



A Decade of Accountability

Assessing the Role of Voluntary National Reviews in Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals.

2016-2024



INTRODUCTION



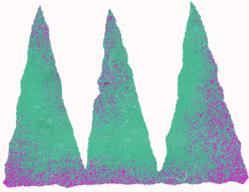
- "With just five years left to achieve the SDGs, are Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) truly driving change, or are they symbolic exercises"?

Since their inception in 2016, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) have served as a key accountability tool for monitoring progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Designed as country-led and voluntary mechanisms, VNRs aim to peer learning, track national progress, and identify policy gaps, ensuring that governments remain accountable to their commitment to the Agenda 2030¹. The VNRs also seek to strengthen policies and accountability², enhance policy dialogue, promote policy coherence and foster multi-stakeholder engagement under the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)³.

However, as the global community approaches just five years to finish the SDGs, it has become evident that the effectiveness of the VNRs have varied significantly across countries. While some governments have used them strategically to align national plans with SDG implementation, others have treated them as symbolic exercises with little influence on policymaking or resources allocation. Additionally, civil society organizations (CSOs) have raised concerns about limited stakeholder engagement, shrinking civic space, and the selective nature of SDG reporting.

As we approach the **10-year milestone of the SDGs in 2024**, this report assesses whether the VNR process has meaningfully advanced SDG implementation or if it remains a largely rhetoric exercise. The increasing complexity of global challenges – ranging from the impact of COVID-19 pandemic⁵ and soaring **climate emergencies**⁶ to **geopolitical tensions**⁷, and deepening **socioeconomic inequalities**^{8,9} – has heightened the urgency for stronger accountability mechanisms.





This report leverages the key findings and analyses of the Progressing National SDGs Implementation series¹⁰ that have been examining the 366 VNRs submitted by 191 countries¹¹ from 2016-2024 to the United Nations during the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). These yearly reports have provided an annual “SDG reality check” by interspersing countries’ official analysis with direct responses and additional insights from spotlight reports submitted by broad coalitions of civil society organizations directly involved in SDG implementation and monitoring in each country.

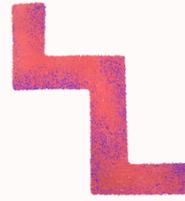
This report critically assesses the role of VNRs over the past decade, identifying what has worked, what has not, and what reforms are needed to ensure real progress toward the 2030 Agenda. This report especially focuses on:

- Thematic priorities and strategic approaches across different national contexts¹²
- The effectiveness (or limitations) of VNRs in driving policy change
- Where VNRs have contributed to greater accountability and where gaps remain.¹³
- Good practices that can be strengthened ahead of the 2030 deadline.

By offering a comprehensive data-driven review of VNRs, this analysis seeks to provide practical recommendations to policymakers, researchers, civil society organizations, and global stakeholders, for strengthening their role in accelerating SDG implementation and ensuring no one is left behind. It is more than an academic exercise; it is a collaborative effort to diagnose, understand, and finally accelerate progress toward a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient global future.¹⁴



THE EVOLUTION OF VNRS: KEY TRENDS AND GAPS



- Below are critical insights into the effectiveness of VNRS based on trends and evaluations over the past eight years.

Global Trends in VNR Participation

Three hundred sixty-six VNRs have been submitted to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) since 2016, with a further 39 due to be presented in 2025¹⁵.

Since the launch of VNRs, participation initially grew but has plateaued and now shows a declining trend. While early years reflected growing recognition of the SDGs as a global governance priority, participation peaked before declining post-COVID. This suggests that while VNRs remain an important tool, engagement levels are fluctuating, raising concerns about sustained commitment.

