



GET INTO... **Voluntary National Reviews**

3 November 2023

- 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 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It also includes a major focus on creating measures and processes to monitor progress. This brief looks at how one key element of this – voluntary national reviews of Member States' progress towards achieving the SDGs – 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.

Therefore, alongside statistical reporting and thematic debates, there are 'Voluntary National Reviews' (VNRs), where Member States choose to submit a report and present on their own efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda.

Around 40 countries a year do this, with the main limit on capacity being the time available to hear interventions. In 2024, it is anticipated that 44 countries undertake one. You can find the list on the next page.

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](#))

|

This guide offers more information on why countries undertake VNRs, the principles they should follow in preparing them, and how 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.

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 2024 (announcement)

Asia-Pacific: Iran, Lao Democratic People's Republic, Micronesia, Nepal, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu

Europe: Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Spain

Latin America and the Caribbean: Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Peru

Middle East and North Africa: Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, State of Palestine, Syria, Yemen

Sub-Saharan Africa: Chad, Congo (Republic), Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, Zimbabwe



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 guidance from the UN on the [overall process](#), (translations into other UN languages are available on [this page](#)) as well as the [structure](#) that this should follow. Updates of this information will become available in the coming months

To do this, the government should develop a roadmap with key deliverables aligned with the overall UN deadlines – typically main messages in early May, and a full report in mid-June. The UN recommends starting already in October.

Then, it should 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. Importantly, governments should show how their VNR is part of their wider implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

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’. This, as well as other activities, can help identify sources of data and other evidence that can support the review.

Sometimes, there are existing SDG coordinating structures, bringing together different ministries, civil society organisations and others, which

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

play a key role in VNR preparation. It may be possible for libraries to be part of such efforts.

In general, consultations can take place through face-to-face workshops, online platforms, focus groups, written comments or by other methods.

In terms of what should be included, VNRs should look across the SDGs, and think in particular interlinkages. Especially for countries doing a second or subsequent VNR, they should also look back at progress since the previous one. See the box on the right for more.

Clearly, not all countries will follow this guidance. Some may focus purely on successes, others only certain SDGs. 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 are likely to need to submit their main messages by late April 2024 (a priori), and then final reviews by mid-June.

The grand presentation of the 2024 VNRs will take place during the [High Level Political Forum](#) (HLPF), held on 8-18 July 2024, 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.

Voluntary Local Reviews

In addition to Voluntary National Reviews, there is also a growing collection of reviews carried out at the local or regional level –broadly known as Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs).

Unlike VNRs, there is no single template for carrying these out, but rather a range of guidelines produced by different organisations, including United Cities and Local Governments, which also collects the resulting responds on its [Global Observatory of Local Development](#) and Democracy pages. In broad terms, they provide both context as to the development situation of a city or region, to match up their own policies with the SDGs, and to make commitments about future plans. Some are likely to be discussed in side-events at HLPF.



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.

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.

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.

Steps to engagement

There have been six rounds of Voluntary National Reviews to date, with all but a few countries having completed at least one, and some who have done three. IFLA has analysed all of the reports submitted by governments over this time, in order to understand how far libraries have been engaged in the process – see our reports on [2016-2020](#), [2021](#), [2022](#) and [2023](#). These highlight a general trend towards more and more reviews referring to libraries, with a record of over 50% of Reviews in 2023 referring to libraries.

In some cases, it is a lack of libraries that is highlighted as a challenge, while elsewhere, the work of our institutions is cited as a positive contribution. While the main focus is on the contribution of libraries to education, efforts in other areas covered by the SDGs are also mentioned, as well as work to raise awareness of the SDGs, and engage citizens in dialogue about how to achieve them.

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



Voluntary Local Reviews are more likely to refer to libraries in fact (report on [2016-2020](#), and [2021 update](#)), with over half talking about the contribution that libraries can make. They also tend to refer to a wider range of ways in which libraries help achieve the SDGs, and include further positive examples of integration of libraries both into policy planning, and into the preparation of the Review.

Complementing this, we have also shared a [review](#) of the experience of a few library associations in engaging with the VNR process for 2021. While this highlights how different the process is from one country to the next, it highlights different ways in which libraries can benefit – through being recognised as actors in development, through new contacts in government and across civil society, and even through obtaining commitments of support.

Looking beyond libraries, you may also want to look at the [report](#) commissioned by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) in the context of the Culture2030Goal campaign (of which IFLA is a core member). This considered how far VNRs were including consideration of culture and heritage. Subsequently, IFLA has led in producing reviews of the place of culture in VNRs in [2022](#) and [2023](#).

These reports underline 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 reports also make recommendations around working with cultural institutions and associations, and broader recognition of what could constitute good practice in Reviews. They are potentially a very helpful reference for you in your own advocacy, as well as a basis for developing cooperation with other cultural actors.

How to Get Involved?

Getting involved in a Voluntary National Review, as underlined above, can be a useful way not only of securing recognition of the work of libraries, but also of obtaining commitments to provide support and building your contacts in government and across civil society.

To help libraries in countries due to undertake VNRs, IFLA has produced a series of guides to the process to follow, available on our [website](#). The full list of sections will be as follows:

- Part 1: Find out Who's in Charge
- Part 2: Prepare your Stories
- Part 3: Prepare your Data
- Part 4: Present your Materials
- Part 5: Engage with Decision-Makers
- Part 6: Engage with Partners
- Part 7: Communicate to the Public
- Part 8: Prepare for the High-Level Political Forum
- Part 9: Join the Global Conversation

