ACHIEVING THE SDGS WITH NATIONAL REPORTING PLATFORMS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SDG NATIONAL REPORTING INITIATIVE

CODE

About the SDG National Reporting Initiative

The SDG National Reporting Initiative was launched to facilitate greater information-sharing on SDG reporting between international, regional, and local communities. The Initiative has been led by the Center for Open Data Enterprise and funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

About the Center for Open Data Enterprise

The Center for Open Data Enterprise (CODE) is an independent nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. whose mission is to maximize the value of open government data for the public good. CODE believes that open government data is a powerful tool for economic growth, social benefit, and scientific research. For more information, please visit **OpenDataEnterprise.org**.

Acknowledgements

Disclaimer

This paper is a product of the Center for Open Data Enterprise. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions in this document are based on interviews, focus groups, and publicly available information and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders of this paper. This paper represents the authors' assessment of the state of SDG reporting as of May 2019, with the recognition that new developments may change the field over time.

Contents

I.   Executive Summary

The **United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** set out an ambitious agenda to address the world's most pressing challenges. This global action plan, which includes 17 goals and 169 targets that are tracked using 232 unique indicators, can only be achieved if data on the SDG indicators is made available to policymakers, industry, civil society, and the general public.

Publishing and disseminating data and statistics on the SDG indicators - referred to as SDG reporting - can be a valuable tool to help national governments achieve their goals by enabling policymakers to understand where their country stands in relation to the SDG targets, and how far they still need to go. Government officials can use this data to adjust their country's development strategies, inform the distribution of resources, and engage stakeholders around specific goals. SDG reporting can also help improve access to national and subnational data and statistics, identify data gaps, and encourage collaboration across existing data programs.

Since the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** and its 17 SDGs were adopted in 2015, the international community has made notable progress towards SDG reporting. Many countries have begun to report on their progress through **voluntary national reviews** (VNRs)[i] and by developing national reporting platforms (NRPs).

The SDG National Reporting Initiative was launched in August 2017 as a two-year initiative led by the **Center for Open Data Enterprise** (CODE) and funded by the **William and Flora Hewlett Foundation** to facilitate greater information-sharing on SDG reporting between international, regional, and local communities.
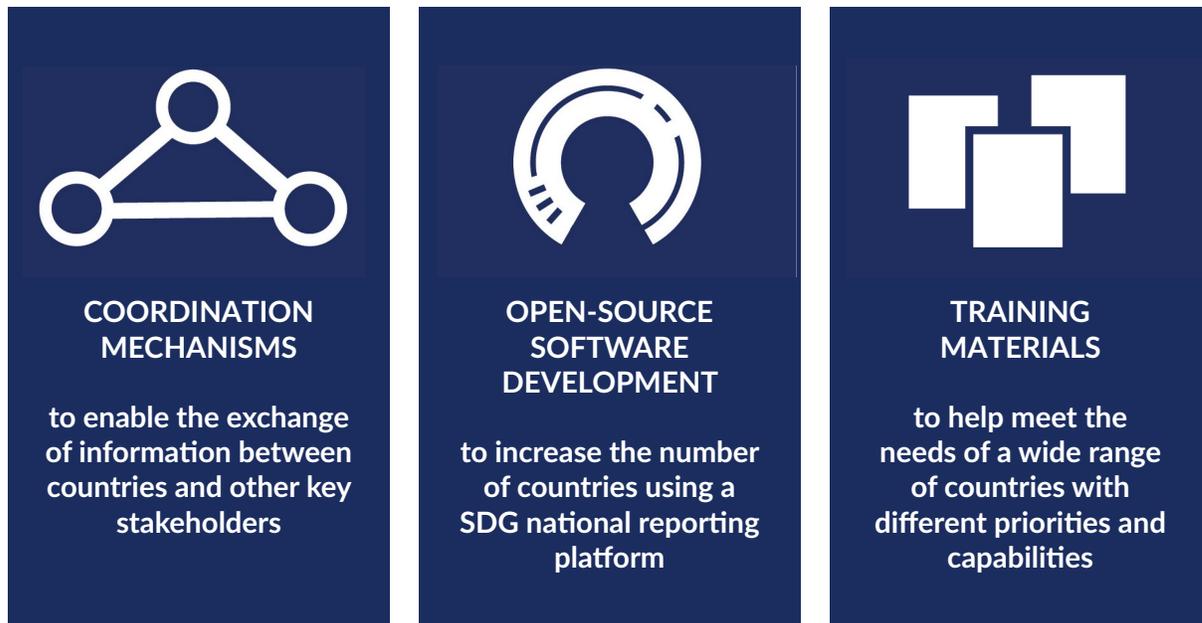
This report summarizes the state of SDG reporting as well as challenges and successes identified during CODE's implementation of the SDG National Reporting Initiative. From August 2017 to August 2019, the CODE team undertook wide-ranging stakeholder consultations. The findings in this report build on the substantial work of national governments and organizations including the UN Statistics Division (UNSD), the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the World Bank, The Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21), the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD), and Open Data Watch, among many others.