Status of the VNRs After July 2025, 191 countries, and the EU, will have presented over 366 VNR reports during the HLPF:

2016	-	22	VNRs
2017	-	43	VNRs
2018	-	46	VNRs
2019	-	47	VNRs
2020	-	47	VNRs
2021	-	44	VNRs
2022	-	44	VNRs
2023	-	41	VNRs
2024	-	36	VNRs



This decline raises important questions about whether countries are deprioritizing the VNR process or facing institutional and resource constraints in reporting on SDG implementation. The drop also underscores the need for strengthened accountability measures to ensure sustained engagement in the lead-up to 2030.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VNRS: WHAT HAS WORKED, WHAT HAS NOT



• Where VNRS Have Made a Difference



Raising awareness of SDG challenges at the national level.

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRS) have been instrumental in raising awareness of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) challenges at the national level between 2016 and 2023. The "Progressing National SDGs Implementation" reports provide insights into how various countries, including Forus member nations, have utilized VNRS to highlight and address these challenges.



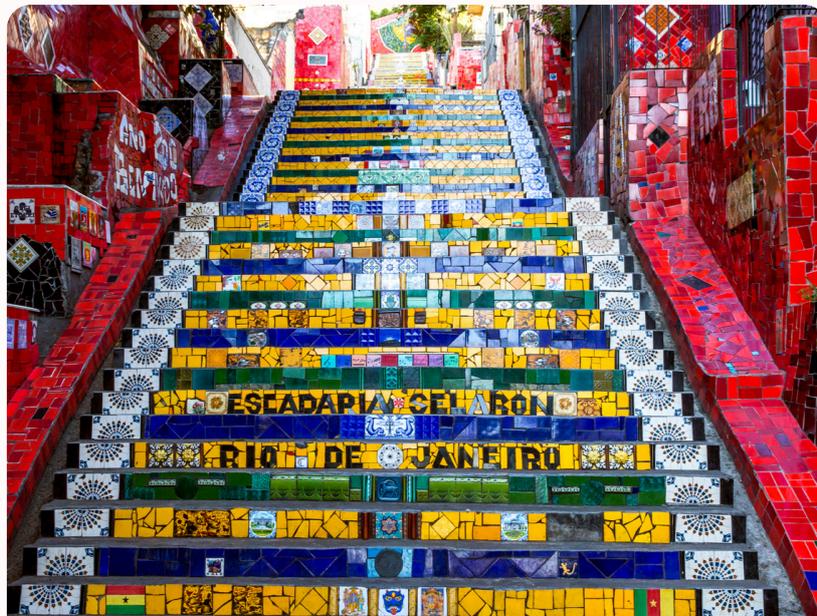
- **Brazil's** VNRS have emphasized the nation's commitment to the 2030 Agenda, detailing efforts to integrate SDGs into national policies and programs. The reports discuss challenges such as poverty reduction, healthcare access, and environmental sustainability, thereby increasing public awareness and fostering dialogue among stakeholders²⁵.



- **Dominican Republic** : Through its VNRS, the Dominican Republic has brought attention to issues such as social inequality, health disparities, and environmental concerns. The process has engaged various sectors, including civil society organizations like Alianza ONG²⁶, in discussions aimed at overcoming these challenges and advancing SDG implementation.



- **Honduras**: has utilized its VNRS to shed light on critical challenges such as poverty, education gaps, and climate vulnerability. The reports have played a key role in informing policymakers and the public, thereby fostering a collective approach to addressing these SDG-related issues²⁷.



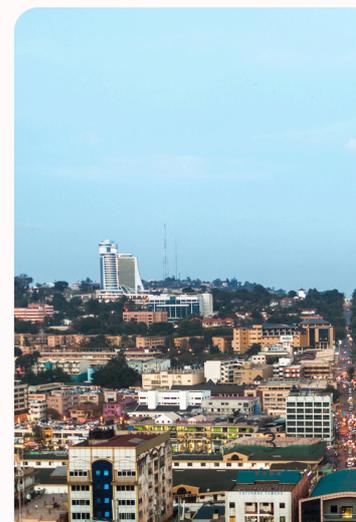
✓ Encouraging some countries to align national development plans with SDGs.

