OUR POSSIBLE FUTURE

Quality reporting and Governance of the 2030 Agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CEPEI 2023
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Quality reporting and Governance of the 2030 Agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
This report compiles the work Cepei has done since 2015 to monitor and accelerate the 2030 Agenda’s implementation in Latin America and the Caribbean. Its purpose is to provide evidence to support decision-makers for global development agendas in the region.

The report provides a comparative
analysis of the quality of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNR)—which measure progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda—and the governance established by each country in the region to lead the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It also includes an analytical data-based approach to the situation in the region as well as the link between the work at the regional, national, and global levels.

This report recognizes the global complexity of the context. As highlighted by the United Nations’ recent report on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the situation is worrying:

> It’s time to sound the alarm. As 2030 approaches, we continue to face serious challenges related to achieving Sustainable Development Goals. The assessment of the trends of approximately 140 targets indicates that approximately half of these targets are moderately or severely off track. Likewise, more than 30% have not made progress, or they have dropped below the 2015 baseline (United Nations, 2023, p. 4).

Despite the bleak outlook, we are still capable of striving to achieve the 2030 Agenda while remaining hopeful and convinced that with high-quality data and information—coupled with stakeholder participation and joint work—it is indeed possible to make decisions that keep us on the path toward sustainable development.

The motivation to create this report stems from the most urgent and demanding challenges that are compelling governments in Latin America and the Caribbean to rethink solutions and strategies in order to overcome them. Mass digitization, the economic crisis, recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, and political instability need strong leadership—along with infrastructure and tools to support it—in order to drive the creation of high-impact public policies. We have found that without high-quality information and data, it is impossible to accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out in the United Nations road map.

For this reason, the quality of the 2030 Agenda progress reports must be improved. As a result, in 2023, Cepei launched the SDG VNR Quality Tracker—a digital and interactive tool that analyzes countries’ Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), as well as their level of governance—and offers practical advice on how to improve this type of document.

The chapters in this report largely explain the tool’s results and their consequences for the region. Each chapter aims to expand on a specific topic, provide examples, and include valuable and enriching insights from external experts committed to sustainable development. As such, the first chapter will give an overview of the regional context,
which includes the political, economic, and social complexities that countries face on their path to sustainable development.

The **second and third chapters** respectively address the context and results of the Voluntary National Review (VNR) Quality Index and the National Governance Quality Index, both contained in the SDG VNR Quality Tracker. The purpose of this analysis is to highlight the importance of providing decision-makers, academia, civil society, and the private sector with information that leads to a better understanding of VNRs and of how the region’s institutions are doing.

The **fourth chapter** addresses the importance of data ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean in order to accelerate sustainable development. Encouraging each country to invest resources and strengthen these platforms—which produce a vast amount of statistical information—is key to ensuring a long-term future rooted in the principles of openness and transparency.

The last section contains the appendices to support the information on the National Voluntary Reviews and the state of the studied countries’ institutions. In addition to including data on each country’s institutions—i.e. the level of its governance—the report provides simple tips for improving future VNR presentations.

Above all, this report aims to highlight key points needed to turn knowledge into action, so that any actor interested in sustainable development may do so. Focusing on these local, national, and international dynamics can encourage multi-stakeholder participation in creating public policies adapted to the surrounding challenges and complexities. This is Cepei’s contribution to improving the 2030 Agenda’s implementation during the remaining time and securing a sustainable long-term project for Latin America and the Caribbean.
Now halfway along the timeline established to achieve the goals and targets outlined in the 2030 Agenda, we need to analyze how countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are reporting implementation progress at the regional, national, and global levels. Cepei verified that despite multiple problems and challenges related to implementing the 2030 Agenda—exacerbated due to several related crises that profoundly impacted the region—both governments and various non-governmental actors continue to see it as a key benchmark for promoting sustainable development that leaves no one behind.
The situation in the region is turbulent and politically polarized. The loss of confidence in institutions—and even in democracy—stems from citizens' perception that governments are not meeting their demands or needs in terms of improving social, economic, and environmental issues. The status of the 2030 Agenda’s implementation aligns with the above. In fact, the path to the Sustainable Development Goals shows setbacks, with insufficient progress made on 75% of the agreed targets.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for countries to improve the quality of their progress reports, which are currently far from meeting the reporting commitments included in the 2030 Agenda. The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) must be improved, since increasing the quantity and quality of data is essential in order to drive SDG progress, foster co-learning and knowledge sharing, and support efficient, effective, and data-driven actions.

After conducting an analysis of 19 VNRs using the SDG VNR Quality Tracker tool, Cepei identified key points for improvement, including guiding implementation policies based on the 2030 Agenda’s principles (Leave No One Behind, Universal Jurisdiction, and human rights, among others) as well as encouraging non-governmental actors to play a more active role in report preparation.

