

Voluntary National Reviews

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) can provide insight into SDG16+ implementation, promote inclusive and meaningful multi-stakeholder participation and advance and accelerate implementation of the SDG16+ agenda

Overview

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are an essential part of the follow-up and review framework of the 2030 Agenda. Presented annually at the HLPF under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), they review individual progress on a country's implementation of the SDGs. The VNRs are voluntary, State-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries and often involve a wide range of stakeholders.¹⁹⁰ They aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They also seek to strengthen policies and government institutions and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the SDGs.¹⁹¹

Between 40 and 50 countries can sign up to present a VNR each year. A VNR typically consists of the following phases: initial preparation and organization; preparation of the report; presentation at the HLPF, usually involving a 15-minute presentation followed by a 15-minute discussion; and follow-up after the HLPF. Stakeholder engagement may occur throughout any or all of these phases.¹⁹² Ideally, VNRs will build on national review processes, involve all relevant stakeholders and focus on those most at risk of being left behind.¹⁹³

VNRs are a key tool to support accountability for SDG16+ – and the rest of the SDGs – at both national and global levels. They can provide insight into SDG implementation, promote inclusive and meaningful multi-stakeholder participation in reporting on the SDGs and support more effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Rather than being an end in themselves, they are a means to advance and accelerate the implementation of the SDGs including SDG16+. By comprehensively reviewing SDG16+ in a VNR, Member States are reaffirming their commitment to creating peaceful, just and inclusive societies,¹⁹⁴ as well as their commitment to effective, transparent and accountable reporting on SDG implementation.



¹⁹⁰ United Nations (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1, para. 84. Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

¹⁹¹ United Nations. 'High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: Voluntary National Reviews Database'. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

¹⁹² Transparency, Accountability and Participation (TAP) Network (2018). *SDG Accountability Handbook: A Practical Guide for Civil Society*, p. 35. Available at: <https://sdeaccountability.org/>

¹⁹³ The Danish Institute for Human Rights (2019). *Integrated review and reporting on SDGs and Human Rights*, p. 7. Available at: <https://www.humanrights.dk/publications/integrated-review-reporting-sdgs-human-rights>

¹⁹⁴ Global Alliance for Reporting on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies (2020). *A Guide to Report on SDG 16 in a Voluntary National Review*, p. 8. Available at: <https://www.sdg16hub.org/content/global-alliance-guide-report-sdg16-voluntary-national-reviews>

Putting it into practice¹⁹⁵

Civil society actors can participate in, influence and contribute to VNR-related processes – in order to support SDG16+ implementation and accountability – through the following actions:

1. **Determine whether your country has volunteered for a VNR** – You should verify whether your country has volunteered to present a VNR and identify the national focal point for the review through the UN's [Voluntary National Reviews Database](#).¹⁹⁶
2. **Urge your government to review SDG16+ in its VNR** – You should urge your government to provide a comprehensive review of all SDG16+ targets and indicators, a review of specific SDG16+ targets and indicators that are most relevant to your national context, or a review of priority themes in SDG16+ in which to cluster relevant SDG16+ targets and indicators.¹⁹⁷
3. **Determine whether there will be multi-stakeholder participation in preparing the VNR** – You should contact the national focal point for the review, the government entity responsible for coordinating or preparing the VNR,¹⁹⁸ and any other actors that may be involved in facilitating or supporting stakeholder engagement¹⁹⁹ in order to establish whether there will be formal opportunities for civil society actors to participate in preparing the VNR. If no opportunities are planned, you should advocate for a formal mechanism or platform to ensure that civil society can actively and meaningfully contribute to the VNR.²⁰⁰

TIP:

Be proactive in reaching out to governments in relation to multi-stakeholder engagement, as many governments may not yet have a process to engage with civil society.



4. **Raise awareness of the VNR and build civil society's capacity for engagement** – You can create public awareness of and disseminate information about the VNR process through traditional media, social media and CSO networks in order to promote public interest and engagement in the VNR. You can also help to mobilize and build the capacity of civil society to engage in the VNR process by sharing information, fostering understanding of the VNR and the SDG16+ agenda and identifying opportunities for participation.
5. **Participate in formal consultations for the VNR and/or hold independent consultations** – You should participate in any in-person or online stakeholder consultations held by the government for the VNR in order to bring attention to SDG16+ progress, as well as gaps and challenges. Where no consultations are planned, you should consider holding independent consultations to gather inputs for the VNR or civil society spotlight reports on SDG16+.²⁰¹

TIP:

Consider offering advice or practical support to governments well in advance of VNR consultations in order to ensure that the consultation process is conducted in a meaningful, inclusive, participatory, transparent and accessible manner for all.



