

Main messages pertaining to the Belgian National Voluntary Review

Belgium can build on a long tradition of efforts towards sustainable development. Since 2007, sustainable development is anchored in the Belgian Constitution as a general policy objective. For several years, the various governments at federal and federated levels have been using overarching plans and strategies to ensure coherence between the different dimensions of sustainable development, while a tailored institutional framework enables cooperation, consultation and coordination between the actors involved. While these elements provide Belgian authorities with a good starting point, further adaptations and accelerations in terms of policy-making, institutional functioning and staffing are necessary in view of incorporating the SDGs and targets into all of our internal and external policy frameworks in the best and most coherent possible manner.

This process is ongoing, and the National Voluntary Review (NVR) has so far played a pedagogical and instrumental role, thereby also maximizing the peer learning potential within the Belgian federal system. Coordinated by a political steering committee chaired by the Prime Minister, and with the active involvement of representatives from the various federal and federated entities, it has ensured a much needed high-level political impetus. It has intensified reflections on the best way to operationalize the SDGs within government departments; allowed progress in the work on a Belgian SDG indicator framework; emphasized the need to ensure all relevant actors are truly on board in a 'whole of government' comprehensive approach coherently combining development, defense, diplomacy and rule of law instruments abroad; and it has given a renewed impulse in terms of collaboration with civil society stakeholders and private sector. Most importantly, it has allowed for the first time to deliver a comprehensive overview of the panoply of actions which, domestically as well as externally directed, are currently ongoing and contributing to SDG attainment.

NVR findings underscore the commitment of the Belgian authorities to implementing the SDGs as a whole, taking on board key principles such as leaving no-one behind, adopting a rights-based approach and mainstreaming gender throughout the SDGs. The focus is on all SDGs, working through overarching strategies and initiatives to address interlinkages and to enhance cooperation within and between the various governments. Governments are aligning sectoral and thematic policy plans at national, subnational and local levels to the 2030 Agenda. This alignment has, for example, already contributed to a far-reaching overhaul in Belgian international development policies. The NVR also highlights the commitment of civil society organizations and private sector players, who are launching a broad range of actions and are often setting up new umbrella organizations or revitalizing and adapting existing ones.

All 17 SDGs as well as a large majority of their corresponding 169 targets are currently being addressed in one way or another, with many actions being reported on the SDGs related to, *inter alia*, health, gender, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work, terrestrial biodiversity and peaceful societies. The review also identified that further efforts will be required in a number of areas in order to address specific challenges, as scale matters in terms of the extent to which various governments have been able to systematically incorporate the SDGs throughout their areas of competence. Civil society counterparts, consulted in the context of this NVR, indicated that they expect additional attention for issues pertaining to lifelong learning, water and air quality (including particulate matter), energy intensity and renewable energy, greenhouse gas emissions, people at risk of poverty as well as mobilization of the necessary means of implementation.

Reviewing the implementation of the SDGs in and by Belgium remains work in progress. Given the challenges related to undertaking a fully-fledged review of progress and impact covering the full breadth and depth of this agenda, this first edition of the Belgian NVR should be considered primarily as a stocktaking exercise, a starting point providing us with a (partial) baseline and a benchmark: for

guiding further action, for future monitoring of progress, and for strengthening accountability towards the Belgian population and parliaments.