Three key lessons learned

1. **There is no one-size-fits-all approach to SDG reporting.** Governments must be empowered to choose solutions that are sustainable and that leverage their existing data platforms, resources, and relationships.

2. **Tools and best practices related to SDG reporting are not limited to national governments.** These resources can be utilized by other stakeholder communities including subnational governments, regional organizations, and civil society groups.

3. **SDG NRPs are valuable only when they serve the needs of end users.** More work needs to be done to make disaggregated data available through these platforms and to make national reporting platforms more usable overall.

II.   The SDG National Reporting Initiative

This report describes the state of SDG reporting and related challenges and successes through the lens of the SDG National Reporting Initiative, which included three core areas of work:

COORDINATION MECHANISMS	OPEN-SOURCE SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT	TRAINING MATERIALS
to enable the exchange of information between countries and other key stakeholders	**to increase the number of countries using a SDG national reporting platform**	**to help meet the needs of a wide range of countries with different priorities and capabilities**

Coordination mechanisms

With many SDG reporting efforts launching around the world, one of the main priorities of the Initiative was to create sustainable pathways for sharing information. The objective was both to reduce the potential duplication of work and to support stakeholders in creating more interoperable data ecosystems for SDG reporting. To help governments coordinate their efforts, CODE hosted regular meetings with national governments and international organizations, convened conference sessions and workshops, and developed a newsletter and online resource library at **https://SDGreporting.org**.

Open-source software development

Open-source approaches to developing and managing SDG reporting platforms can lower the cost of creating NRPs compared to proprietary options and can enable greater country ownership of the SDG reporting process. At the outset of this Initiative, CODE focused on supporting the United States (U.S.) open-source NRP, available at **https://sdg.data.gov**. The United Kingdom (UK) Office for National Statistics (ONS) later forked this platform on GitHub and added a range of custom features.

Teams from the U.S. government, the UK ONS, and CODE began working together to implement new features and increase the use of open-source NRPs. Several other countries adopted the U.S. and UK SDG reporting platforms, including Ghana, Jamaica, Poland, and Rwanda. As more countries adopted the U.S. and UK platforms, and as new features were added, there was a need to better share capacity and reduce duplication of efforts. This growing need was met through the development of **Open SDG**, which merged early versions of the U.S. and UK platforms into a shared codebase.

Through the SDG National Reporting Initiative, CODE has made technical improvements to the Open SDG platform to fix bugs, streamline data management, add multilingual capacity, and support the integration of data from external sources. To make the platform sustainable and facilitate its continued adoption, CODE has worked with countries using Open SDG to develop comprehensive documentation. As of May 2019, nine countries are using the Open SDG platform[1] and many others have expressed interest in joining this global open-source community.

