Contributing to Voluntary National Reviews (VNR)

What is it?

Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are an essential part of the formal follow-up and review architecture of the 2030 Agenda. Presented every year at the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) during its three-day ministerial segment in July, these reviews are supposed to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders.[63] VNRs provide the opportunity for countries to share their individual experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating SDG implementation.

VNRs typically consist of the following broad phases: initial preparation and organization; preparation of the VNR report; presentation at the HLPF; and follow-up after the HLPF.[64] Stakeholder engagement may occur throughout all of these phases. The main guidance for countries preparing for VNRs is the updated UN Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines, which provide a framework for common elements for the reviews.[65] While there is no frequency for reporting mandated for VNRs, the UN Secretary-General has recommended that all countries conduct at least two VNRs

during the 15-year period of the SDGs.[66] By the end of July 2018, more than half of all UN Member States had presented VNRs at the HLPF.[67]

Why is it important?

VNRs are a key tool for accountability for the SDGs at both the national and global level. As the main mechanism for tracking progress on the SDGs at the national level and reporting on it at the global level, VNRs provide an important opportunity for countries to be answerable to their citizens in relation to their implementation of the SDGs, especially for members of civil society who have limited space to participate in SDG accountability processes at a national level.

VNR reports are expected to show what steps a country has taken to implement the 2030 Agenda and provide an assessment of the results on the ground including successes, challenges, gaps in implementation, possible solutions and emerging issues. As a tool for accountability, 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.[68] Given the 2030 Agenda's voluntary nature, VNRs may be seen as a norm-building process, in which individual

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63 United Nations (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, para. 84.

64 UN DSD and UN DESA (2018). Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews, p. 9.

65 Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF). https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf

66 Report of the Secretary General, Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level, para. 80.

67 The Danish Institute for Human Rights (2018). Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda, p. 18.

68 UNDG (2017). Guidelines, p. 9.

countries' best practices may persuade others to follow suit and set standards for the international community.

How can it be used?

Although VNR presentations take place at the global level, there are a number of ways in which stakeholders – including CSOs and citizens – can participate in, influence and/or contribute to VNR processes at the national level. In particular, CSOs can engage in the following actions:

1. Determine whether the country has volunteered for a VNR – CSOs should investigate whether their country has volunteered to present a VNR by reviewing the list of volunteer countries on the HLPF website: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/. The website should also identify country focal point(s) for the review as well as relevant reports.

2. Determine whether there are mechanisms or processes for involving civil society in preparing for the VNR – CSOs should establish if there will be stakeholder involvement in preparing for the VNR by identifying and contacting the entity within the government responsible for the overall coordination of the VNR. This could be an existing body or institution, or an ad hoc arrangement such as a lead department/agency or an integrated, inter-ministerial group, coordinating office or committee.[69] CSOs should also consider contacting UN focal points in the country that may be involved in facilitating or supporting stakeholder engagement.[70]

TIP: Be proactive in reaching out to governments in relation to VNR preparations, as many governments may not have a process for outreach and engagement with CSOs.[71]

3. Raise awareness of the VNR among civil society and other stakeholders – CSOs can play a key role in building public awareness and disseminating information about the VNR process including information about national consultations. CSOs may wish to engage the media to raise awareness of the VNR, create and maintain a network of CSO contacts to share information and foster understanding of the VNR process and its importance, and/or utilize social media to promote public interest and engagement.[72]

4. Participate in government consultations or hold independent consultations – CSOs should seek to participate in any in-person or online stakeholder consultations held by the government to prepare for the VNR. Ideally, governments should solicit verbal and written inputs from all stakeholders in the preparation of VNR reports.[73] Where governments lack the capacity to hold consultations, CSOs may wish to conduct independent consultations to provide inputs to the VNR report. 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.[74]

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

5. Review the draft VNR report – In some cases, CSOs and other stakeholders may have the opportunity to provide feedback and comments on a draft VNR report. Where CSOs have this opportunity, they should ensure that the report contains the following information:

a. A review of all 17 SDGs given the universal and interrelated nature of the 2030 Agenda;

b. An overview of stakeholder engagement in SDG implementation and review processes at national and

