

#### Statistical Capacity to Monitor the FAO-relevant SDG Indicators in the Asia–Pacific Region

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#### Abstract:

This paper presents the main results for Asia–Pacific countries of the “Statistical Capacity Assessment for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicators under the custodianship of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)” carried out by the Organization at the beginning of 2019. The paper focuses, in particular, on the socio-economic indicators of the SDG monitoring framework, which countries are usually better equipped to produce and disseminate on a regular basis. In order to provide a comprehensive picture of the statistical capabilities on the National Statistics Systems, the objective of the assessment was not only to assess countries’ capacity to monitor and report FAO-relevant SDG indicators, but also to collect information on the presence of national coordination mechanisms for SDG reporting, on the main data collection instruments and statistical infrastructure used at country-level, as well as on the needs for technical and financial assistance.

A total of 25 countries in the Asia–Pacific region (52%) participated in the assessment. Despite most countries in the region seem to have established the required mechanisms for coordinating SDG monitoring, their contribution to global SDG reporting is still rather limited. The FAO survey showed that Asia-Pacific countries need to significantly improve their national data collection activities to compile even the SDG indicators related to the economic aspects of food and agriculture. More worryingly, it seems that most of the countries have no plans in the near future to upgrade their current data collection activities in order to generate the required statistical information to monitor progress towards the SDG targets. This provides a negative outlook on the possibility of Asia-Pacific countries to improve their capacity to compile the SDG indicators that are heavily relying on such data collection vehicles. Many countries report that unless they receive the required technical assistance, they will not be able to produce the SDG indicators under FAO custodianship and therefore contribute to global SDG reporting. This highlights the need to mobilize resources to support targeted interventions of technical assistance and to establish partnerships among the UN agencies to help these countries overcome the capacity and financial constraints they are facing.

**Keywords:** food and agriculture statistics; SDG indicators; statistical capacity; household and farm surveys.

#### 1. Introduction:

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been designated by the United Nations Statistical Commission as the custodian agency for 21 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators<sup>1</sup>. In this role, the Organization is responsible for collecting and disseminating SDG data at global level, for developing the methodologies for the compilation of the relevant indicators, and for providing technical assistance and capacity development to member countries to support SDG monitoring. In order to gather insights about the strengths and weaknesses of the national statistical systems worldwide and identify priorities for intervention, FAO conducted a dedicated assessment of countries’ capacity to monitor FAO-relevant SDG indicators at the beginning of 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.fao.org/sustainable-development-goals/indicators/en/>

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This paper describes the overall data collection process, provides the aggregate results for the member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for the Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) which participated in the assessment, and lists lessons learned and suggests improvements for future assessments. The assessment is focused on the socio-economic SDG indicators under FAO custodianship, which countries are usually better equipped to produce and disseminate on a regular basis (Table 1<sup>2</sup>). Comprehensive results of the assessment in addition to detailed country profiles (in English, French and Spanish) can be obtained through the FAO SDG Portal.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1:** List of socio-economic SDG indicators under FAO custodianship

2.1.2	Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population, based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)
2.3.1	Volume of production per labour unit by classes of farming/pastoral/forestry enterprise size
2.3.2	Average income of small-scale food producers, by sex and indigenous status
2.4.1	Proportion of agricultural area under productive and sustainable agriculture
2.a.1	The agriculture orientation index for government expenditures
2.c.1	Indicator of food price anomalies
5.a.1	(a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, by type of tenure
5.a.2	Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control
6.4.1	Change in water-use efficiency over time
12.3.1	(a) Food loss index and (b) food waste index
14.7.1	Sustainable fisheries as a proportion of GDP in small island developing States, least developed countries and all countries

## 2. Methodology:

A careful review of recent statistical capacity assessment studies (e.g. AfDB, 2017; ESCAP, 2018; PARIS21, 2018; UNSD, 2017a and 2017b) guided the overall formulation of the assessment as well as its survey instrument. Since these studies, however, were generic in scope, covering the entire national statistical production, or focused on a specific region, they did not provide sufficient information for guiding the technical assistance programme of FAO. A standard questionnaire on food and agricultural statistics was therefore addressed to all countries in the world, for obtaining meaningful results on a global scale and comparable across countries.