Training materials

To help fill gaps in the SDG reporting space, CODE developed training materials to address both the technical and policy challenges that come with reporting data and statistics on the SDGs. On the policy level, the Initiative's report on Strategies for SDG national reporting[ii] was written as a practical guide for national governments developing plans for SDG reporting. CODE also produced short-form policy training materials on SDG reporting including brief videos and resource sheets on topics ranging from SDG data flows to the Statistical Data and Metadata eXchange (SDMX). On the technical level, CODE created training materials for data scientists and software developers interested in setting up their own SDG NRPs. Technical training materials included guidance on how to set up, make modifications, and load data onto open-source SDG reporting platforms including the U.S. NRP, and later, the Open SDG platform.

STRATEGIES FOR SDG NATIONAL REPORTING

A REVIEW OF CURRENT APPROACHES AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT REPORTING ON THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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[1] Armenia, Germany, Ghana, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Poland, Rwanda, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America are using the platform. More information on these platforms can be found at CODE's NRP inventory.
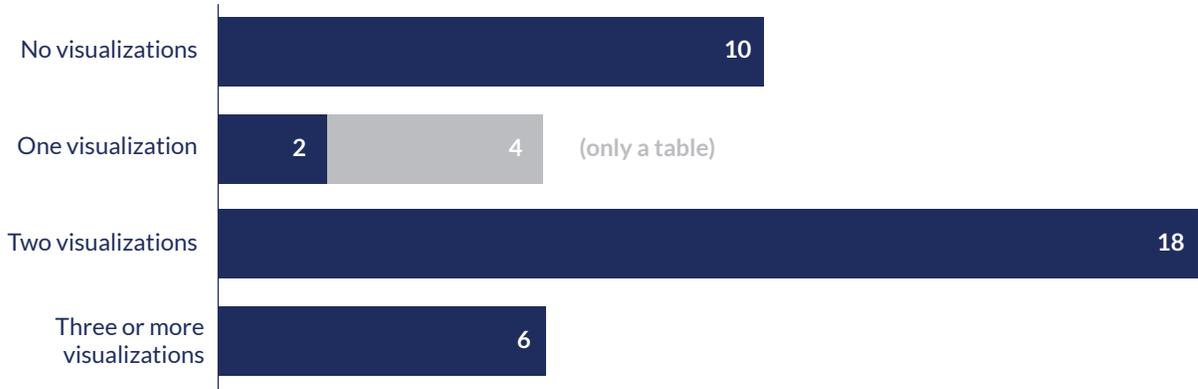
III. The State of SDG Reporting

To document progress and understand the different approaches to SDG reporting, CODE created a public inventory of NRPs around the world.[2] National governments have generally taken one of three different approaches to reporting: adding an SDG module within an existing platform, building a new platform dedicated to SDG reporting, or leveraging a regional platform.[3] The NRP inventory demonstrates both the amount of progress countries have made establishing platforms and also how much more needs to be done. At the time of writing in May 2019, CODE has identified 40 NRPs in use across all regions.

CODE evaluated five key characteristics related to openness and usability for each of these NRPs, including availability of data visualizations, multilingual accessibility, open data licenses, download formats, and use of APIs. These characteristics correspond to the UNSD **guidelines for reporting and dissemination platforms**[iii] on multilingualism and accessibility (guideline 3), data communication (guideline 5), standardized interfaces (guideline 8), and open data (guideline 11). These guidelines were developed at a January 2018 meeting organized by UNSD on **national platforms for SDG reporting** to review best practices and assist countries with the implementation of NRPs. Across the board, the following analysis shows that many existing platforms are not yet aligned with basic principles of accessibility, usability, and openness.

1.   Data visualizations

Data visualizations, such as graphs, maps, and dashboards, can enable users to more easily and quickly understand and interpret data. Graphs can demonstrate changes over time or highlight key variables such as gender, region, or age. Maps can help identify geographical variations in development, and dashboards can help identify data and potential resource gaps. Based on the SDG NRPs that CODE evaluated, there is room to improve the availability of data visualizations. While several SDG NRPs included maps and three or more data visualization options, others did not provide any visualizations or only had tables available. These limitations could frustrate end users and make it harder for them to understand the data.

