

Main messages from Iceland's Voluntary National Review 2023

Iceland confirms its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 in its second Voluntary National Review. The review builds on progress from 2019, when Iceland presented its first VNR, new institutional mechanisms, more extensive stakeholder involvement and consultation and relies on more data than before. However, challenges remain, not least due to the dire impacts of climate change, COVID-19, the Russian aggression in Ukraine and a growing number of conflicts around the world.

VNR process

Iceland's second VNR includes chapters written by stakeholders, the SDG Youth Council, Iceland's UN Youth Delegate for Sustainable Development, civil society organizations, The Institute for Sustainability Studies at the University of Iceland and the Association of Local Authorities. Extensive consultation on the VNR was also conducted with various stakeholders through in person meetings with CSOs, through online consultation and with the Future Committee of the Parliament.

Parallel to Iceland's second VNR, a Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR) will be conducted by the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities. The aim of the VSR process is to integrate local governments further into Iceland's work with Agenda 2030. The results of a survey sent out to all municipalities show that their core obligations align with the SDGs, but their biggest obstacle in working strategically with the SDGs is a lack of financial and human resources.

Progress on the SDGs

The VNR provides an assessment of Iceland's current progress towards each of the 17 goals, as assessed by specialists from all ministries. A detailed version of this assessment is available on an online dashboard. For the first time, this overview now includes both a government assessment as well as an assessment from civil society of each goal. Iceland's first VNR in 2019 then reported data for 30% of the UN SDG indicators. The coverage is now up to 70% in this second VNR.

In addition to the SDG indicators, 39 well-being indicators have been established, monitoring the quality of life in Iceland and well-being by looking at factors beyond economic measures such as GDP. These national well-being indicators are based on the three main pillars of sustainable development. Out of the 39 indicators, 34 are reported as the measurement instruments for those five remaining indicators are still under development. 60% of the reported well-being indicators have been moving in the right direction while 40% of them either remain stagnant or are moving backwards.

Means of implementation

National implementation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs is coordinated by the Prime Minister's Office in close cooperation with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. In 2022 a new cooperation platform, Sustainable Iceland, was established. Its purpose is to formulate a national strategy for sustainable development and coordinate the work of the government with various stakeholders. The strategy will use the SDGs as guiding principles and will define measurable goals, as well as an action plan to reach them. This will include roles and responsibilities within the government and society at large.

The backbone of Sustainable Iceland is the National Sustainability Council. Its members include all ministers of the government, representatives from each party of the parliament, municipalities, the business sector, social partners and civil society organizations. The Icelandic government acknowledges that to achieve a just and inclusive transition, leaving no one behind, a comprehensive social dialogue and stakeholder engagement is needed.

Challenges

One of Iceland's main challenges in achieving the SDGs is its spillover effects, i.e., when one country's actions affect other countries' abilities to achieve the goals. Iceland ranks high when it comes to implementing the SDGs but simultaneously generates one of the largest negative spillover effects. Iceland is therefore working on developing a comprehensive overview on its spillover effects to understand, measure and carefully manage them.

For the formulation of a national strategy for sustainable development, seven focus areas have then been defined to address its challenges and outline key targets and an action plan:

1. Economy and circularity
2. Equality, health and well-being
3. Education, culture and science
4. Infrastructure and regional issues
5. Food, land and water
6. Energy and climate
7. International cooperation