6. **Encourage your government to include independent contributions in its VNR report** – Contributions from other stakeholders may be in the form of independently written chapters, comments on specific SDGs or targets, or separate inputs included in the annex of the report. For example, Finland's 2020 VNR report includes an independent assessment from civil society – in addition to the government's assessment – for each SDG reviewed.²⁰²

¹⁹⁵ Adapted from: Transparency, Accountability and Participation (TAP) Network (2018). *SDG Accountability Handbook: A Practical Guide for Civil Society*, pp. 36-38. Available at: <https://sdgaccountability.org/>

¹⁹⁶ Focal points for VNRs are identified under a separate tab for each country listed in the Voluntary National Reviews Database. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

¹⁹⁷ Global Alliance for Reporting on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies (2020). *A Guide to Report on SDG 16 in a Voluntary National Review*, p. 11. Available at: <https://www.sdg16hub.org/content/global-alliance-guide-report-sdg16-voluntary-national-reviews>

¹⁹⁸ The government entity responsible for the overall coordination of the VNR could be an existing body or institution – such as a specific ministry – or an ad hoc arrangement such as a lead department/agency or an integrated, inter-ministerial group, coordinating office or committee.

¹⁹⁹ Other actors that may be involved in facilitating or supporting stakeholder engagement in the VNR process include UN focal points in the country, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) or civil society stakeholder platforms or umbrella groups.

²⁰⁰ A formal mechanism should allow civil society to contribute to the VNR through consultations, online platforms, and written submissions and reporting.

²⁰¹ According to one CSO, conducting or supporting VNR consultations can be an effective way to ensure that the voices of marginalized or vulnerable groups are included in the VNR process in a more legitimate and representative manner. Sightsavers (2017). "Civil society engagement in the voluntary national review process: Sightsavers' experience in 2016-17." Reflection paper, p. 2.

²⁰² *Voluntary National Review 2020 Finland: Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26261VNR_Report_Finland_2020.pdf

7. Review the draft VNR report through an SDG16+ lens and provide feedback – In some cases, you may have the opportunity to provide feedback or comments on the government’s draft report. Where this is the case, you should ensure that the report:

- a. Reviews all relevant SDG16+ targets in a comprehensive and detailed manner;
- b. Refers to recommendations or information from international human rights, labour standards or other mechanisms that overlap with SDG16+ targets;
- c. Addresses vulnerable and marginalized groups and the pledge to “leave no one behind” in a dedicated section or through a cross-cutting approach;²⁰³ and
- d. Discusses the inclusiveness of stakeholder engagement in SDG-related processes.

8. Produce a civil society spotlight report on SDG16+ – You can also produce a spotlight report to challenge or provide an alternative perspective of SDG16+ implementation in your country.²⁰⁴

9. Participate in the review at the HLPF – You should encourage your government to include civil society stakeholders within their official delegation to the HLPF, as well as within their official presentation. You may also be able to attend or participate in your country’s VNR at the HLPF in an independent capacity, either in-person or remotely.²⁰⁵ All civil society representatives attending the HLPF should consider organizing a side event on their country’s implementation of SDG16+, disseminating civil society spotlight reports on SDG16+ and making official statements or asking questions during their country’s review.

10. Pursue follow-up activities after your country’s VNR – You should use the VNR as a tool to advance SDG16+ implementation and accountability. In particular, you should:

- a. Disseminate the VNR at national and sub-national levels in local or national languages;
- b. Provide an assessment of your country’s review of SDG16+ implementation by issuing a press release or public statement or holding a press conference;
- c. Meet with other non-governmental stakeholders to reflect on the VNR process and discuss next steps to influence SDG16+ implementation and follow-up and review; and
- d. Urge your government to address the main findings of the VNR and to follow through on any commitments it made during the VNR process in relation to SDG16+.



²⁰³ For example, a cross-cutting approach to leaving no one behind could entail having a subsection on leaving no one behind in reviewing each SDG, including SDG 16.

²⁰⁴ For more information, see the chapter on ‘Spotlight Reporting.’

²⁰⁵ Civil society representatives wishing to attend their country’s VNR in an independent capacity must register in advance and will need UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consultative status or to be on the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) Roster. Information on registration for the HLPF each year is normally available on the HLPF’s website: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/>



CASE STUDY:

Bringing Together Civil Society and Government through ‘Ready for Review’ Consultations for the VNRs

Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS)

At the start of 2019, the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) began its ‘Ready for Review’ (R4R) project, with the support of France’s Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs (MEAE), EU DEVCO, and the TAP Network. The R4R project ultimately aimed to ensure the meaningful inclusion, participation and contribution of civil society during Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes through nationally-held consultations and capacity-building workshops. The project operated in Côte d’Ivoire, the Central African Republic, Chad, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste, Nigeria and Rwanda to host capacity building and coordination workshops for civil society to discuss and strategize around their country’s VNR processes, and SDG16+. In follow-up to these activities, both during and after the HLPF, CSPPS organized a peer-to-peer exchange to reflect on the VNR experiences of CSO representatives involved in the project. Overall, this project helped empower civil society in-country to engage in VNR processes, and to help them mobilize around SDG16+.