Figure 1. Availability of data visualizations in national reporting platforms

No visualizations	10
One visualization	2 4 (only a table)
Two visualizations	18
Three or more visualizations	6

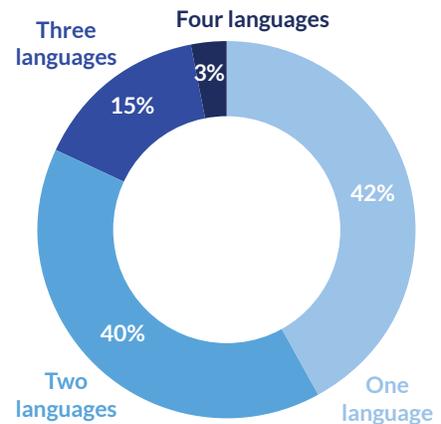[2] See the **NRP inventory** for a full list of countries.
[3] More on these three different approaches can be found in **Strategies for SDG national reporting**.

2. Multilingual accessibility

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs include a pledge to "**leave no one behind**,"[iv] stressing that the SDG targets should be met for all nations and people and in all segments of society, regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or migratory status. The ability to speak English or a national language is often directly related to class, ethnicity, migratory status, and gender.[v] Consequently, SDG data that is not delivered in a variety of locally appropriate languages could be inaccessible to many people and impact the UN commitment to leave no one behind.

More than half of the NRPs reviewed were available in more than one language, which is a positive trend for accessibility. The most common language, available on 37 sites, was English. The languages available on these sites were mostly major national languages and not regional dialects.

Figure 2. Languages available on national reporting platforms
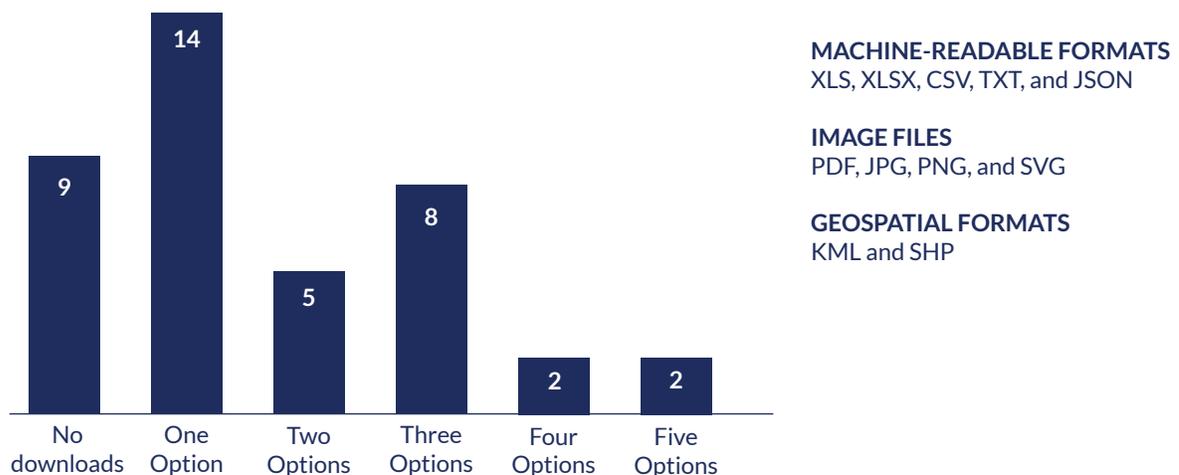

3. Data download options

Some users may want to download data available on SDG NRPs in order to generate their own analyses or create new data visualizations. A variety of download formats can make it easier for users to download the data in the manner that suits their needs. For instance, data scientists and developers may want to download a machine-readable CSV format of the data for their own analysis while policymakers may want to download the JPEG version of the visualization on the NRP for sharing or use in a presentation.

