



SDG Voluntary National Reviews

A Guide for Library Participation (2021 Edition)

- 1) Voluntary National Reviews are a way for UN Member States to report on national progress towards the SDGs
- 2) They should be prepared in consultation with all actors, including civil society (and so libraries)
- 3) They are an opportunity for libraries to highlight their contribution to development and build new relationships and partnerships

Introduction

The UN's 2030 Agenda is not just about setting goals, but also about their achievement. A key part of this ongoing work are the measures and processes in place to monitor progress. This brief looks at the most prominent part of this – Voluntary National Reviews of Member States' progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – and how these can represent an opportunity for libraries.

The basis for these reviews comes from General Assembly Resolution 67/290, which calls on governments to use the annual High Level Political Forum (HLPF) to share experiences. In doing so, they can help others – and themselves – advance more quickly towards achieving the SDGs.

Between 40 and 50 countries therefore choose to submit a report and present on their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. In 2021, it is anticipated that 43 countries will undertake one, although this number can rise or fall. You can find the list confirmed by the UN in October 2020 on the next page.

Alongside VNRs, other means of monitoring progress and sharing experience include thematic discussions, and statistical reporting.

This guide offers more information on **why countries undertake VNRs**, the **principles they should follow in preparing them**, and **why libraries can benefit from being involved**. Be aware that there are also, in some cases, Voluntary Local Reviews, which can also offer an opportunity to libraries to engage.

Why Do a Voluntary National Review?

For the **United Nations**, the objective of VNRs is to provide a means of monitoring progress towards implementing the 2030 Agenda. In doing so, they should take account of all the 17 SDGs, as well as the resources used to achieve them.

For **Member States**, they are a chance to consult and reflect on their overall approach. They should be an opportunity to identify areas of strength and weakness, build partnerships, and seek the advice and input of other countries in order to make faster progress. The UN's own guidance underlines that

UN General Assembly Resolution 67/290

Paragraph 84: The [High Level Political Forum], under the auspices of ECOSOC, shall carry out regular reviews, in line with Resolution 67/290. Reviews will be voluntary, while encouraging reporting, and include developed and developing countries as well as relevant UN entities and other stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector. They shall be state-led, involving ministerial and other relevant high-level participants. They shall provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders. ([link](#))

they can also help promote cooperation across government, and raise awareness of the SDGs nationally.

For **civil society – and for libraries in particular** – they are a chance to engage in the national development process. The next section offers more information about the involvement of stakeholders such as libraries in VNRs.

VNR Countries in 2020

Africa: [Angola](#), [Cabo Verde*](#), [Chad*](#), [Djibouti](#), [Madagascar*](#), [Namibia*](#), [Sierra Leone*](#), [Zimbabwe*](#)

Asia-Pacific: [Bhutan*](#), [China*](#), [DPR Korea](#), [Indonesia*](#), [Japan*](#), [Laos*](#), [Malaysia*](#), [Marshall Islands](#), [Myanmar](#), [Pakistan*](#), [Thailand*](#)

Europe: [Azerbaijan](#), [Cyprus*](#), [Czech Republic*](#), [Denmark*](#), [Germany*](#), [Norway*](#), [San Marino](#), [Slovakia*](#), [Spain*](#), [Sweden*](#)

Latin America and the Caribbean: [Antigua and Barbuda](#), [Bahamas*](#), [Bolivia](#), [Colombia*](#), Cuba, [Dominican Republic*](#), [Guatemala*](#), [Mexico*](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Paraguay*](#), [Uruguay*](#)

Middle East and North Africa: [Egypt*](#), [Iraq*](#), [Qatar*](#), [Tunisia*](#)

Countries marked with a '*' have already done at least one VNR

What Principles Should Governments Follow in Preparing a Voluntary National Review?

Once a government has volunteered to undertake a Voluntary National Review, it is expected to prepare a report. There is a Handbook from the UN on the [overall process](#) (translated into all UN languages).

A key first task for governments is to **create a coordination structure**, which can link together all relevant ministries or agencies. This should benefit from the resources and staff necessary to do a good job.

This structure will be responsible for gathering inputs from across government, as well as other data and evidence. Importantly, it should **develop a stakeholder engagement plan** to include civil society.

The guidance emphasises the importance of stakeholder consultations; *'All stakeholders, including all levels and sectors of*

government, civil society and the private sector, members of parliament, and national human rights institutions, [should be] involved in the review and implementation processes'.

These consultations can take place through **face-to-face workshops (where safe)**, **online platforms**, **focus groups**, **written comments** or by other methods. While COVID-related restrictions need to be respected, these should not prevent meaningful consultation. The guidelines give examples from Armenia (submission of stories for the report, creation of a council of civil society stakeholders, dedicated outreach to groups which may otherwise not have been heard) and Gambia (creation of a multi-stakeholder engagement platform). Governments are then supposed, in their reports, to explain how they have involved civil society at all levels.

Clearly, not all countries will follow this guidance. Some may focus purely on

The Perfect Voluntary National Review should...