Many countries have aligned their national plan and policies with the SDGs as part of their VNR reporting. The "Progressing National SDGs Implementation" reports provide insights into how various countries have aligned their national plans and policies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of their Voluntary National Review (VNR) reporting between 2016 and 2023. Below is an overview of Forus member countries mentioned in these reports:

Colombia (2016) ,Brazil, Peru, Uruguay, Honduras , Indonesia (2017) Dominican Republic (2018) United Kingdom (2019) , Botswana (2022)²⁸ mentioned the incorporation of the SDGs into its national development strategies. The report highlighted efforts to integrate the 2030 Agenda into national policies and frameworks.

✓ Stakeholder Engagement and Consultation:

- VNRs have facilitated inclusive consultations with various stakeholders, including civil society, local governments, and the private sector, to raise awareness and gather diverse perspectives on SDG challenges.
- **Nepal:** In its VNR, Nepal emphasized the importance of inclusive stakeholder engagement. The country conducted consultations with various stakeholders, including civil society organizations, local governments, and the private sector, to gather diverse perspectives on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) challenges. This participatory approach aimed to ensure that the perspectives of different groups were incorporated into the national SDG implementation strategy.
- **Uganda:** Uganda's VNR process also highlighted extensive stakeholder engagement. The government organized consultations at both national and sub-national levels, involving civil society, academia, development partners, and the private sector. These consultations were designed to raise awareness of the SDGs and to collect input on the country's progress and challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda.





Providing a platform for peer learning and knowledge exchange

The "Progressing National SDGs Implementation" reports emphasize the role of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in facilitating peer learning and knowledge exchange among countries. These reports analyze VNRs submitted to the UN's High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and highlight the importance of mutual learning in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, the 2017 edition²⁹ underscores the HLPF's function in promoting "mutual peer learning, knowledge exchange and support" among nations. Similarly, the 2019 report³⁰ identifies ten key pillars essential for effective SDG implementation and discusses how countries can utilize the HLPF as a platform for "mutual peer learning, knowledge exchange and support."



VNR Twinning Program by The UN ESCAP

The Voluntary National Review (VNR) Twinning Program is an initiative designed to foster collaboration and mutual learning between countries undertaking their VNRs. This program pairs countries to share experiences, strategies, and best practices in implementing and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



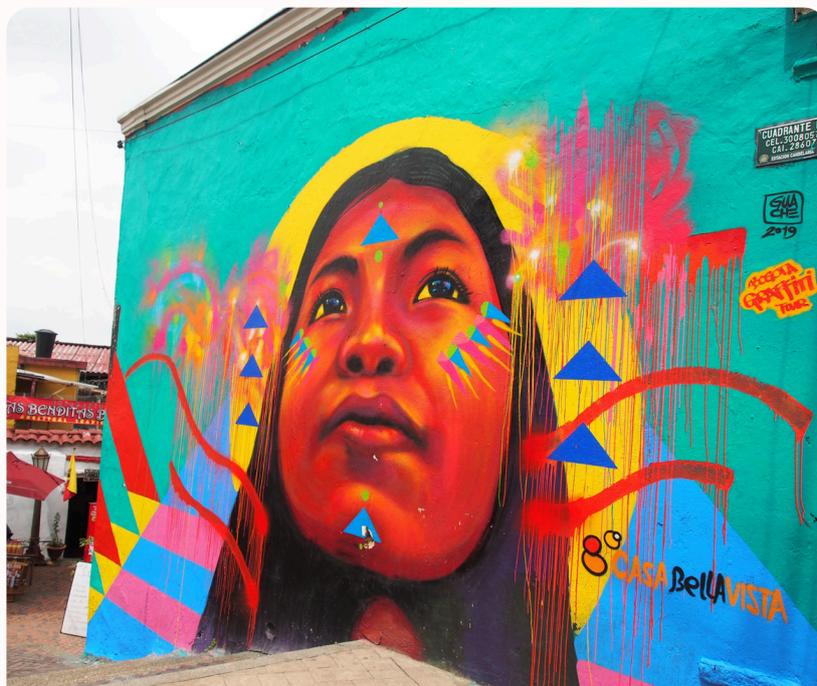
In the context of **Sri Lanka's** 2022 VNR³¹, the report highlights the country's participation in the VNR Twinning Program. Through this program, Sri Lanka engaged in knowledge exchange with its twin country, focusing on areas such as policy formulation, stakeholder engagement, and data collection methodologies related to SDG implementation.