The questionnaire was organized in sections to collect information on the national coordination mechanisms for SDG reporting, current data availability of food and agriculture SDG indicators, plans for filling data gaps, and needs for technical and financial support. The target respondents were the National Coordinator for SDG Monitoring or the SDG focal point nominated by the Director General of the National Statistics Office in each country. The data collection was conducted by the Office of the Chief Statistician (OCS) and the questionnaire was dispatched to 195 countries at the end of 2018, with end of February 2019 as deadline for the submission of country's responses. In total, 114 out of 195 recipient countries (58%) participated in the survey. The preliminary results were shared with the participating countries and the final validated results were published on the FAO website in February 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Although SDG indicator 2.4.1 has more focus on environmental sustainability, it is decided to be listed since the indicator covers socio-economic factors as well.

<sup>3</sup> Link: <http://www.fao.org/sustainable-development-goals/indicators/statistical-capacity-cp-for-sdg-indicators/en/>

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In total 25 countries in the Asia–Pacific region submitted their questionnaires to FAO (Table 2). While all sub-regions are well represented, the highest country coverage was achieved for North and Central Asia and the lowest for East and North East sub-regions. The reporting countries cover more than 50% of the total Asia-Pacific population and are uniformly distributed across the range of per capita GDP in the region. For the estimation of regional and global aggregates, only the data from participating countries are used and they are assumed to be representative for the entire region.

**Table 2:** List of Asia-Pacific countries, which submitted their questionnaires (25 in total)

Armenia	Georgia	Malaysia	Pakistan	Tajikistan
Azerbaijan	India	Marshall Islands	Palau	Thailand
Bangladesh	Kazakhstan	Mongolia	Philippines	Turkey
Bhutan	Kyrgyzstan	Myanmar	Samoa	Uzbekistan
Fiji	Lao PDR	Nepal	Singapore	Viet Nam

### 3. Results:

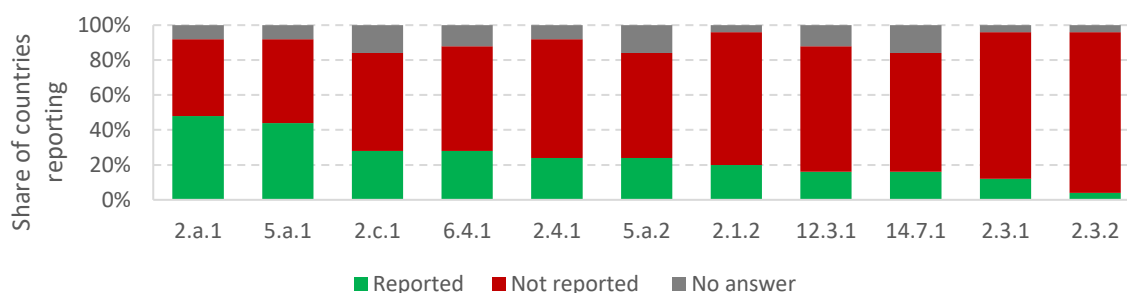
In this section the presentation of the main results of the assessment are organized in three main topics: (1) National coordination, (2) SDG indicators reporting and needs for assistance; and (3) Data availability and needs for assistance.

National coordination mechanisms for SDG monitoring and reporting play a key for the data flows within each country and between national and international statistical agencies, allowing to increase the availability and quality of the SDG data publicly disseminated. Out of the 25 countries which participated in the assessment:

- A national committee responsible for the coordination of SDG monitoring and reporting has been established in 17 countries (68%).
- A national coordinator for SDG monitoring and reporting has been nominated in 21 countries (84%).
- An indicator-specific national focal point for all the 11 FAO-relevant economic indicators has been formally designed in only 13 countries (52%). In almost one-third of the countries, instead, no indicator-specific national focal point has not been identified yet.