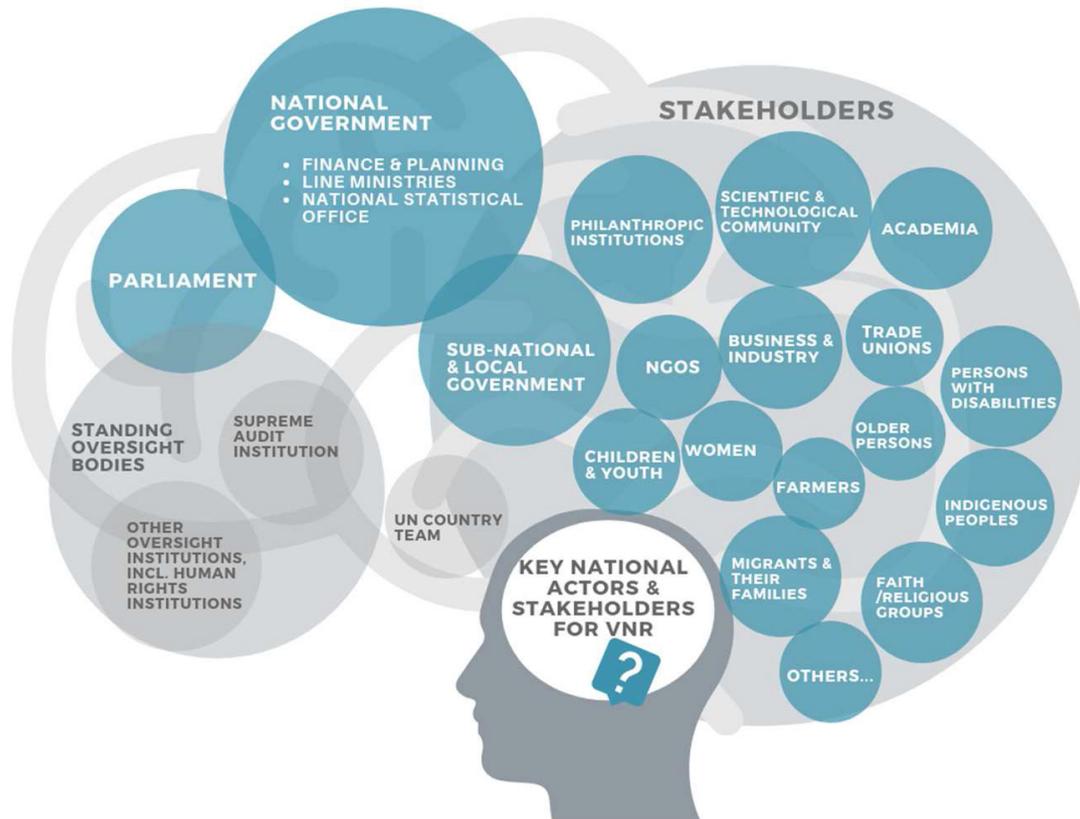69 UN DSD and UN DESA (2018). Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews, p. 10.

70 UN Women (2018). p. 35.

71 Sightsavers (2017). Civil society engagement in the voluntary national review process: Sightsavers' experience in 2016-17. Reflection paper, p. 1.

72 Amnesty International (2016). Sustainable Development Goals: A Practical Guide for National Action and Accountability, p. 13. https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ACT1046992016ENGLISH.PDF

73 CCIC (2018). p. 28.

74 Sightsavers (2017). p. 2.

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subnational levels, including opportunities for broad stakeholder participation in preparing for the VNR;

c. A summary of national-level accountability processes and how the government plans to review progress in the future, including plans for future HLPF reporting ;[76]

d. A dedicated section on and/or cross-cutting approach to the pledge to 'leave no one behind' that outlines the status and situation of vulnerable and marginalized groups – including any available data – as well as initiatives to improve their situation;[77] and

e. Recommendations or information from existing human rights reporting that align with the SDGs.[78] [For information on using human rights reporting in VNRs,

see chapter on International Human Rights Mechanisms.]

6. Provide independent contributions to VNR reports – CSOs should urge governments to include independent contributions, comments or inputs from other stakeholders in the VNR report. A number of VNR countries – including Denmark, Cyprus, Netherlands and Sweden – included stakeholder-generated content in their 2017 VNR reports with contributions from stakeholders such as youth, civil society, academia and business.[79]

7. Produce a civil society shadow report – CSOs may wish to produce a civil society SDG progress report to challenge or provide an alternative perspective of SDG implementation to their country's official VNR report.

75 UN DESA (2018). Handbook for Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20872VNR_hanbook_2019_Edition_For_Print10122018Foreword-Graphic_update.pdf

76 CCIC (2018). p. vi.

77 The Danish Institute for Human Rights (2018), Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda, p. 38.

78 *Ibid*

79 DIHR 2018, Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda, p. 33.

These reports are particularly important where civil society has little or no opportunity to engage in official VNR processes at the national level. Shadow reports may be produced in partnership with civil society coalitions, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), academia or other stakeholders. [For more information on producing civil society reports, see chapter on civil society reporting.]