• Outcomes and Lessons Learned:

- > **Enhanced Understanding of Best Practices:** Sri Lanka gained insights into effective strategies employed by its twin country, which informed the refinement of its own SDG implementation approaches.
- > **Improved Stakeholder Engagement:** The exchange facilitated discussions on engaging diverse stakeholders, leading to more inclusive and participatory processes in Sri Lanka's SDG initiatives.
- > **Strengthened Data Management:** Learning about innovative data collection and management techniques helped Sri Lanka enhance its monitoring and evaluation frameworks for SDG progress.
- > **Policy Coherence:** The program underscored the importance of aligning national policies with SDG targets, prompting Sri Lanka to assess and adjust its policy frameworks for better coherence.

Overall, the VNR Twinning Program provided Sri Lanka with valuable opportunities to learn from peer experiences, leading to strengthened capacities and more effective implementation of the SDGs.



LOCALISATION AND SUCCESS OF SDGS BECAUSE OF THE VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW.



The "Progressing National SDG Implementation" reports discusses the role of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) in the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2023 report³² highlights that subnational governments and local non-state actors are increasingly engaged in SDG reviews, with about a third of reporting countries having conducted VLRs. The report emphasizes the importance of systematic SDG processes at the local level, including defining sub-national priority targets and action plans, instituting mandatory SDG reporting, and participating in international partnerships to localize the SDGs.

- **Where VNRs have failed to trigger accountability, policy shifts, or financing commitments.**



Voluntary implementation of SDG commitments: 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.³³ 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. Yet, many countries do not consider the SDGs obligatory, do not allocate special budgets for them, and using updated terminology keep pursuing their old strategies based on economic growth, to the detriment of overall global and regional goals. The SDGs remain in the form of virtual programs without the necessary status and funding. The community, business, academia and the local authorities also remain alienated observers in this process (they do not perceive the SDGs as personal goals)³⁴. As per the record, United States, Haiti and Myanmar have neither presented their VNR nor they plan to present until July 2025³⁵.



Selective Reporting: Governments often highlight achievements while downplaying failures or contentious issues.



- **In Colombia**, for the first time, the government announced that in 2024 it would only review one goal – SDG 2 (zero hunger)³⁶, raising questions about its commitment to, as well as the inclusion and representation of, other SDGs. As explained by the Confederación Colombiana de ONG (CCONG), civil society has called for transparency and meaningful participation, yet it continues to face challenges in accessing information and engaging with decision makers.

This approach is seen as symptomatic of a broader trend, where international agendas may not be a priority. Although there are potential areas of alignment between the SDGs and government programs, concerns persist about the narrow focus across the region. In fact, recent developments point to a worrying reversal of these commitments, especially in Latin America.



Lack of Independent Monitoring: Many VNRs lack mechanisms for independent evaluation of government claims.



- **In Brazil's** 2019 Voluntary National Review (VNR), civil society organizations (CSOs) criticized the government for presenting a selective narrative that emphasized progress in poverty reduction while downplaying or ignoring significant challenges related to rising inequality, shrinking civic space, and human rights violations³⁷.



- **In Mexico**, the process of civil society dialogue with the government in the framework of monitoring and promoting the 2030 Agenda is currently limited by the electoral situation, which imposed a “ban” on multistakeholder engagement between March and June 2024³⁸. Although civil society has a seat on the Monitoring and Strategy Committee, one of the four committees that make up the National Council of the 2030 Agenda, they have no access to information on the content of Mexico’s VNR and even less access to advocacy options and information.





