the index promotes integrated approaches to social policies and effective identification of populations being left behind.

INCLUSIVE AND PARTICIPATORY

Finland's National Commission for Sustainable Development worked together with government institutions to set baselines for 2030 Agenda implementation through an inclusive process as part of the country's VNR process. In addition, an independent analysis of the country's readiness to implement the 2030 Agenda based on a mapping exercise, which was conducted by the Finnish Environment Institute and Demos Helsinki, focused on setting a baseline for SDG implementation and identifying areas that require further attention. **Greece's** policy-mapping process included non-state actors to ensure transparency and accountability. **Mali** identified priority targets for 2030 Agenda implementation through a process that included national and regional workshops. In the **Philippines**, the National Economic and Development Authority organized two technical workshops in 2015 and 2016 with participation by civil society organizations, academic institutions, donors and government institutions to identify data availability as well as assess, agree on and prioritize national indicators. **Switzerland** carried out a baseline assessment involving national and sub-national government institutions, the private sector and other organizations to identify the current status of progress, efforts under way and challenges. The process included examining all targets and indicators and identifying responsible government institutions. To ensure inclusivity, meetings and online consultations were held with organizations that protect

the interests of groups at risk of being left behind, such as low-income individuals, migrants or victims of human trafficking. A lesson from Switzerland's experience is to ensure that there is adequate capacity to process received data and inputs.

REPORTING ON GAPS AND BASELINES

The results of gap and baseline assessments provide insights into countries' starting points with respect to implementation. **Bangladesh** included information on the number of available indicators for each SDG in its VNR report. **Sri Lanka** provided an overview of the various gap assessments carried out in the country, including information on alignment between existing policies and the 2030 Agenda as well as data availability (Table 1).

Several countries provided indicator baselines in their VNR reports. For example, **Egypt** included information on progress in implementing the SDGs in the goal-by-goal analyses using available indicators. **Estonia** discussed the current status of and existing policy instruments for each of the 17 SDGs. Baseline figures and 2019 targets for selected existing national indicators were included. **Georgia** provided an excerpt on baselines fixed for each SDG target, alongside complementary national indicators and forecasts for 2030. **Kenya's** VNR report states that the country set baselines for most of SDG indicators between 2009 and 2014. **Sierra Leone** pointed to 56 draft indicators and provisional baselines and targets for the years 2020, 2025 and 2030. Finally, **Switzerland** conducted a baseline assessment in 2017. Its 2018 VNR report provided results on emerging trends with respect to progress on national targets in the goal-by-goal analysis.

TABLE 1. EXAMPLE OF REPORTING ON INDICATOR AVAILABILITY, SRI LANKA	
CLASSIFICATION	**NUMBER OF INDICATORS**
Already compiled by national statistical office	46
To be compiled by national statistical office	29
Available or to be compiled by other institutions	131
Regional or global indicators	35
Not relevant for Sri Lanka	3
TOTAL	**244**

Source: Adapted from the VNR report for Sri Lanka.

Recommendations

This policy brief examines standard and good practices with respect to policy and data gap assessments to inform 2030 Agenda implementation. A number of recommendations emerge from the analysis for governments.

Assess policies and identify gaps, national priorities, targets and indicators for 2030 Agenda implementation.

An in-depth assessment of existing policies with a focus on overall alignment with the 2030 Agenda, where gaps exist and how they can be addressed should provide the basis for 2030 Agenda implementation. The identification of national targets and indicators is also an important part of nationalizing the 2030 Agenda to ensure relevance and promote ownership. National targets and indicators should complement global ones.

Carry out assessments that address the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda.

Policy assessments should include and go beyond an examination of the extent to which existing policies align with the SDGs and their targets. Particular attention is needed to examine policies and available data in light of the commitment to leave no one behind, human rights-based approaches, inter-generational equity, planetary boundaries, and the integrated and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda.

Examine data availability, set baselines and identify priorities for improving statistical capacity to monitor 2030 Agenda implementation.

Data assessments are important for understanding overall data availability for monitoring global, national and sub-national targets. They inform the establishment of baselines. Information on data gaps is also important for identifying efforts to improve statistical capacity for 2030 Agenda implementation as well as where unofficial data producers can fill gaps.

Clearly articulate how assessments are conducted and make information on results available.

Making the results of assessments publicly available ensures transparency in the identification of priorities, policies and programs to support 2030 Agenda implementation. It also provides a basis for engagement with diverse stakeholders on how to best address gaps, including in partnerships. In addition, sharing the process and results of assessments helps establish good practices and build understanding across countries and levels of government, enhancing the harmonization and comparability of data and policies as appropriate.

Gap assessments should occur at national and sub-national levels.

Policy and data gaps vary at national and sub-national levels. There is a need for national governments to consider the challenges faced by sub-national governments to ensure that national approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation are grounded in local realities and address policy and data constraints. In addition, sub-national governments have a leadership role to play in terms of assessing their own policies and data gaps to inform their efforts to localize the 2030 Agenda, including in partnership with the national government and non-state actors.

Ensure inclusivity and participation when assessing policy and data gaps, particularly for groups at risk of being left behind.

Inclusive consultation processes that engage historically marginalized communities can support collective ownership of 2030 Agenda priorities. Diverse stakeholders should be engaged to identify gaps, priorities and solutions for 2030 Agenda implementation. Importantly, engagement with unofficial data producers can help to fill gaps in official data.