- Be led by national governments
- Take account of all the dimensions of development, and the resources needed to achieve it
- Look to the long-term
- Identify challenges and gaps, as well as successes
- Be transparent and participatory, including reporting by stakeholders
- Focus on people, and in particular the poorest and most vulnerable
- Use existing platforms and processes where possible
- Be based on evidence, including assessment of progress since past Voluntary National Reviews, where relevant

successes, others only certain SDGs. In 2021, the focus SDGs will be [SDG1](#) (no poverty), [SDG2](#) (zero hunger), [SDG3](#) (good health and wellbeing), [SDG8](#) (decent work and economic growth), [SDG10](#) (reduced inequalities), [SDG12](#) (responsible consumption and production), [SDG13](#) (climate action), [SDG16](#) (peace, justice and strong institutions) and [SDG17](#) (partnerships for the goals). This year, there is also particular emphasis on responses to COVID-19. You can find examples of reports previously submitted on the dedicated [UN website](#).

The full list of themes that the report should cover are noted in the box below. In terms of deadlines, governments should submit their main messages by 3 May 2021, and final reviews by 18 June 2021.

The grand presentation of the 2021 VNRs will take place on 13-15 July 2021, at the UN in New York. Countries can present either individually, or as part of a panel, and then face questions from other Member States and civil society organisations.

Some Member States bring a representative of civil society to New York to take part in the formal presentation. Given the number of countries under review, there may only be around 15min for each presentation and questions put together.

The (Suggested) Structure of a VNR Report

- 1) Opening Statement (from a Minister)
- 2) Highlights
- 3) Introduction (the context and objectives of the review)
- 4) Methodology (how was the review prepared, who was involved)
- 5) Policy and Enabling Environment
 - a. Creating Ownership of the SDGs (how were all groups, including civil society, engaged?)
 - b. Incorporation of the SDGs in national frameworks (what has the government done to implement the SDGs? Is there a National Development Plan?)
 - c. Integration of the Economic, Environmental and Social Dimensions of the SDGs
 - d. Leaving No-One Behind (how have vulnerable groups been identified and supported?)
 - e. Institutional Mechanisms (how has the government organised itself to deliver the SDGs?)
 - f. Structural Issues (what fundamental issues have been faced)
- 6) Progress on Goals and Targets (how is the country doing on all of the SDGs and targets?)
- 7) Means of Implementation (what resources are being mobilised? What is missing?)
- 8) Next Steps (what is planned for the future)
- 9) Conclusion
- 10) Annexes

What's in it for Libraries?

As highlighted above, there is a strong expectation that countries should consult with stakeholders in preparing the report. This could go from a call for written submissions to invitations to take part in meetings or focus groups. These are great opportunities for libraries and library associations to talk about what they are doing, both in raising awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals, and in implementing them.

What Makes Libraries Special as Stakeholders?

'Stakeholders' means anyone with an interest in delivering development. As such, all types of library can be involved, although the type of engagement may differ. National libraries may be involved through discussions across government, while library associations are part of civil society. Importantly, all should be involved.

Libraries have a particularly strong case for involvement as institutions which are not only talking about the SDGs, but also delivering them. Depending on the national situation, they may also benefit from natural sympathy, and not be seen as a threat, in the way a pure protest movement may be.

If done properly, the process can also open doors. Libraries can underline their role as an essential partner in development, from the local to the national level. They can build up new links with other civil society organisations, and show other government ministries how important they are.

The Experience so Far

After four cycles of Voluntary National Reviews, a [report](#) commissioned by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and prepared by ICOMOS, with support from IFLA, looked at the degree to which VNRs were including consideration of culture and heritage.

This report underlines that while the original 2030 Agenda leaves plenty of possibility to focus on culture, too few countries give it the attention it deserves. Nonetheless, there are examples of good practice that can be drawn on at the national level – Italy, Cyprus, Palau, Greece, New Zealand, Portugal and Serbia made extensive reference to cultural issues. Others have developed cultural indicators, and have engaged cultural actors in their review teams.

The report also makes recommendations around working with cultural institutions and associations. You should feel ready to refer to this report in your own advocacy.

Since then, IFLA examined the 2020 VNRs, finding ten that referred to libraries, including great examples of how libraries' contribution to development, and commitments to support them in future.

How to Get Involved?

To get involved, you can plan for a contribution to your national reform process. To do this, you should find the answers to the following questions:

- 1) Who is coordinating the voluntary national review in your country? You may be able to find a name by clicking on the name of your country in the box on p2, and looking at the 'focal point' tab. If information is not available, use other contacts to find out who is responsible.
- 2) Find out if there is a particular focus for the VNR (i.e. particular SDGs)? They should not be looking only at some SDGs, but with a focus on education, employment and access to information, these are good subjects for libraries.
- 3) How will they seek the views of civil society? Is there a formal consultation to which you can respond? Are there special meetings?
- 4) What deadlines are there? Make sure you don't miss them, and act to meet people quickly.

Once you know this, you can prepare a library contribution to the voluntary national review process. This could include, for examples:

- 1) An overview of why libraries and the access to information and other services they provide support development.
- 2) A summary of relevant data, based on Library Map of the World and the Development and Access to Information Report. IFLA can provide this.
- 3) A set of examples of what libraries are doing to promote the SDGs and their implementation. You can use the examples provided for IAP Updates. If your government has chosen a particular focus for the report, reflect this in your examples.
- 4) An analysis of what is going well – and what more could be done – in realising the potential of libraries to deliver development.

Let us know if you'd like to be involved – contact da2i@ifla.org.

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