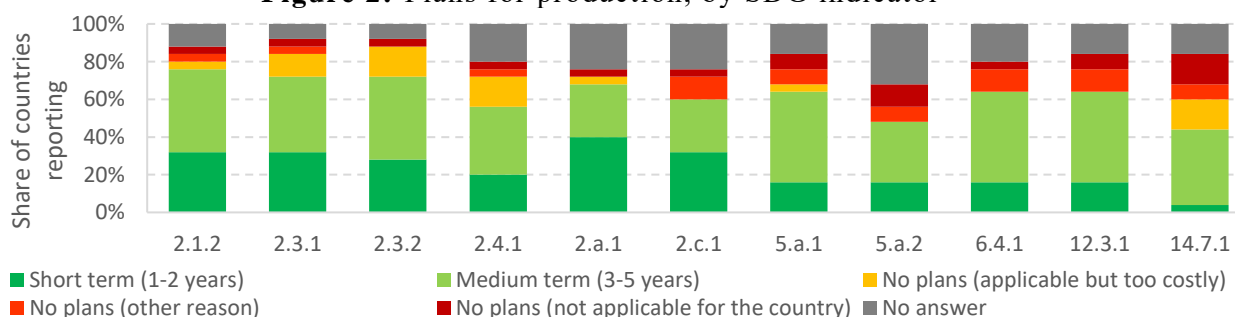
Figure 1 displays the current reporting status of the SDG indicators in national and/or international databases. More than 40% of the countries report that indicators 2.a.1 and 5.a.1 are published in national or international databases as of end-2019. The reporting rates for indicators 2.3.1, 2.3.2, 12.3.1 and 14.7.1 are below 20%, which is consistent with the recent updates in their Tier classification. Indeed, the methodology for the compilation of indicators 2.3.1, 2.3.2, 2.4.1, 12.3.1 and 14.7.1 has been endorsed only recently by the Interagency and Expert Group on SDG indicators, and countries have had little time to establish a data collection and reporting mechanism. These results assume that the indicators published only in national databases correspond to the official global SDG indicators. This unfortunately is not always the case as countries, not having the possibility to produce and disseminate SDG data in line with internationally agreed methods and standards, tend to publish proxy indicators instead.

**Figure 1:** Current reporting in a national or international database, by SDG indicator



To understand whether these data gaps will be addressed in the short-medium term, the assessment collected detailed information on the specific plans of each country. The existence of these plans of data generation and dissemination is crucial to minimize data gaps in the near future. It is also essential to ensure the sustainability in data reporting also of those indicators that are currently published. Figure 2: shows that at least 60% of the countries have plans for producing eight FAO-relevant indicators in the medium term. For the indicators which are not currently published, short (1-2 years) and medium (3-5 years) term plans still give some reassurance about future progress in SDG data reporting. For example, although 80% of the countries are not currently reporting indicator 2.1.2 (Figure 1:), more than 75% of the countries are planning to produce it in the short and medium terms.

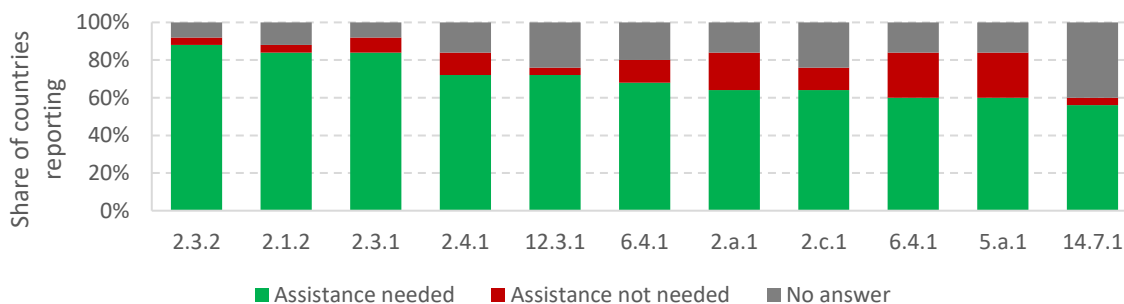
**Figure 2:** Plans for production, by SDG indicator



The dependency on external assistance and additional resources is an important indication of the capacity of countries' statistical systems. Figure 3 shows that for each indicator, at least 55% of the countries request technical assistance – the actual share might be even higher given the fact that a significant number of reporting countries did not respond to this specific question. Given these capacity development needs, technical assistance requests should be taken very seriously as they might constitute an essential prerequisite for future reporting by the national statistical institutions.

