

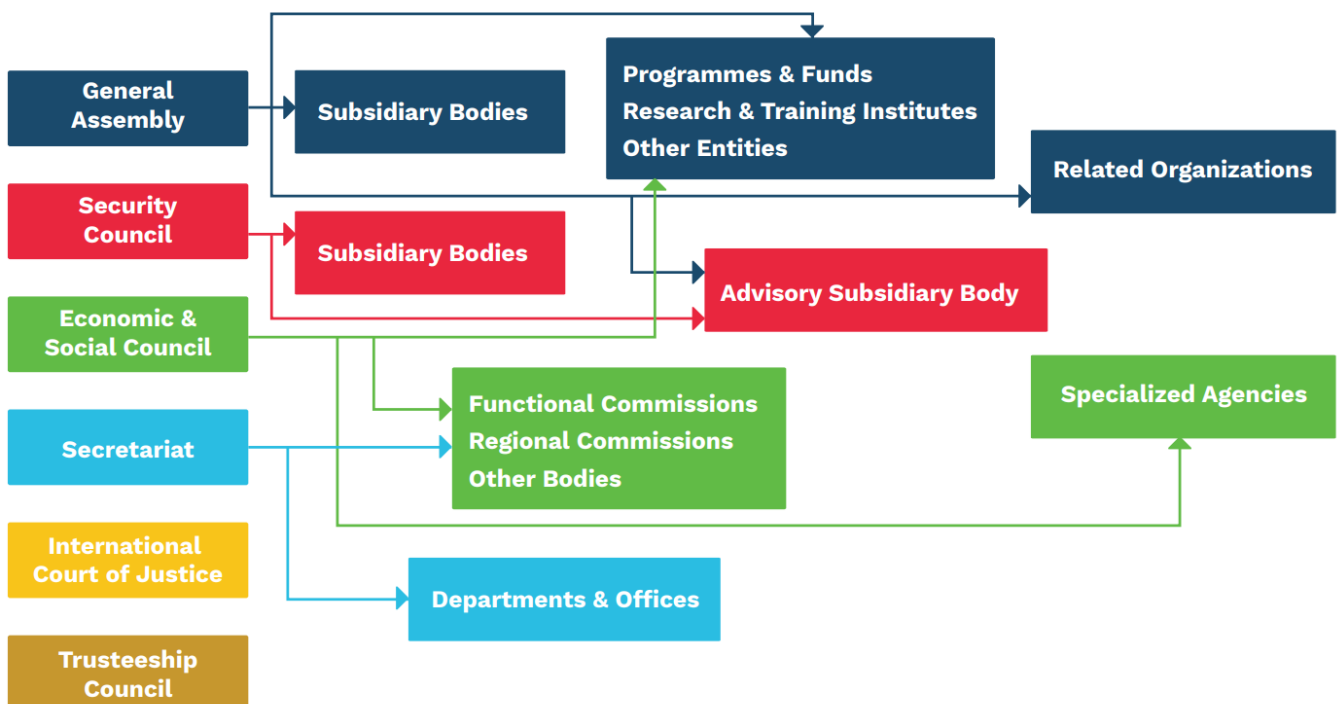
Global mechanisms and forums

The primary political mandate for oversight, follow up and review of the SDGs rests with the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) held annually in New York under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Additionally, the HLPF meets under the auspices of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) every four years, where world leaders, sustainable development experts and civil society will convene to assess progress towards the SDGs at the highest level, and provide political direction and guidance for SDG implementation in the years ahead. The two-week annual

conference is mandated to provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by: tracking progress; encouraging the development of coherent policies informed by evidence, science and country experiences; addressing new and emerging issues; and providing a platform for partnerships.²⁴⁸

With the focus around implementation and follow-up and monitoring of the SDGs firmly placed on national governments, the HLPF represents a critical opportunity for countries to collectively discuss progress towards the SDGs and 2030 Agenda. This is particularly important to examine key challenges and emerging issues and to explore partnerships between governments, civil society and the private sector to accelerate progress towards achieving the SDGs.²⁴⁹ Each year, the HLPF reviews global

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248 TAP Network (2016), Goal 16 Toolkit, p. 40.

249 Goal 16 Toolkit (2016) p. 40.

progress on five or six SDGs, in addition to the cross-cutting SDG 17 on means of implementation.²⁵⁰ Since the inaugural HLPF, there have been concerted efforts to re-view SDG 16 on an annual basis given its centrality to the realization of the rest of the Agenda.

The meetings of the HLPF are intended to be open to the participation of civil society and a wide range of other stakeholders, making it a prime target for engagement of civil society at the global level. With the HLPF serving as the main forum for countries to present their Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) (see box below), it is particularly important for civil society organizations that are interested in SDG accountability to keep track of these discussions on a yearly basis. Even for CSOs not able to attend the HLPF in person, meetings will be available via webcast on official UN channels, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and outputs and national progress reports will be posted on the UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform.²⁵¹

Currently, the Forum's provisions for accountability of national governments are considered relatively weak: national reporting is voluntary, the interactive discussion on each VNR is very brief and has not met the substantive standards of other accountability processes in the UN system, and space for civil society participation in many aspects of the Forum is limited and not considered adequate for ensuring meaningful contributions. In addition, the technical preparations for the Forum are not linked to its high-level discussions in a way that ensures their findings and inputs are addressed.