Nine NRPs did not contain any options to download the data while another 14 only had one option. All of the platforms that had only one download option had the option in a machine-readable format, which allows users to easily process data using a computer. Eleven of the platforms evaluated provided both machine-readable and image format downloads.

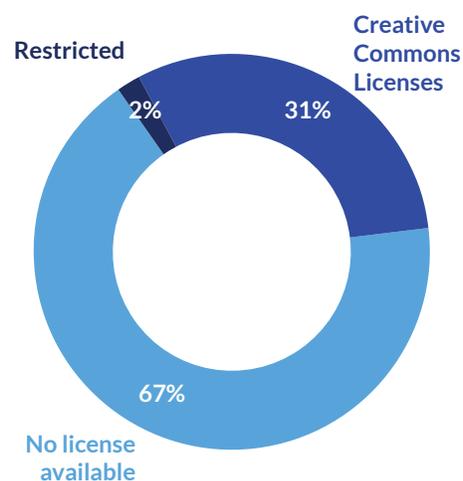**Figure 3.** Availability of data download formats in national reporting platforms

MACHINE-READABLE FORMATS
XLS, XLSX, CSV, TXT, and JSON

IMAGE FILES
PDF, JPG, PNG, and SVG

GEOSPATIAL FORMATS
KML and SHP

4. Open data licenses

Licenses provide users with the acceptable legal terms for using data: Can it be shared and reused? Is a citation required? Can it be used for both commercial and non-commercial use?

Creative commons licensing typically allows for use and reuse with citation (CCBY) or under certain conditions. However, less than a third of countries reviewed have creative commons licensing on their sites. The other two thirds have restrictive or no data licenses. A restrictive license, according to the Open Data Inventory, is one that includes clauses that prohibit misleading use and commercial use; require users to seek prior permission or an onerous attribution; register to view the data, or contain vague language.[vi] Restricted licenses or the absence of licenses altogether can cause uncertainty and therefore discourage the use of data on SDG NRPs.

Figure 4. Open data licenses available on national reporting platforms

Restricted

Creative Commons Licenses

2%

31%

67%

No license available

5. APIs

Application programming interfaces (APIs) can enable users to automatically pull and use data on other websites or mobile applications. APIs can also reduce the reporting burden within governments by automatically updating ministries' databases and platforms as new data becomes available. For maximum efficacy and interoperability, these APIs should use common standards, such as OpenAPI, and include clear documentation. Though there are a multitude of benefits to providing APIs, only four SDG NRPs evaluated by CODE had APIs available for the public, which could limit the creation of beneficial applications that utilize this data.

IV. Challenges

The current state of SDG reporting is shaped by several data, technical, and policy-related challenges. The following are some of the big picture issues that CODE observed throughout the SDG National Reporting Initiative.

▶ **Around the world, countries are finding it challenging to provide data on the large number of indicators being used to track progress on the SDGs.**

As part of the commitment to "leave no one behind," the SDG targets are tracked using 232 different indicators, disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity, and a number of other characteristics. This level of disaggregation enables policymakers to make more precise, data-driven decisions. However, countries are struggling to produce data on these indicators and their additional sub-indicators which add to the total number of SDG data requirements. National statistical offices (NSOs) have also mentioned that there are quality concerns regarding the data that they have reported.[vii] In situations where open data best practices are not in use, this data may not be stored in machine-readable formats or may not yet be digitized. These foundational issues can have significant effects on the process of choosing and implementing an approach to SDG reporting.

▶ **Countries are at different stages of developing their data and statistical capacity, which can complicate international coordination and the implementation of SDG reporting guidelines.**

While some countries have already implemented cutting-edge SDG NRPs, many others are just beginning to explore their options and determine their SDG reporting needs. This finding is supported both by the CODE's NRP inventory as well as the World Bank Statistical Capacity Indicator (SCI), a composite score assessing the capacity of a country's statistical system. The latest results from the 2018 SCI show significant variability among the 140 developing countries studied, with some countries receiving triple the scores of others.[viii] With countries at so many different levels of SDG reporting and statistical capacity, it is difficult to develop guidelines and programs that can be universally implemented.