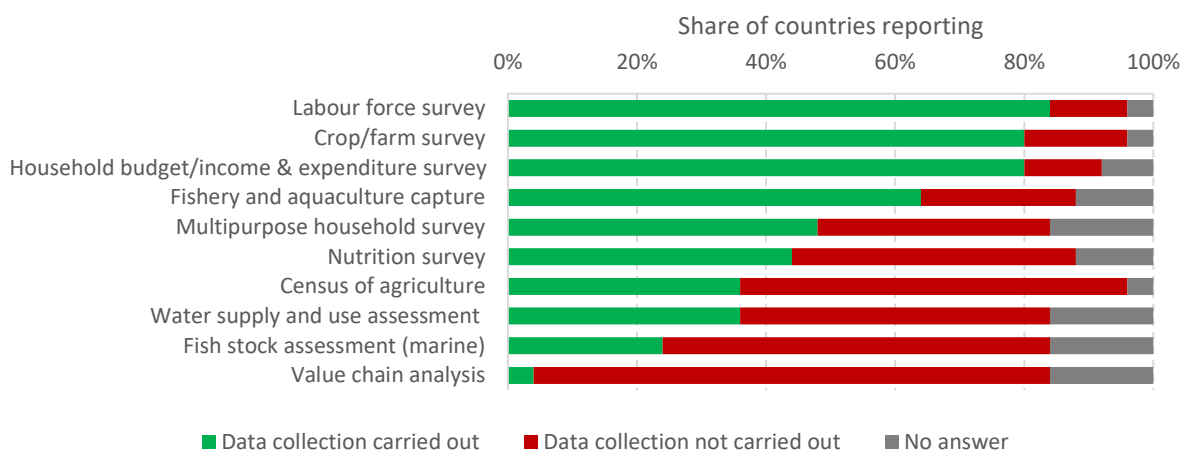
National data collection status and plans signal the limitations on data availability and hence the constraints on the compilation of SDG indicators. For this reason, in this assessment a review of the national statistical programme to ascertain the presence of the most relevant statistical data collection tools and alternative data sources, i.e. census of agriculture and selected surveys (e.g. household budget survey/income and expenditure survey, crop/farm survey), has been conducted.

**Figure 3:** Requests for assistance for producing/compiling SDG indicators

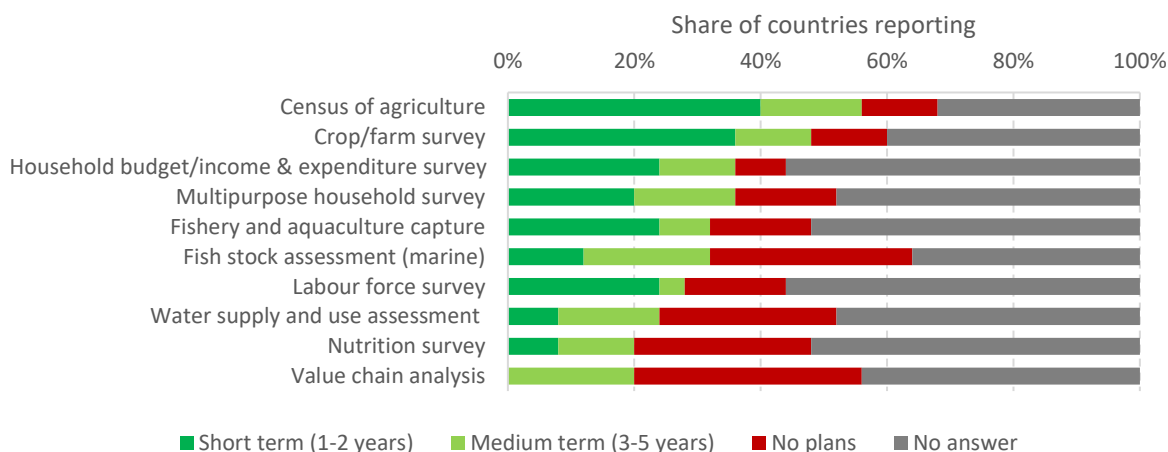


Based on the results displayed in Figure 4, the majority of the countries do not regularly conduct some key data collection vehicles such as multipurpose household surveys, nutrition surveys, and water supply and use assessments. Moreover, the data collection vehicles which have not been carried during the last five years are not fully planned to be carried out in the short or medium terms (Figure 5). This provides a negative outlook on the possibility to fill important data gaps in SDG reporting, as most indicators are heavily dependent on such data sources.