While progress on inclusion and participation at the global level remains slow, there are efforts and initiatives to advance SDG16+ to ensure meaningful participation of civil society at the global level. Civil society can engage in various ways in the Forum:²⁵³

- Joining their government's delegation to the HLPF when they present VNRs;
- Issuing their own reports on their government's experiences with SDG implementation, or a "spotlight" or "shadow" report to be issued alongside the government's report;
- Providing data or other information to be used in global stocktaking reports of SDG progress, including: the Secretary-General's report on 'Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals,' which provides a global overview of "the current situation of the Goals" each year; and 'The Sustainable Development Goals Report' produced by the UN Statistics Division, which reviews the preceding year's progress towards implementation. Both yearly updates draw on the available official data for the global indicators, which can be found in the Global SDG Indicators Database (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/>) and is sourced from the "custodian" UN agencies for each indicator;
- Participating at the global level in ways that domestic processes may not allow, including in the thematic/ SDG reviews held during the HLPF each July; and
- Advocacy with governments to shape the Ministerial Declaration adopted each year through intergovernmental negotiations leading up to the July session of the HLPF.

What is the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process?

The HLPF provides an important global stage to showcase the work developed at the national level, to exchange experiences and good practices between countries (including on VNR preparations), and to measure overall progress toward the SDGs. As the main mechanism for tracking progress on the SDGs at the national level and reporting on it at the global level, the VNRs are a key moment for countries to be answerable to their citizens. The VNR process can strengthen national ownership of the SDGs, promote transparency, inclusiveness and participation in reporting on the SDGs, and support more effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda.²⁵² An effective VNR process requires inclusive avenues of engagement from the subnational/national to global level and during all phases of the process: the initial preparation and organization; preparation of the VNR report; presentation at the HLPF; and follow-up after the HLPF. While some governments involve civil society in the VNR process, other countries exclude civil society from official processes—making CSO engagement at HLPF even more relevant and necessary in these contexts.

²⁵⁰ https://www.humanrights.dk/sites/humanrights.dk/files/media/migrated/integrated_review.pdf

²⁵¹ Goal 16 Toolkit (2016) p. 40.

²⁵² SDG Accountability Handbook, p. 35.

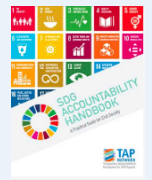
²⁵³ SDG Accountability Handbook, p. 93-95

As part of its role as the global hub for review of the SDGs, the HLPF also serves to gather the results of the range of national, regional, international and thematic processes, mechanisms and institutions that have the potential to contribute to the follow-up and review. Thus, civil society actors can influence the Forum’s discussions and, by extension, the accountability of their own government, by contributing to processes that feed into the HLPF, such as:²⁵⁴

- Regional commissions’ dialogues that serve as preparation for the HLPF sessions;
- Expert Group Meetings on the specific SDGs under review each year; and
- Contributing to side events on HLPF margins that feed informally into governments’ discussions on SDG progress.

CSOs can also utilize the HLPF for forming partnerships and alliances with the thousands of civil society representatives and other actors gathered at HLPF meetings, to strengthen advocacy and accountability at home. Civil society participation in meetings of the HLPF is facilitated by the Outreach and Partnerships Branch in the Division for Sustainable Development Goals, which is part of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

Key TAP Network resource:

<p>SDG Accountability Handbook: A Practical Guide for Civil Society (TAP Network, 2018)</p>	<p>This handbook provides guidance on the different approaches and steps that can be taken by civil society to ensure accountability for the SDGs at every level.</p> <p>Available at: https://sdgaccountability.org/</p>	
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Key resources:

<p>Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary General (United Nations, 2020)</p>	<p>This annual report provides a global overview of the current situation of the SDGs, based on the latest available data for indicators in the global indicator framework.</p> <p>Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26158Final_SG_SDG_Progress_Report_14052020.pdf</p>
<p>HLPF Partnership Exchange</p>	<p>The Exchange provides a forum for national governments and civil society to share experience and expertise in the design and implementation of partnerships that will contribute to achieving the SDGs.</p> <p>Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/PartnershipExchange</p>
<p>Partnerships for SDGs</p>	<p>This online platform contains the multi-stakeholder partnerships and voluntary commitments being profiled at the HLPF Partnership Exchange. CSOs can sign up for access to the database and use it to submit progress reports to the HLPF.</p> <p>Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships/</p>
<p>SDG National Reporting Initiative</p>	<p>This initiative facilitates greater information-sharing for reporting on the SDGs between international, regional and local communities.</p> <p>Available at: https://www.sdgreporting.org/</p>
<p>Major Groups and other Stakeholders Coordination Mechanism</p>	<p>Major groups and stakeholders interested in engaging in the HLPF can register for the self-organized coordination mechanism and mailing list via https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/mgos</p>

254 SDG Accountability Handbook, p. 93-95