Standards and the SDGs: Leveraging Sustainability Standards for Reporting on SDG Progress

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Standards and the SDGs:
Leveraging Sustainability Standards for Reporting on SDG Progress

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Outline

• SDGs and VSSs
• Where do we stand on SDG progress?
• VNR reporting and associated challenges
• Research methodology
• Findings and key takeaways
2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

- Adopted in 2015.
- Ambitious vision for people and the planet.
- 17 SDGs and 169 targets that are interlinked, integrated, and indivisible.
- Implementation and follow-up processes participatory and inclusive (UN, 2015; DESA, 2022).
- Partnerships, including public, public-private and multi-stakeholder, are an effective vehicle to implement the SDGs (DESA, 2022).
Voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs)

- VSSs are market-based tools established mainly by non-state actors to help achieve sustainable development outcomes.
- VSSs set production requirements, apply methods that aim to guarantee compliance, and offer supporting services to producers.
- There are more than 400 VSSs in the world operating across different sectors.
- VSS are grounded, encourage multi-stakeholder collaboration—and could be leveraged to implement the SDGs.
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### 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

#### Where do we stand?

- Of approximately 140 targets with data, about 12% are on track, 50% are moderately or severely off track, and 30% have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline.
- 575 million people will still be living in extreme poverty in 2030.
- By 2030, 84 million children will be out of school.
- It could take another 25 years to halt deforestation.

Source: UN Secretary-General’s SDG Progress Report (advance unedited version)
Reporting on SDG progress

Government reporting to UN HLPF

- Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) every four years to report on national progress toward the SDGs.
- Share experiences, identify areas that need more attention, find ways to work in partnership with stakeholders.
- There are barriers to reporting.
Data availability challenges

Countries cite lack of data as a major obstacle to reporting on SDG progress

- 2020: 20 of the 47 presenters (Source: De Oliveira et al., *Progressing National SDGs Implementation*, 2021)
- Countries continue to highlight data availability as a challenge in 2021-2022 (De Oliveira et al., 2022; Sautejeau, 2023)
- Opportunity to strengthen collaboration between governments and VSS actors to report on SDG progress!
IISD’s SSI Review: Standards and the SDGs

Crossover between VSS objectives and the SDGs

1. Can we build on synergies between government and VSS action to **advance the SDGs**?
2. Can we leverage linkages between VSS and government to **report on SDG progress**?

**YES!**
Research methodology

1. Map and analyze requirements of 13 international, regional, and national VSSs against 10 targets spanning 5 SDGs
2. Review of latest VNRs of India, Tanzania, and Uganda
3. Literature review of VSS activities and results in these countries
Overarching findings

• VSSs can help governments advance the SDGs—some more so than others.
• Information on VSS requirements and activities conducted in-country can help report on SDG progress.
• Governments can implement five steps to use VSS information for their VNR reporting.
Voluntary sustainability standards cover many of the same targets as the SDGs

The VSS examined have:
- High coverage of criteria that support SDG 8 and SDG 6 (70% - 100%)
- Moderate coverage of criteria that support SDG 2, SDG 12 and SDG 15 (45% - 69%)

The VSS examined are: Global scope: 4C, AWS, BC, CmiA, FSC, FSPO, IFOAM, ISCC, RA, SRP; National/Regional scope: ARSO, EAOPS, NPOP.
Do VSSs cover criteria aligned with selected targets?

The VSSs examined have:

- High coverage (average) of criteria that support:
  - SDG 8 T08: Protect labour rights and safe and secure working environment
  - SDG 8 T07: Eradicate forced labour, human trafficking, modern slavery, child labour
  - SDG 6 T03: Improve water quality, treat wastewater
  - SDG 6 T04: Increase water use efficiency and reduce water scarcity
  - SDG12 T04: Sound management of chemicals

- Low coverage (average) of criteria that support:
  - SDG15 T02: Sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, and restored degraded forests
  - SDG2 T03: Double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale producers, in particular women, indigenous people etc; equal access to land, inputs, financial services, markets, and non-farm employment
## Examples of VSS criteria that support SDGs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>High coverage of criteria that support:</th>
<th>Low coverage of criteria that support:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Land rights and tenure</td>
<td>Living wage, access to financial services (including by women)</td>
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<td>Integrated pest management</td>
<td>Access to buyers and distribution networks</td>
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<td>Soil conservation, health, and fertility</td>
<td>Diversification (i.e. crops/farming activities)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training of producers/ workers on sustainability issues</td>
<td>Access to technology and innovation</td>
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<td>Water quality in production</td>
<td>Wastewater quality management and treatment</td>
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<td>Prevention of water pollution and chemical run-off, chemical storage and labeling</td>
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<td>Water use monitoring; irrigation efficiency</td>
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<td>Protection of natural wetlands</td>
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<td>Respect of ILO Conventions (voluntary labour, freedom of association and collective bargaining, prevention of child labour, safety at work, prevention of discrimination)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prohibition of hazardous chemicals</td>
<td>Reduction of solid waste; treatment of non-solid waste</td>
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<td>Lower use, proper application, recording and disposal of chemicals</td>
<td>Air quality pollution monitoring</td>
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<td>Use of composting</td>
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<td>Forest conservation, preventing conversion of forest to production land</td>
<td>Monitor HCS &amp; preservation of biodiversity hotspots</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitoring and protection of HCVA</td>
<td>Legal and sustainable timber harvest and regeneration of tree cover after logging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of spatial planning to protect buffer zones and HCVA</td>
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Reporting examples:

Can information related to VSS activities in-country help report on SDG progress?
UNSG’s voluntary common reporting guidelines for VNRs

Relevant sections for using VSS data and information

1. An opening statement
2. Highlights
3. An introduction
4. Methodology and process to prepare the review
5. Policy and enabling environment, including:
   a) information on ensuring ownership of the SDGs and the VNRs
   b) integration of the SDGs in national frameworks
   c) integration of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions
   a) leaving no one behind
   b) institutional mechanisms
   c) systemic issues and transformative actions
6. Progress on Goals and targets and evaluation of policies and measures
7. New and emerging challenges
8. Means of implementation
9. Conclusion and next steps
10. Annexes with statistical data and additional information such as a list of actors consulted and comments from stakeholders
## VSSs' contribution to reporting on progress on goals and targets

### Examples of good practices and results of VSSs in India, Tanzania, and Uganda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SDG target</th>
<th>Examples of good practice and results</th>
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| SDG2 T03   | Trainings on diversification of sources of income to women coffee growers and on how to access land tenure  
**Result:** Women grow and sell vegetables, kerosene and other crops to obtain extra income; Some women have been added to joint legal titles. (WIEGO, n.d.- Fairtrade-Uganda) |
| SDG3 T04   | Regular advice from a resident plant doctor to tea farmers: maintain crop growth, cope adverse weather, and maintain productivity (Fairtrade India, 2014). |
| SDG6 T04   | **Results** of a company compliant with the Alliance for Water Stewardship standard:  
1) improved water-use efficiency by reducing water consumption and increasing plant water recycling;  
2) provided safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services for its workers; and  
3) reduced water dependencies and water scarcity in the area through improved water extraction in irrigation (Bhardwaj, 2020; Alliance for Water Stewardship, India) |
| SDG8 T08   | • Greater pay and benefits to workers of a RFA-compliant tea plantation that exceed Tanzania’s legal requirements.  
• Support workers assessing living wage gap and measuring progress towards reducing it (Lacuna, 2021-Rainforest Alliance, Tanzania). |
| SDG12 T04  | • Trainings to cotton farmers on pesticide handling and targeted application and use of alternatives  
**Result:** reduce and improve the use/application of chemicals benefiting workers health and the environment. (CmiA, 2018a-Uganda) |
Reporting guidelines

Mapping criteria → Reporting examples → Guidelines
# Guidelines for governments

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Identify processes for stakeholder engagement in the preparation of a VNR.</th>
<th>Identify institutional approaches for SDG implementation and information gathering for reporting progress.</th>
<th>Identify relevant VSS content criteria and gather evidence.</th>
<th>Describe how VSSs engage with local actors, help address data availability challenges, and promote partnerships.</th>
<th>Select case studies to report on SDG progress target-by-target.</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>VSSs could be invited to participate in workshops, platforms, or provide information.</td>
<td>Raise awareness on the role of VSSs and other actors in SDG implementation, monitoring and reporting, and boosting partnerships.</td>
<td>Use mapping exercises (IISD’s and others) and request information/case studies from VSS-bodies/operators in-country.</td>
<td>Highlight how VSS information can help fill data gaps.</td>
<td>Select examples on good practice and results of VSSs in-country.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Populate VNR section on 'Methodology and process for preparation of the review.'</td>
<td>Populate VNR section on 'Institutional mechanisms.'</td>
<td>Populate VNR section on 'Progress on goals and targets.'</td>
<td>Populate section VNR on 'Means of implementation.'</td>
<td>Populate section VNR 'Progress on goals and targets.'</td>
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Key takeaways

Working together to track and report progress

- VSSs could do more to introduce mandatory, timebound commitments to sustainability issues and improve data collection.
- VSSs can help fill data gaps and provide examples of how they have overcome shared challenges.
- VSSs can deliver benefits beyond the areas their criteria cover, providing additional contributions for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.
- Being embedded in multistakeholder partnerships, VSSs can play a role in supporting sustainable development post-2030.
Thank you

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