The study of these documents also shows that the measures that States have taken—or intend to take—in order to make progress in SDG implementation are presented as general rather than action-oriented steps. As such, they are not specific enough to allow for subsequent analysis of their implementation. Finally, VNRs do not have a “process report”—that is, a structure that clearly includes what has worked, how challenges have been overcome, and how identified opportunities have been capitalized on.
Venezuela’s 2016 VNR is not included in this dimension, since the Secretary-General did not propose any voluntary reporting guidelines that year.

Source: Cepei
Additionally, in order to make progress on the 2030 Agenda, the institutions established by the regions’ countries must be the ones to lead SDG implementation and follow-up, since it is their direct responsibility to take action.

Through its analysis model, Cepei also concluded that although the institutions in the region’s countries have the power and ability to exercise leadership in the processes, this does not happen when it is time to communicate the 2030 Agenda to the public. Moreover, there is an imbalance when it comes to bringing together multiple stakeholders. This refers not only to non-governmental entities, but also to State entities that need to participate in the process, including parliaments, the judiciary, and other institutions—such as comptrollers’ and ombudsman’s offices. As a result, citizens lack a sense of ownership of the SDGs, and transparency and accountability is decreased.

*Image 2: National Governance Quality Index for SDG implementation and monitoring (citation up to 2023)*
The inconsistent quality of the VNRs and the national governance of the 2030 Agenda has repercussions on SDG implementation and tracking at the regional level, where polarization and tensions hindering dialogue and collaboration also come into play. In fact, the space that promotes regional SDG-related progress and reporting—namely, the Regional Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development—has not made it possible to identify specific priorities for implementing the 2030 Agenda since its creation in 2017.

Despite the forum’s contributions—including its success in creating regional indicators and bringing together ECLAC and the United Nations agencies, funds, and programs operating in the region in order to define common strategies—it has shown that it still fails to make regional SDG-related action a priority for States and motivate them to improve their VNRs.

The situation regarding regional and national tracking and reporting on the 2030 Agenda also exists at a global level. In fact, the High Level Political Forum (HLPF)—where governments from around the world have gathered since 2016 to present their VNRs—broadly reflects the aforementioned assessment of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean; there is a plethora of official language, yet it is very rarely action-oriented. Moreover, to date, there is little space for regions to contribute to the global debate.

How should we navigate this situation? Since the challenges in accelerating SDG implementation are highly complex—and there is a limited window of opportunity to resolve them—finding solutions cannot be based on trial-and-error methods. Cepei believes that there is still time to accelerate the implementation of agreements and make data-driven decision making more relevant than ever. This is despite the fact that the national governance structures for implementing the 2030 Agenda do not ensure the use of data, relegating the National Statistical Offices (NSOs) to the background.

A midterm assessment of the SDG-related lags in progress shows that clear action-oriented processes do not exist at any level; instead, institutions are employing reactive processes rather than proactive processes designed to achieve the desired results. In order to effectively and efficiently accelerate progress toward the SDGs, we must improve the quality of the tools and institutions’ 2030 Agenda implementation and tracking mechanisms at all levels. This first Cepei flagship report organizes evidence to serve this purpose.
The commitments defined in the 169 targets of the Sustainable Development Goals are far from being achieved. Still, the value of the 2030 Agenda is that it constitutes a common path that brings all parts of society together in the same direction and projects them towards a future supported and defined by sustainable development.
FINDINGS

Despite the problems and challenges around implementing the 2030 Agenda, both governments and non-governmental actors continue to see it as a path with many opportunities for joint action among various actors and countries. However, to date, the reporting processes—specifically the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and institutional mechanisms in Latin American and Caribbean countries—lack the quality needed to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and agreed-upon targets.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Despite the urgency to accelerate the 2030 Agenda’s implementation, there are several setbacks on the path toward the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, there has been insufficient progress made on 75% of the agreed-upon targets in Latin America and the Caribbean. Thus, it is crucial to address the gaps in the quality of VNRs and national governance, since this can have repercussions when tracking progress toward the SDGs at the regional level, where ideological polarization and government institutions’ fluctuation between political orientations within the same country only make it more difficult to carry out dialogue and achieve regional consensus.

ACTIONS TO TAKE

Given the scale and urgency of the current problems, finding solutions cannot be based on trial-and-error methods. Instead, decision-making must be based on data and evidence. In order to effectively and efficiently accelerate progress toward the SDGs, we must improve the quality of the tools and institutions’ 2030 Agenda implementation and tracking mechanisms at the regional, national, and global levels. Additionally, all spaces, forums, and events should be action-oriented in order to create concrete and achievable proposals in the short term.