▶ **The reporting burden that countries face continues to grow with new national and international reporting requirements.**

NSOs and other organizations involved in SDG reporting are facing an increasing number of requests, ranging from increased demand for official statistics to the integration of non-official data sources such as geospatial data and citizen-generated data. Many of these stakeholders are also under pressure to develop new partnerships, skills, and technical capacity with limited time and resources. In addition to collecting the data necessary to implement and monitor the 2030 Agenda, countries also need to report data and statistics for national and regional policy frameworks. Tanzania, for example, has the Tanzania Development Vision 2025,[ix] the UN 2030 Agenda, and the African Union's Agenda 2063,[x] in addition to sector-specific and subnational goals, frameworks, and priorities. The government offices and international organizations that manage these different development plans may also request data in different formats or through different reporting mechanisms, which can further overwhelm countries. Though some of the reporting burden can be reduced by adopting standards and tools for automating reporting such as SDMX or APIs, these kinds of solutions require significant technical expertise and resources to set up.

V. Successes

While there are clear challenges related to SDG reporting, a number of organizations around the world are working to help meet these demands. Together, this growing community of stakeholders is making a positive difference through activities and initiatives in the following areas.

▶ **The development of common guidelines and principles is helping to inform current and future work on SDG reporting.**

The 2030 Agenda provided a basic structure for reporting but did not include specific guidance for the development of national reporting platforms. Agreeing on common design, management, and structural details for reporting platforms can make those platforms more usable, sustainable, and equitable. For example:

- UNSD brought stakeholders together for a conference in January 2018 to produce **principles of SDG indicator reporting and dissemination platforms and guidelines for their application**.[xi] These principles outline best practices and basic steps that countries can take to develop national data platforms and increase interoperability between SDG reporting systems.

- The process for reporting data between countries, custodian agencies, and the UNSD was established in the **Guidelines on Data Flows and Global Data Reporting for Sustainable Development Goals**[xii] during the **49th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission**.

- Improvements to data interoperability are also being facilitated by the **Collaborative onSDG Data Interoperability**, which was launched after the first UN World Data Forum in January 2017. Co-convened by GPSDD and UNSD, this collaborative developed an **interoperability guide** to support the SDGs, which launched during the 2018 UN World Data Forum.[xiii]

▶ **Online and in-person information-sharing activities are bringing together diverse international, regional, and local communities.**

Throughout the SDG National Reporting Initiative, CODE engaged with numerous online and in-person resources and convenings to help exchange information about SDG reporting across all regions.

- The UNSD **SDG Monitoring and Reporting Toolkit for UN Country Teams** provides a collection of resources on global policies, data, SDG implementation, and capacity building and coordination to support national governments to monitor and report on progress towards the SDGs.

- The UNECE **Task Force on National Reporting Platforms** hosts detailed country **case studies** on SDG reporting and features its own **guide for developing national reporting platforms**.

- The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) **SDG Help Desk** has a large library of resources for the SDGs and related issues as well as an online forum for discussing SDG-related challenges and solutions.

- Meetings and workshops at conferences continue to be critical for the development of networks and the sharing of information. Outcome documents and presentations from many of these events also provide a narrative for the developments in SDG reporting over time: see the **UNSD Conference on National Platforms for SDG Reporting**, **GPSDD Data for Development Festival**, **UNECE Workshop on Reporting and Communicating Statistics for Sustainable Development Goals**, **International Open Data Conference (IODC)**, and **UN World Data Forum**.

▶ **Stakeholders are collaborating and sharing capacity to reduce barriers to entry.**

Government, industry, civil society, and academia are working together in novel ways, particularly through open-source approaches to SDG reporting. The following are several prominent open-source communities and other capacity sharing efforts.

