

**TIME TO
DELIVER
VOLUNTARY
NATIONAL
REVIEWS
FOR SDG4 AND
EDUCATION
2030**

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The Voluntary National Review (VNR) process is a critical part of the accountability architecture for the SDGs. This briefing highlights opportunities for engagement of education civil society, nationally and internationally, and lays down our demands in terms of both content and process.

What are the Voluntary National Reviews?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is known mostly for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but it also includes measures to make these goals a reality – called the Follow-Up and Review mechanisms. Specifically, it calls on member states to “conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven” (paragraph 79). These form the basis for the annual reviews of the full SDG agenda, undertaken by the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), the UN’s central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 agenda.

These Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are supposed to:

- be voluntary, country-led, and undertaken by both developed and developing countries;
- be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent;
- track progress on reaching the SDG goals and targets;
- provide a platform for partnerships, including for the participation of major groups and other stakeholders (Paragraph 84 of the 2030 Agenda); and
- build on existing platforms and processes.

Every year, interested countries inform the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) President about their willingness to present their voluntary national review during the HLPF. No binding frequency for the reviews has been agreed, but countries are encouraged to go through regular review processes. There is no mechanism for forcing countries to do a review, the UN can only encourage a member state to volunteer.

The VNR as a process and a product

The VNR is both a process and a product – the actual report. The **process** has six building blocks that roughly correspond to the ways that SDG reviews strengthen the implementation of the SDGs:

- promote review of existing institutional frameworks, promote their restructuring in light of the 2030 agenda, integrate SDG implementation in national plans and strategies and support their implementation;
- strengthen cooperation and collaboration among Government agencies and ministries and between donors;
- facilitate comparability across and within countries as part of an official review process;
- facilitate the exchange of experiences and good practice between countries;
- provide opportunities for capacity building and learning;
- provide for strengthening the national statistics system and support data collection for the SDG agenda; and
- provide space for inclusive national policy dialogue and strengthening of stakeholder participation in institutions.

However, countries are free to organise the process in whatever way they find suitable, which means that civil society has to follow the process closely to ensure their seat at the table.

The format of the VNR report (the **product**), is included in the appendix of the UN Secretary-General’s Report A/70/684, entitled “Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level.” It includes a set of voluntary common reporting guidelines, including areas to cover. These are indicative, offering a broad structure that can be adapted to each country context. While each HLPF is focused on a cluster of Goals, the VNR should also address the agenda in its entirety – that is, all the goals and targets.

Why should the education community care about them?

Historically, the education agenda has been led by the education ministry nationally and championed by UNESCO regionally and globally. Over the 25 years of the Education For All agenda, strong relationships were forged within the education community, which has helped build a strong thematic strand for SDG 4 implementation as demonstrated through UNESCO's Framework for Action. However, the SDGs require a new global development architecture by building on an integrated approach to the realisation of all the 17 Goals. SDG 4 will not be realised unless the education community understands and engages with this new architecture, recognises interlinkages between goals, and succeeds in reaching out to and working with other sectors, such as ministries in charge of youth, labour, health, women's rights, social affairs and environment.

More specifically, there are five reasons for the education community to be involved in the VNR process:

- a. **To ensure that civil society, including the most marginalised and vulnerable, have a say in SDG implementation.** Education civil society must have a seat at the table when SDG implementation is planned, developed, evaluated and monitored to push for the implementation of the full Education 2030 agenda and to fulfil the pledge to leave no one behind.
- b. **As a mechanism to hold states to account.** This is the mandated space for holding member states to account for the implementation of the entire agenda, including SDG 4. Civil society has a mandated role to act as a watchdog and the VNRs provide an additional tool in our arsenal.
- c. **Because our participation is required.** *Education and Academic Entities* are recognised as key stakeholders that must be involved in all efforts to realise the SDGs (Resolution 67/290). This gives the education community an official seat at the table – and an obligation to deliver!
- d. **To build broad-based alliances.** Following the interconnected nature of the SDGs, broad inter-thematic coalitions are coming together to track progress and hold governments to account. A universal and indivisible agenda requires united and strong civil society alliances across goals and interest groups.
- e. **To promote learning.** The VNR process provides an opportunity to engage with a diverse set of stakeholders and bring some non-traditional allies into the network, and acquire new information and skills that would be useful in our day-to-day work. It also allows us to raise awareness of the benefits of education and the interlinkages with our goals and policy areas.