TIP: CSOs should try to work in coalition with other CSOs to effectively influence VNRs. Supporting the development of coalitions and strengthening the collective ability to influence are key activities to influencing the VNR process and its outcomes.[80]

TIP: CSOs 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.[81]

8. Participate in the review at the HLPF – Some national-level CSOs may have the opportunity to attend or participate in their country's VNR at the international level. Notably, a number of countries that have presented VNRs have included stakeholder representatives within their official delegation to the HLPF and, in some cases, within their official presentation.[82] CSOs attending the HLPF in an official or independent capacity

should consider organizing a roundtable or side event on their country's VNR, disseminating any civil society shadow reports and making official statements or asking questions to their country under review.[83]

9. Pursue follow-up activities after the VNR – There are a number of important actions that CSOs can pursue to promote accountability for the SDGs following their country's VNR presentation at the HLPF. In particular, CSOs should:

a. Disseminate the national report and outcome of the VNR at national and subnational levels and, if necessary, translate it into national and/or local languages;[84]

b. Provide an assessment of the country's review by issuing a press release, public statement or holding a press conference;[85]

c. Hold a conference or meeting with non-governmental stakeholders to reflect upon the VNR process and discuss next steps to influence SDG implementation and review;

d. Pressure governments to follow through on promises and commitments made in VNR reports or during national presentations; and

e. Engage with governments to follow-up on the main findings of VNRs and to discuss plans for future SDG implementation and review, including the government's plans to volunteer again for a VNR at the global level.[86]

Key Resources:

• The **High-level Political Forum's website** provides a list of all countries that have volunteered or are intending to volunteer for a VNR. See: *https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/*

• The **updated Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF),** provide a framework for common elements for VNR reviews. See: *https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf*

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80 Sightsavers (2017), p. 3.

81 Information on registration for the HLPF each year is usually available here: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/

82 DIHR 2018, Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda, p. 33.

83 Amnesty International (2016), p. 14.

84 Amnesty International (2016). p. 14.

85 *Ibid*

86 Together 2030 and World Vision International (2017). Guiding for Accountability: Together 2030 Recommendations for a revised set of guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), p. 5. http://www.together2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/REV-FINAL-T30-Recommendations-for-VNR-guidelines-October-2017-2.pdf

• ***The Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews* (2019)**, produced by UN DESA and available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic, elaborates on the Secretary-General's guidelines on VNRs and provides practical information on the steps that countries may take when preparing a VNR. See: *https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20872VNR_hanbook_2019_Edition_For_Print10122018ForewordGraphic_update.pdf*

• ***The Guidelines to Support Country Reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals* (2017)**, prepared by the UN Development Group (UNDG) contain tools and suggestions for preparing reviews at the national level, which can be used in the preparation of the VNR. See: *https://undg.org/document/guidelines-to-support-country-reporting-on-the-sustainable-developmentgoals/*

• **The Synthesis Reports of Voluntary National Reviews of previous years (2016 and 2017)**, produced by UN DESA, provide a snapshot of general characteristics of the VNRs for each year and contain additional examples of good practices and lessons learned for countries conducting VNRs. See: *https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/*

• ***Progressing National SDG Implementation: An Independent Assessment of the Voluntary National Review Reports Submitted to the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2017* (2018)**, by the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC), highlights best practices as well as gaps in VNR reporting at the 2017 HLPF. See: *https://ccic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/ES-Eng.pdf*

• **Partners for Review** facilitates dialogue and peer learning on SDG reviews, bringing together representatives of the state, civil society, the private sector and academia to reflect on, discuss and share their experiences, good practices and lessons learned of national SDG review processes, both before and after VNR presentations at the HLPF. More information available at: *http://www.partners-for-review.de/*

• **Action for Sustainable Development (Action4SD)** works with civil society groups to monitor progress and public engagement in the national implementation of the SDGs including supporting member coalitions in a number of countries to submit shadow civil society reports for countries volunteering for VNRs. See: *https://action4sd.org*

Case Study: Including Stakeholders in Preparations

Global: *All 43 countries that reported to the 2017 HLPF included some element of stakeholder engagement in their preparations, but the level and modality varied across countries. The reports of some countries, such as* **Benin**, **Ethiopia**, **Indonesia**, **Jordan**, **Kenya**, **Tajikistan** *and* **Thailand**, *go into details about the diverse stakeholders consulted (CSOs, private sector, academia, youth, labour associations and local authorities, among others), while other countries are vaguer in their descriptions, referring to consultations with "relevant stakeholders." A few countries explicitly report on efforts to "reach those furthest behind" in their VNR preparations by carrying out consultations with vulnerable and marginalized groups. Costa Rica, for instance, carried out consultations with older persons, LGBTIQ persons, persons with disabilities and Indigenous peoples, and includes a section under each SDG on the challenges identified by these groups. Approaches for outreach include seminars, workshops, bilateral discussions and online channels.[87]*

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87 DIRH. HR/2030.