- The **Open SDG platform** is free for anyone to use and reuse and is supported by a vibrant community of governments that have adopted the platform. In recent months, Armenia, Ghana, and Rwanda have set up their own versions of Open SDG. The U.S. government, UK ONS, and CODE are also exploring opportunities to collaborate with international organizations and subnational governments with an interest in SDG reporting.

- **.Stat Suite** is an open-source modular platform developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that provides tools to design, collect, process, analyze, and disseminate data on the SDGs.

- Through a **Pilot Project on SDG Monitoring**, UNSD and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) are working with 20 countries in Asia and Africa to support the development of national strategies for SDG reporting and NRPs. The project is particularly focused on increasing in-country collaboration on the SDGs and the use of the **SDMX** standard.

VI. Lessons Learned

Through its SDG National Reporting Initiative, CODE has identified three key lessons learned that may be applicable to others working in the SDG reporting space. These lessons were drawn from wide-ranging stakeholder engagement and research. CODE hopes that these insights can help others working on achieving the SDGs through the development of national reporting platforms.

LESSON 1

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to SDG reporting. Governments must be empowered to choose solutions that are sustainable and that leverage their existing data platforms, resources, and relationships.

Countries face different challenges in reporting on the SDGs and have varying resources and technical capacities. All of these factors can influence a country's SDG reporting approach. Some governments, for example, have hired proprietary solutions providers to develop their NRPs,[4] while others have leveraged their in-country capacity to develop their own national platforms. Hiring out the development of a platform can generally enable countries to launch a platform more quickly but can have higher up-front costs than in-country development. Government officials must make further decisions about whether or not to create a separate platform for SDG data or to host the data within a module on a country's existing national data platform.

LESSON 2

Tools and best practices related to SDG reporting are not limited to national governments. These resources can be utilized by other stakeholder communities including subnational governments, regional organizations, and civil society groups.

This report references numerous examples of national governments working together to share capacity and resources related to SDG reporting. The information and skills developed at the national level can also be leveraged by subnational governments, and vice versa. Through the SDG National Reporting Initiative, CODE has observed significant demand for information about SDG reporting at the city level. Examples include the Local Data Action Solutions Initiative by SDSN and the broader "localize the SDGs" movement, which brings the SDGs to the local level to inspire implementation and action. Cities like Los Angeles and New York are mapping the SDGs to their own targets and implementing their own SDG reporting projects at the local level.[xiv] There are also examples of municipal collaboration on the SDGs in countries like Colombia[xv] and regional collaboration such as the Africa Information Highway.

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[4] As an example of this type of collaboration, Data Act Lab worked with the government of Colombia to develop an SDG reporting platform which can be viewed at: http://dataactlab.com/our_work/dnp.

> **SDG NRPs are valuable only when they serve the needs of end users.** More work needs to be done to make disaggregated data available through these platforms and to make national reporting platforms more usable overall.

The past several years have witnessed a proliferation of data platforms and portals, often without a clear focus on data users. According to a 2016 study by PARIS21, there was an average of 3.4 platforms per country in Africa.[xvi] AidData, Open Data Watch, and PARIS21 surveyed government officials and NSO employees in low- and middle income countries to understand data user demands in their report, *Counting on Statistics*.[xvii] Their research found that users requested more active dissemination efforts, more granular, disaggregated data, and more accessible data in machine-readable and visual formats.

CODE has corroborated these findings through discussions at the 2018 IODC and the UN World Data Forum. CODE's NRP inventory also demonstrates that the field is not yet aligned with guidelines and principles for reporting platforms that could increase usability. NSOs and other stakeholders responsible for SDG reporting need to double down on efforts to fulfill user needs so that the global community can move beyond data platforms and towards data use. Ultimately, an NRP is a means to achieve the SDGs and advance data-driven decision-making, not an end in itself.