Government and intergovernmental processes around VNRs

National preparation

Countries have adopted different modalities for conducting VNRs. However, each country has a Point Person (the list can be accessed on the HLPF page¹) that coordinates the process. This person is expected to work with the official structures for SDG implementation to ensure a comprehensive report – that is, one that combines technical analyses with inputs from multi-stakeholder consultative processes. As such, this entails engaging with SDG-specific structures, line ministries that are in charge of the individual goals (including education and international cooperation), sub-national governments (in federal systems in particular), the national statistics body, and national political leadership.

The Ministry of Education is expected to be directly in charge of the implementation of SDG4, but the involvement depends on how much priority the government gives education and how serious they are about involving line ministries. It is, therefore, important for education civil society to advocate for a strong engagement of the Ministries of Education in the VNRs.

Preparation for the VNR at the international level

The Guidelines encourage member states to convene meetings to prepare for the HLPF. So far, retreats have been organised for member states volunteering for national reviews, where they discuss modalities and planning. These meetings tend to be closed, although civil society representatives may be invited to attend some of them, but the main highlights are made available online.

The UN system also supports VNR countries. The Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) offers National Workshops and distance training courses. The UN Regional Commissions organise regional meetings and hold Regional Sustainable Development Forums every year to prepare for as well as follow up on the HLPF, and serve as a forum of knowledge exchange; regional VNR preparation workshops are held in their sidelines. While the exact schedule varies from year to year, the final national VNR reports are anticipated to be ready latest by mid June ahead of the HLPF in July.

¹ By clicking on the name or flag of the country undergoing Voluntary National Review

What happens at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF)?

Each VNR country is expected to submit a report (and an advance executive summary) and make a brief presentation during the HLPF. All documents submitted can be accessed on the HLPF website. The national presentations take place during the high-level ministerial segment of the HLPF (usually the last three days of the HLPF). Paragraph 83 of the A/70/864 provides a comprehensive listing of what the presentation should include, but time is limited and the accountability systems are weak, which means that the presentations tend to be short and general. The presentations are followed by questions and comments from member states as well as civil society; even if few answers are given, this is a great opportunity for civil society to raise concerns. Countries are also encouraged to share their experiences and conclusions in dedicated workshops and side events during the week of the HLPF. A final synthesis report of all the VNRs presented in a year is generated and shared on the HLPF website.²

There is no space for official civil society shadow reports to be presented (although they are highlighted during HLPF side events), but countries can choose to have a civil society representative as part of their national presentations. Major groups and other stakeholders are also submitting their own annual reports..

What Member States should do as part of the VNR Process: Civil society expectations

On process:

- A robust, transparent, inclusive and participatory process that includes the full range of stakeholders from the start of the VNR process. This must include civil society specialising in each of the specific goals, representatives of marginalised and vulnerable groups, reflect the regional diversity of the country and not be restricted to participation of larger organisations or those based in the national capital. Education stakeholders, including representative unions and national coalitions must be represented.
- Civil society participation must be meaningful and long-term and not restricted to ad hoc participation in national or online consultations. In some countries CSOs or unions have been part of official review teams, and drafting groups. Citizen-generated data should be taken into account during the process of review.

² https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/127761701030E_2016_VNR_Synthesis_Report_ver3.pdf