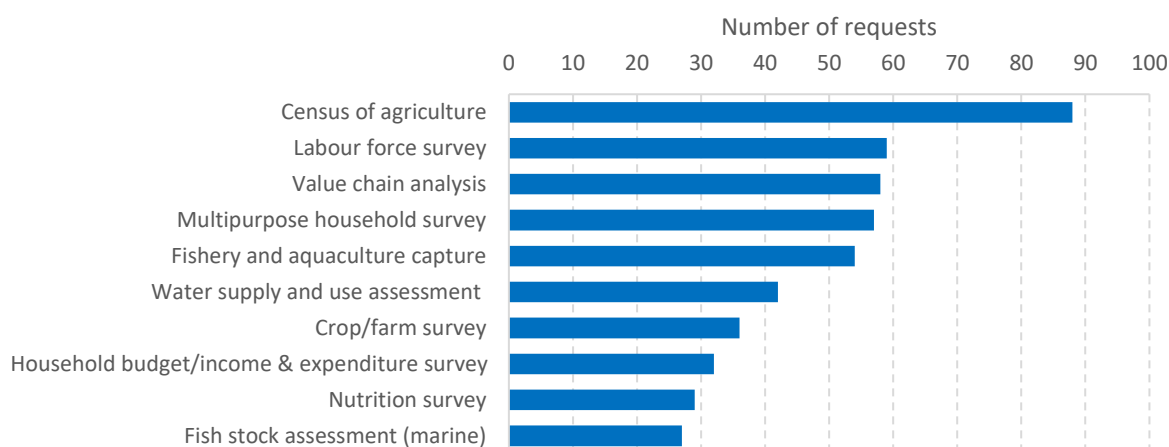
**Figure 4:** Data collection status during the last five years, by data source



**Figure 5:** Time horizon of data collection plans in the next five years, by data source



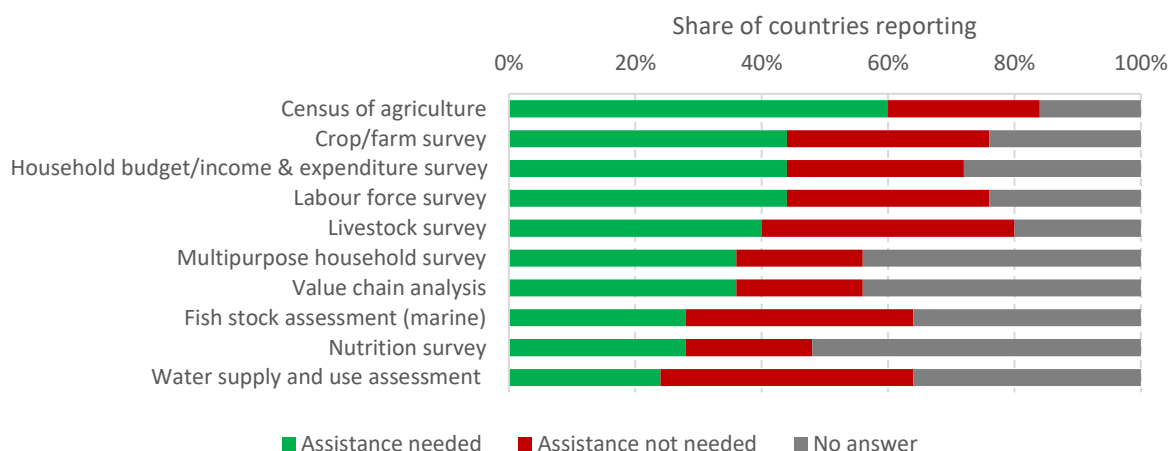
**Figure 6:** Number of requests for assistance by data source (multiple requests for the different phases of the data cycle can be made for any data source)



The dependency on external assistance and additional resources can provide insights about the capacity of national statistical systems. Figure 6 shows that Asia–Pacific countries seek technical assistance mostly for the census of agriculture, the labour force survey and the value chain analysis – the latter being essential for the compilation of indicator 12.3.1. Therefore, this indicates a positive indication for the perspective publication of this indicator if the relevant support could be supplied on time.