VI. Conclusion

SDG reporting has evolved in meaningful ways since the SDG National Reporting Initiative began in August 2017. Government leaders and their partners in industry, civil society, and the general public have launched SDG NRPs, established principles and guidelines for their development, and started building strong communities of practice to share their insights and experiences.

The SDG National Reporting Initiative's three core areas of work revealed challenges, successes, and lessons learned for the future. Governments around the world continue to face data, technical, and policy barriers that may impact their ability to advance SDG reporting and implement NRPs that are aligned with basic principles of accessibility, usability, and openness.

Many of the stakeholders that CODE interacted with during the Initiative will continue pushing forward progress on SDG reporting. The Open SDG platform, for example, has seen a steady increase in adoption over the past year as a lightweight, collaborative approach to reporting data and statistics on the SDGs. CODE and its partners have created documentation and coordination mechanisms to support further expansion of this global open-source community. For more information about Open SDG, please visit **https://open-sdg.readthedocs.io/en/latest/**. The Open SDG development team can be reached by email at **opensdg@googlegroups.com**. Other organizations and communities of practice, such as the **UNSD-DFID Pilot Project on SDG Monitoring**, and the **Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data** will also continue to facilitate information sharing and progress on SDG reporting.

Through the SDG National Reporting Initiative, CODE has been privileged to work with these and other experts and advocates who share a vision for improving the global data ecosystem and building a more sustainable future. While this Initiative has formally concluded, CODE looks forward to continued development of the SDGs as a framework for positive change. We welcome input, ideas, and opportunities for collaboration at **contact@odenterprise.org** as we continue our own commitment to the global agenda represented by the SDGs and the use of data to help achieve them.

"The UN Sustainable Development Goals pose an unprecedented opportunity for countries in all regions of the world and at all income levels. The implementation of SDG reporting will be a critical step on the path to achieving these global goals, and will provide data for a more complete, deeper view of the state of the world than has ever before been possible."

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Glossary

Application programming interfaces (APIs) - APIs enable users to automatically pull data from a website for use on other websites or mobile applications.

Indicators - There are 232 different global indicators related to the 17 SDGs, disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity, and a number of other characteristics. These global indicators can be complemented by regional, national, and/or subnational indicators.

Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDG) - The IAEG-SDG is a group comprised of International organization representatives and representatives of their member countries. It is tasked "to develop and implement the global indicator framework for the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda."

National Reporting Platform (NRP) - An NRP is a means to report and disseminate national statistics including SDG indicators and descriptive metadata in an easily accessible way to reach all target users.

National Statistical Office (NSO) - An NSO is the leading statistical agency within a national statistical system. It is generally responsible for the collection, storage, classification, publishing, and dissemination of general purpose statistics.

National Statistical System (NSS) - The NSS is the ensemble of statistical organizations and units within a country that jointly collect, process, and disseminate official statistics on behalf of the national government.

Open SDG Platform - Open SDG is a reporting platform developed for managing and publishing data and statistics related to the UN SDGs. It is built exclusively with open-source libraries and tools and can be hosted and maintained using free services.

Principles of SDG Indicator Reporting and Dissemination Platforms and Guidelines for their Application - Best practices published by the UN Statistics Division that governments can take to develop national reporting platforms and increase interoperability between SDG reporting systems.

Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) - SDMX is an international initiative that aims to standardize and modernize the mechanisms and process for the exchange of statistical data and metadata among international organizations and their member countries.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - The UN SDGs are a collection of 17 goals, adopted by all UN member states in 2015, which are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.

Targets - There are 169 Targets within the 17 SDGs that help explain, on a more detailed level, how close a country is to reporting on and achieving each goal.

Voluntary National Report (VNR) - A VNR is a published review to the UN High Level Political Forum that informs the global community of a nation's progress on Sustainable Development Goals and Indicators on the national and subnational levels.

SDG NATONAL REPORTING INITIATIVE

CODE