- A wide outreach including parents, academia, teachers, other education personnel (in both formal and non-formal educational settings), youth, children and citizens at large to ascertain their views on the current state of delivery and involve them in implementation. Modalities for the meaningful input and participation of marginalised groups be provided addressing the financial, linguistic, logistical, or age barriers that might prevent such groups from participating meaningfully in national consultations.
- The VNR process should constitute more than a process of review, but offer a coordinated push for implementation. Reviews of exiting legislative provisions, policies, restructuring of planning, budgeting and monitoring mechanisms should be undertaken and ameliorative steps taken. Evidence generated through the Education Sector Review should be used in the VNR processes, address whether implementation plans for education have been put in place and SDG planning should converge with the education sector planning process. SDG4 focal points in the education ministry, identified as part of the UNESCO thematic agenda's implementation, should be included in governmental VNR processes to ensure convergence with the thematic track. The VNR process should add strength to the push towards the implementation of the Education 2030 Framework for Action.
- Education civil society should be included in any new, national SDG decision-making structures which are established, and which will act upon any recommendations made, during the review process.
- They should explain how the country has gone about the interlinkages between the different goals and targets, highlighting specific measures taken to avoid siloes and to create synergies.
- Report on the means of implementation, both financial and non-financial.
- Give an account of the extent to which ODA commitments are being met, including an analysis of extraterritorial obligations and aid to education.
- The narrative should broadly adhere to the UN Secretary-General's common reporting guidelines to ensure a consistent and comparable approach to reporting.
- Countries should describe how civil society has been involved throughout the process, and how differing views have been consolidated in the final report.
- The VNR report should specify the process followed for its preparation, including consultations, reviews and the expected process after the HLPF.
- Contain a commitment to establishing an architecture and mechanism at the national level for SDG implementation and monitoring, which is long-term and involves civil society, and which is not limited to VNR processes.
- Clearly address the progress made towards fulfilling the pledge to leave no one behind and how this is applied to the achievement of SDG4 by 2030.⁴ This should include an assessment of which groups are furthest behind, highlighting the strategies, plans, budgets, and policies that will be implemented to ensure they are reached first; and share experiences of challenges and steps that can or will be taken by the Government to overcome them.

The HLPF should be followed by a national 'debriefing' so government and civil society can discuss and agree on the next steps, consider the lessons learned and plan for the next review (setting up an accountability cycle). Governments must, with continuous input and support of civil society, unions and other stakeholders, make best use of the time between the VNRs to build capacities and strengthen implementation.

On product (the report):

- Reports should give an account of the progress made under each goal and target, highlighting specific successes as well as challenges, including efforts made to ensure that no one is left behind. Education must be addressed given its criticality to the full agenda.³ Specific initiatives or measures taken to improve the status of implementation of SDG4 should be mentioned.

³ The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report paper addressing the role of education towards the fulfilment of all SDGs: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002305/230508e.pdf> and the Copenhagen Consensus page listing the SDG targets most critical to national development: <http://www.copenhagenconsensus.com/post-2015-consensus/nobel-laureates-guide-smarter-global-targets-2030>

⁴ Save the Children's briefing [Realising the Pledge to Leave No One Behind](#) provides guidance on how governments and international community can take action on this commitment.

Civil Society Processes

The UN Secretary General's Report on Follow-Up and Review particularly emphasised the need for member states to involve civil society in reviews nationally and at the HLPF.

National Engagement

The VNRs presented at the 2016 HLPF – the first HLPF held following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda – indicated that almost all countries reported engaging civil society in some form. While much of the engagement has been ad hoc, some countries appear to have involved civil society in a more meaningful way, for instance by including civil society in SDG implementation structures or delegations to the HLPF. With this in mind, civil society should:

- Contact the focal point for the VNR in your country to find out more about the process that is being adopted and signal your interest to be involved. Establishing that contact prior to the start of the VNR consultation is important. Try to find the person tasked with the drafting of the official report.
- Education networks and unions should make themselves and their work known to the national HLPF focal point, and demand a seat at the table in all processes related to the planning, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of the SDGs. Please note that governments may otherwise prefer to work with groups representing a cluster of goals or only pick those pushed for by active and vocal civil society.
- Build links with any official SDG structures that are being put in place at the national level (e.g. high level SDG body anchored by the office of the Head of State or Government, parliamentary oversight group or an independent SDG commission).
- Contact the person in charge of SDGs and/or the Education 2030 Focal Point in the education ministry to ask about the internal processes for the education ministry's input. Similarly, ministries of development cooperation, foreign affairs, and national offices of statistics are likely to be involved. Check whether there is a parliamentary group for the SDGs.
- Create a buzz around the VNR process within education civil society by organising events and participating in activities organised by others.
- Reach out to potential new allies within education civil society to expand coalition membership and outreach nationally. For example, one could work with groups working on Target 4.7 (i.e. human rights education, education for sustainable development and global citizenship education), the work of which may not historically have revolved around the education ministry.
- Work with CSO coalitions cutting across different goals. These are coming together to monitor implementation and engage with national processes. It is important to be part of these, since future CSO SDG engagement in global and regional processes could happen through these structures.
- In many countries, civil society 'spotlight' or 'shadow' reports are being prepared around the VNR process. Many are connected to a global CSO network that covers all goals; in this case, offer to draft or contribute to the drafting of the section on SDG4 in the process. Alternatively, consider a standalone report to focus national attention on the progress of Goal 4. Please note, however, that unlike reports submitted to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on human rights, there is no official space for submission of VNR shadow reports to the UN; these are only presented at separate CSO side events during the HLPF. While drafting the report, reach out to your wider membership and other stakeholders working on education nationally addressing targets that the coalition may lack expertise in. Ensure that your report (or at least its executive summary) is translated into local languages and disseminate the report widely, including with the media, parliamentarians and other official stakeholders. Given the convergence between the SDG Goal 4 and existing human rights provisions,⁵ parts of the evidence generated for the report could be used as part of shadow reporting to human rights treaty bodies.
- Participation as part of an official delegation attending the HLPF is difficult, but there is precedent: in the first year, four governments included representatives of civil society, unions or private sector in their delegations. Formal selection processes are carried out by UNDESA in respect of official HLPF side-events in New York.
- Hold a follow-up meeting nationally after the HLPF to compare your analysis and conclusions with those of the official review. Make use of any questions raised by other member states based on your report in your national advocacy.