To read the full-length version of this case study, visit www.sdg16toolkit.org/case-studies

Key TAP Network resources:

<p>Mainstreaming SDG 16: Using the Voluntary National Review to Advance More Peaceful, Just and Inclusive societies (Global Alliance and TAP Network, 2020)</p>	<p>This resource provides policy guidance, case studies and good practices on advancing SDG 16 implementation by more effectively leveraging the Voluntary National Review (VNR) and post-VNR processes.</p> <p>Available at: https://www.sdg16hub.org/topic/mainstreaming-sdg-16-using-voluntary-national-review-advance-more-peaceful-just-and-inclusive</p>	
<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 national government accountability for the SDGs. It includes a chapter on ‘Contributing to Voluntary National Reviews (VNR)’.</p> <p>Available at: https://sdgaccountability.org/</p>	
<p>SDG16 in VNRs and Spotlight Reports: Reporting on Progress, Reflecting on Inclusive Accountability Measures and Recommendations for going ahead (GIZ and TAP Network, 2020)</p>	<p>This report evaluates VNR and spotlight reports submitted to the 2019 HLPF for a select group of countries. It examines whether and how spotlight and VNR reports relate to one another and identifies the main commonalities and differences between the perspectives of governments and civil society.</p> <p>Available at: https://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GIZ_TAP_2020_SDG-16-in-VNRs-and-Spotlight-Reports_Final-Version.pdf</p>	

Key resources: Preparation for VNRs

<p>High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development – ‘Voluntary National Reviews’ (UN DESA)</p>	<p>This section of the UN’s HLPF website provides information and resources on VNRs. It includes a database of all countries that have participated or intend to participate in a VNR, with links to documents and reports, statements, partnerships and commitments, and focal points for VNRs.</p> <p>Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/</p>
<p>Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (UN Secretary-General, 2021)</p>	<p>These guidelines – prepared by the UN Secretary-General in 2015 and updated in 2017, 2019 and 2021 – seek to support Member States in conducting VNRs. They provide a framework for certain common elements within VNR reports, while allowing for flexibility so countries can adapt reporting to their own circumstances.</p> <p>Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf</p>
<p>Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews – The 2021 Edition (UN DESA, 2020)</p>	<p>This handbook for countries preparing to present VNRs supplements the Secretary-General’s guidelines. It provides elementary building blocks and the basic, practical information on the steps that countries may take when preparing VNRs. Available in the six official UN languages.</p> <p>Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/</p>
<p>The Guidelines to Support Country Reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals (UNDG, 2017)</p>	<p>This resource contains guidance, tools and suggestions for preparing SDG progress reviews at the national level, which can be used in the preparation of the VNR.</p> <p>Available at: https://unsdg.un.org/resources/guidelines-support-country-reporting-sustainable-development-goals</p>
<p>A Guide to Report on SDG 16 in a Voluntary National Review (Global Alliance for Reporting on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, 2020)</p>	<p>This resource provides a step-by-step guide for Member States on how to report on SDG 16 through an inclusive and participatory VNR process. It outlines where to include information on SDG 16 in a VNR and provides a compendium of resources and Member State examples.</p> <p>Available at: https://www.sdg16hub.org/content/global-alliance-guide-report-sdg16-voluntary-national-reviews</p>

Key resources: Analysis of VNRs

<p>Voluntary National Reviews Synthesis Reports (UN DESA, multiple years)</p>	<p>These annual reports provide an overview of the approaches and actions taken by countries presenting VNRs in a given year. They showcase best practices, lessons learned, gaps and challenges encountered in working towards the achievement of the SDGs.</p> <p>Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/</p>
<p>Progressing National SDG Implementation: An Independent Assessment of the Voluntary National Review Reports Submitted to the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (Cooperation Canada, multiple years)</p>	<p>This annual series of reports, commissioned by civil society and published by Co-operation Canada (formally the Canadian Council for International Co-operation), provides an independent analysis of Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports submitted to the HLPF, including outlining the governance and institutional arrangements of countries.</p> <p>Available at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● https://cooperation.ca/2030agenda/ (2018, 2019 and 2020). ● https://cooperation.ca/progressing-national-sdgs-impementation/ (2017).
<p>P4R Comparative Analysis of Voluntary National Reviews (Partners for Review (P4R), multiple years)</p>	<p>These annual reports identify similarities, differences, progress and emerging trends in VNRs in a given year. They outline general features of the VNRs and analyze national SDG institutional structures, SDG mainstreaming and policy coherence, stakeholder engagement, statistics and data, repeated VNR countries and, in 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Available at: https://www.partners-for-review.de/resources/</p>
<p>White & Case Review of the Voluntary National Reports (VNRs) (White & Case LLP and Global Alliance, multiple years)</p>	<p>These annual reports provide an analysis of VNR reports to assess whether, and to what extent, countries report on the implementation of SDG 16 or SDG16+.</p> <p>Available at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● https://www.sdg16hub.org/content/analysis-2020-voluntary-national-reviews-and-sdg-16 (2020) ● https://www.sdg16hub.org/content/global-alliance-white-case-review-2019-voluntary-national-reports-vnrs (2019) ● https://www.sdg16hub.org/node/324 (2018) ● https://www.sdg16hub.org/node/326 (2017) ● https://www.sdg16hub.org/node/327 (2016)