Data disaggregation: Many countries still lack disaggregated data critical for addressing inequalities. Only 43% of countries reported on SDG data availability in 2022, down from previous years. Underutilize alternative data sources, such as citizen-generated data or CSO reports. For example –



- **CONCORD – Europe:** As the European Confederation of NGOs working on sustainable development and international cooperation, CONCORD gathers data from its member organizations across Europe. This collective citizen-generated data is utilized to assess the effectiveness of development policies and advocate for changes at the EU level. For instance, their "AidWatch39" reports analyze the quality and quantity of Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided by EU member states, influencing policy discussions and decisions within the EU institutions.



Limited Civil Society Participation: As discussed in the previous paragraphs, in many countries, the VNR process is largely government-driven, with minimal input from civil society. This limits the inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of reports. Restricted civic space can result in the exclusion of marginalized groups from the review process. For instance, the 2022 report notes that while 41 out of 44 countries⁴⁰ provided information on engaging multiple stakeholders in the VNR process, the level of detail and actual inclusivity varied significantly. Some countries mentioned both offline and online consultations, but the depth of civil society involvement was often limited. Also, despite formal steps to consult with various stakeholders, these consultations frequently lack substantive engagement. There is a growing tendency – to treat dialogue opportunities as a "tick box"⁴¹ exercise, fulfilling formal requirements without genuinely incorporating civil society perspectives into the VNRs.



- **Tokenistic Engagement:** The number of VNR that reported the formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements dropped from 70% in 2019 and 2020 to 64% in 2021. In **Pakistan (2019)**, CSOs reported that their contributions were ignored, and the VNRs reflected a government-centric narrative.



- **Lack of Clear Mandates:** In Botswana, the national platform BOCONGO⁴² reported that, despite sound governance arrangements on paper, participation tended to be generic, lacking clear mandates, methodologies, and resources.



- **Curtailment of Freedoms.** Only 1 of the 42 VNR reports presented in 2021⁴³ recognized the occurrence of shrinking civic space, while none mentioned the ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists.

However, the civil society organisations have always managed to raise their concern through various civil society parallel reports⁴⁴ or spotlight reports⁴⁵ on various issues and thematics. However, these reports have not found any formal UN space.

✓ **Resource Constraints:** Financial and technical limitations hinder the ability of low-income countries to prepare detailed and evidence-based VNRs. A 2022 report by the United Nations Statistics Division⁴⁶ highlights that many countries face "limited evidence and data availability, disaggregation and collection as well as human and financial constraints," which impede their capacity to produce comprehensive VNRs.

Similarly, a 2024 study by PARIS21⁴⁷ emphasizes that "the extent of SDG data gaps is more visible in low and middle-income countries, which often face substantive barriers to address these." Furthermore, various High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, several African nations underscored challenges in their VNRs, noting "data constraints for some indicators, and insufficient technical and financial resources⁴⁸."

✓ **Limited accountability:** While VNRs are effective for reporting progress, their impact is limited without robust follow-up mechanisms. Most VNRs lack follow-up mechanisms to track whether commitments translate into action. Few countries have established clear frameworks to track and address gaps identified during the VNR process. A 2018 analysis of VNR reports⁴⁹ found that while 85% of countries provided information on follow-up and review processes at the national level, these reports often lacked reference to accountability mechanisms. Specifically, it was unclear when reporting occurs, by whom, and to whom. Notably, only five countries mentioned the involvement of parliamentarians in follow-up and review processes, raising concerns about how countries are ensuring accountability through elected officials. Later in 2023 "Progressing National SDGs Implementation⁵⁰" report recommends establishing an annual "commitment tracker" where member states can report on progress related to commitments made during their VNRs or at the 2023 SDG Summit. This suggestion underscores the current lack of clear frameworks to monitor and address gaps identified during the VNR process.