⁵ The Right to Education Project (<http://www.right-to-education.org/>) and Danish Human Rights Institute (<http://sdg.humanrights.dk>) provide detailed analysis of how each SDG4 target is reflected in human rights law.

- Continue ongoing engagement for the implementation of SDGs nationally in the subsequent years. While the VNR may not happen again soon, there is a continued need for civil society monitoring to ensure strong state accountability for SDG implementation.

International and regional engagement

Major Groups and Other Stakeholders Coordination

Mechanism: The official space for global engagement with the HLPF and with a range of preparatory processes is through the HLPF Coordination Mechanism (HLPF CM).⁶ The Major Groups and Other Stakeholders are recognised as sectors within society whose views have to be incorporated into intergovernmental processes.

GCE and Education International, along with the International Council for Adult Education and the European Students' Union, are represented as the Organising Partners of the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG) which gives us a mandated role of representing the education community.

EI is also represented through the Major Group of Workers and Trade Unions. Equivalent regional structures exist including Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (AP-RCEM) and the Africa CSO Working Group. Similar fora are evolving in other regions; the precedent provided by the HLPF CM provides a reason for education to be recognised as a distinct constituency in these platforms.

Education and Academia Stakeholder Group: The Education and Academia Stakeholder Group brings together human rights-based education and academia organisations and networks which self-organise to engage with the monitoring and review of the Sustainable Development Goals. The EASG is open to all organisations working for the full realisation of the right to a quality education, the implementation of Agenda 2030, and of SDG 4 in particular.

Unofficial CSO processes: Since the official international review takes place at the HLPF in New York, it is important to build links with existing cross-thematic regional and global umbrella SDG networks that have a presence there. Among others, Together 2030 and Action For Sustainable Development (Action4SD) have national and global members and coordinate civil society engagement with the SDG processes globally; it may be useful to join these groups. Action4SD and the Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development coordinate CSO shadow reports. It is advisable to engage with both EASG and the wider range of stakeholders to maximise contacts and flow of information.

Official processes: VNR countries meet in the sidelines of the meetings of regional UN Commissions. Similarly, civil society from VNR countries tends to meet in the Civil Society SDG Forums that are held around these official spaces. The modalities for engagement with the High-level Political Forum in New York have been well covered in CIVICUS's HLPF User Guide. Modalities of CSO engagement in the HLPF are evolving; a limited number of official CSO statements are delivered in HLPF official sessions and in well-attended dedicated events organised by Major Groups and Other Stakeholders.

⁶ More information about the Coordination Mechanism can be accessed here: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/majorgroups/hlpf>

CRITICAL READING

- 🕒 [Proposal for voluntary common reporting guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF](#)
- 🕒 [UN Guidelines for Country Reporting against the SDGs](#). Not restricted to just the VNRs, but a useful guide on how governments can engage with SDG reporting processes in totality.
- 🕒 [UN website for the HLPF](#): This contains the list of VNR countries (and their focal points), FAQs about the that year's VNR, other critical documents, calendar and reports submitted. The page also includes links to Regional Preparatory Meetings as they become known.
- 🕒 [How to engage with the High Level Political Forum \(HLPF\): User Guide](#): prepared by CIVICUS and explains the modalities adopted at the HLPF.
- 🕒 [Sustainable Development Goals: A practical guide for national action and accountability](#). Amnesty International's guide for action and accountability for the SDGs at the national and international level.