Figure 7 shows that many Asia–Pacific countries request technical assistance for some important data sources; in particular, 60% of the countries request assistance for the design and implementation of the census of agriculture. This dependency is a matter of concern since those data sources are key for the production of necessary data for the compilation not only of basic agricultural statistics, but also of some SDG indicators. Furthermore, it can be expected that the data sources rarely implemented could be expected to attract more technical assistance requests. However, this is not always the case. For instance, the share of countries requesting assistance for the water supply and use assessments (24%) is lower than the share of countries which do not request such assistance (40%). This might indicate countries’ low interest in producing specific SDG indicators.

**Figure 7:** Share of countries needing assistance for data collection, by data source



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#### 4. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations:

The “Statistical Capacity Assessment for the FAO-relevant SDG Indicators” survey attempted to assess the monitoring condition of the national statistical systems by collecting information on the national coordination mechanisms for SDG reporting, food and agriculture data availability, plans for filling data gaps, and needs for technical and financial support. The availability of non-official data sources is not considered in this assessment.

Based on the 25 Asia–Pacific countries (52%) which participated in the assessment, the survey results showed that:

- The majority of Asia–Pacific countries do not regularly conduct some of the key data collection activities that provide the main data sources to compile the SDG indicators related to food and agriculture.
- The data collection activities which have not been carried out recently are not fully planned to be carried out in near future. This puts a continuing pressure on the compilation of the SDG indicators which are heavily relying on such data collection vehicles.
- Most of the countries appear to have set up the required mechanisms for coordinating the SDG reporting and monitoring. However, some countries have not been able yet to identify indicator-specific national focal points for most of the indicators under FAO custodianship.
- Finally, more than half of the countries report that they will require some form of assistance to produce all SDG indicators under FAO custodianship relevant to the economic aspects of food and agriculture.

These results show that there are important data gaps to be filled in the Asia-Pacific region and that SDG monitoring and reporting needs to be improved in many countries. With a little over ten years left until the end of 2030, a comprehensive and inclusive effort of statistical capacity development is needed to ensure that well before the finish line countries will be able to monitor and report on the majority of the SDG indicators. In particular, some of the actions to be undertaken include: 1) ensuring that national/regional indicators are aligned with the global SDG indicators; 2) improving the coordination among national data producers; 3) increasing investments by donors and national governments in SDG data production and use; 4) strengthening the capacity of national statistical systems and the technical skills of official statisticians. Targeted interventions of assistance through partnerships among international and national partners are required to help countries overcome the capacity and financial constraints they are facing.

This assessment does not only reveal existing data gaps, but also helps draw our attention on how the available resources could be used more effectively. With limited additional resources and minimum effort, existing national surveys could already be utilized to collect the SDG relevant data. FAO has developed short survey modules that can be easily included in national surveys to collect food- and agricultural-related data. The training materials (in different languages), data collection, processing and analysis tools for those modules have also been developed and tested. By reducing the fragmentation of efforts and further capitalizing on potential synergies across internationally-led initiatives, these survey modules could be utilized by countries to fill data gaps and produce reliable data for the food- and agricultural-related SDG indicators.

Following COVID-19 pandemic, now more than ever, we need to invest in the immense power of data to help drive the transformative changes the world needs. High quality data and reliable statistics are essential for measuring progress towards the SDG targets and enable national statistical systems to inform the design of evidenced-based policies for their achievement. By providing primary information about the effectiveness of policies and programmes, governments can enhance their policies and be transparent and accountable about the delivery of development results to ensure no one is left behind, as advocated by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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