- Limited Policy coherence:** While some countries integrate SDG targets into policy planning, others only align indicators for monitoring, missing opportunities for systemic reforms: Changes in government often result in policy disruptions, undermining long-term SDG implementation strategies. In the 2022 edition of Progressing National SDGs Implementation 51, the report emphasizes the importance of policy coherence and the challenges posed by political transitions. It notes that while 61% of reporting countries mentioned policy coherence for sustainable development, there remains a need for consistent integration of the 2030 Agenda principles into national frameworks to ensure stability across political cycles. However, the report suggests that VNRs may not be fully effective in this role due to several factors:
- Superficial Analysis:** Some VNRs provide only a cursory examination of policy coherence, lacking in-depth analysis of how different policies align or conflict with SDG objectives.
- Inconsistent Frameworks:** Without a consistent framework for assessing policy coherence, VNRs vary widely in quality and depth, making it difficult to identify best practices or areas needing improvement.
- Limited Follow-Up:** There is often a lack of mechanisms to ensure that insights from VNRs lead to concrete policy adjustments, resulting in missed opportunities for systemic reforms. A study⁵² focusing on VNRs and SDG evaluations in Anglophone Africa and Latin America found that the integration of evaluative evidence into VNR processes was limited, hindering effective follow-up actions





• Institutional Frameworks

Countries with strong institutional setups align their VNRs with national SDG monitoring systems. Establishing multi-stakeholder platforms ensures diverse perspectives in preparing VNRs. For example, the 2022 report⁵³ notes that while Uruguay has established sectoral spaces for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue, these have historically operated parallel to the policymaking process. The Voluntary National Review (VNR) indicates plans to create an inter-ministerial and multi-sectoral structure under the joint leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Communities and the Ministry of Planning, Finance, and Blue Economy. This structure aims to include representatives from all development actors, including government entities, the National Assembly, the National Statistical Agency, technical and financial partners, civil society organizations, the private sector, universities, and researchers.

• Integration of Data and Technology

Digital platforms and geospatial tools have improved data accuracy in some countries, enabling detailed VNRs. For example, Denmark uses technology to monitor progress in renewable energy and climate action, providing accurate and timely data to feed in the national SDGs implementation plan.

• Localization of SDGs

Countries like Canada and Chile effectively localize SDGs⁵⁴ by involving local governments and communities in VNR preparation. This ensures that national-level reviews reflect the realities on the ground.



- **Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and Voluntary Sub-National Reviews (VSRs)**

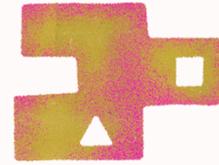
Those are innovative mechanisms that complement Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) by focusing on the localization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). VLRs, pioneered by cities such as New York⁵⁵ and Kitakyushu, provide a platform for local governments to align their development strategies with the SDGs, sharing best practices and challenges in implementation. For instance, the city of Helsinki's VLR in 2019 highlighted the integration of SDG targets into its urban planning. Similarly, VSRs, such as those developed by the Basque Country in Spain⁵⁶, enable regions to evaluate progress on SDGs across municipalities, bridging the gap between local and national levels. These reviews foster bottom-up approaches, ensuring diverse stakeholder engagement, and strengthening data collection at local levels. By aligning local strategies with national frameworks, VLRs and VSRs enhance the effectiveness of VNRs, promoting policy coherence and accelerating SDG localization.



As of July 2024, over 300 Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have been published by cities, municipalities, and regions worldwide. This growing movement reflects the increasing commitment of local and regional governments to assess and report on their progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The VLR process not only enhances local accountability and transparency but also fosters the localization of the 2030 Agenda, ensuring that sustainable development initiatives are tailored to the unique contexts of local communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING VNR EFFECTIVENESS



• Report VNRs on the basis of all the indicators

There is an immense need to provide data for all the indicators as all the member states signed the Agenda 2030 with an understanding for the available indicators and the data to measure them. There is a critical need to do the capacity strengthening, using science and technology to get accurate data including the ST to be able to collect data, including the citizen's generated data.

• Institutionalize Civil Society Engagement

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a critical role in ensuring accountability, inclusivity, and responsiveness in SDG implementation.

- Formalize mechanisms for CSOs to contribute to the formal VNRs
- Recognize independent shadow reports as complementary sources of SDG assessment.
- Ensure transparency by publishing consultation outcomes on the VNRs and how they influenced the final report.
- Establish formal feedback mechanisms using CSOs data in the formal VNR.
- Encourage public-private partnerships (PPPs) to leverage resources, expertise, and innovation from diverse stakeholders.
- Strengthen capacity-building programs for CSOs to enhance their effectiveness in delivering community-driven data

• Improve the Quality and Accountability of VNRs

- Mandate independent reviews of VNRs, ensuring they include CSO perspectives and alternative data sources.
- Require reporting on all the SDG standardized indicators to reduce selective reporting.
- Require the establishment of an annual "commitment tracker" where member states include progress on commitments made as part of their VNRs
- Require governments to report on SDG trade-offs and implementation challenges.

• **Expand Data Collection Capacity**

Invest in national statistical systems to enhance the collection and reporting of disaggregated data by gender, age, disability, income, ethnicity, and geography.

• **Leverage Alternative Data Sources**

Encourage the use of citizen-generated data and CSO reports to supplement official data, ensuring broader representation of marginalized groups.

• **Foster Localized Approaches to SDGs: Look at the VLRs and VSR's options to compliment the VNRs**

- Countries are encouraged to allocate more resources to their statistical systems and enhance their ability to monitor national development plans in line with the SDGs.
- Citizen-Generated Data: Promoting community-level data collection through participatory methods. For example, calls for inclusivity, marginalized groups like indigenous peoples and refugees are often excluded. In 2022, while 93% of reporting countries identified groups at risk of being left behind, only 10% specifically mentioned indigenous peoples, and 39% referenced migrants and refugees⁵⁷. This suggests that these populations are often overlooked in national assessments

In Philippines (2019)⁵⁸: Indigenous peoples were mentioned as part of vulnerable populations, but there was no detailed analysis or disaggregated data on their living conditions, particularly those affected by displacement due to conflict and environmental degradation. This kind of data could help better understand the needs of marginalized communities to ensure no one is left behind.

- These data can fill gaps where traditional data collection methods fall short, especially in remote or underserved regions.
- Capacity-building is identified as a key priority for countries that lack the technical expertise or financial resources to generate reliable data.
- Encourage Voluntary Local Review and Voluntary sub regional review

• Strengthen Regional and Global Follow-Up Mechanisms

- Develop a peer-review system where countries receive feedback on their VNRs.
- Encourage cross-border SDG collaborations to address challenges that require regional solutions (e.g., climate adaptation, migration).

• Strengthen Policy Coherence and Integration

- Fragmentation in policy implementation leads to inefficiencies and duplication of efforts, particularly in countries with weak governance structures. Hence
- Align national development strategies with SDG targets and ensure cross-sectoral collaboration.
- Implement whole-of-government approaches to integrate SDGs into budgetary and legislative processes.
- Develop policy frameworks that prioritize synergies and minimize trade-offs between goals (e.g., balancing industrial growth with environmental sustainability).



CONCLUSION

A decade into the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process, its role as a mechanism for accountability, policy coherence, and multi-stakeholder engagement remains a work in progress. While VNRs have contributed to raising awareness of SDG challenges, encouraging policy alignment, and fostering peer learning, their impact on driving substantive policy change, accountability, and financing commitments has been inconsistent. The persistence of selective reporting, limited civil society participation, weak follow-up mechanisms, and the lack of disaggregated data underscores the need for urgent reforms. As the global community moves closer to the 2030 deadline, the effectiveness of VNRs will depend on their evolution from reporting exercises to action-oriented accountability frameworks. Strengthening institutional commitments, integrating independent monitoring, ensuring meaningful stakeholder engagement, and enhancing data collection mechanisms will be critical in transforming VNRs into a powerful tool for accelerating SDG implementation. Without these improvements, the risk remains that VNRs will serve as symbolic exercises rather than catalysts for real change. The next five years present a crucial opportunity to revitalize the VNR process, ensuring that it delivers on its promise of fostering accountability, policy coherence, and transformative action to leave no one behind.



The next five years present a decisive opportunity to transform VNRs from passive reports into real accountability tools. Will we seize this moment or let the SDGs become another unfulfilled promise?



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