Libraries in Voluntary National Reviews 2023

17 July 2023

- *The 2030 Agenda offers a great framework for building a broader understanding of the varied roles of libraires in supporting sustainable development.*
- *It 2023 has been the best year yet for the share of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of SDG implementation referring to libraries, with 53% of published Reviews doing so (up almost 10 points from the previous high).*
- *There remain regional differences, with Europe and Asia-Oceania seeing higher shares of VNRs referring to libraries, while Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean saw fewer.*
- *In addition to broad references to libraries supporting sustainable development, the work of libraries is seen as contributing to all but one of the 17 SDGs, as well as to wider awareness raising.*
- *The SDGs that are most commonly associated with libraries are SDGs 4, 9 and 11, followed by 10 and 16.*
- *The examples shared provide an excellent basis for other countries to reflect on how they can make libraries part of wider efforts to deliver on the SDGs, individually and collectively, showing what is already possible for governments.*

Libraries – through the materials, the spaces, the staff support, and the programming they offer – stand at the heart of their communities, providing services designed to respond to the needs of their users. While at their core, they are about ensuring access to information, this translates into a wide variety of activities that can make it hard to classify them as belonging to any one policy area or other, be it education, research, or culture.

This is why the UN 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer such an interesting reference point, with their emphasis on holistic, coordinated action that takes the rights and development of individuals, communities, and the planet as a whole as their end goal. While imperfect[1], they do offer a more complete way of thinking about how libraries contribute.

IFLA has engaged actively around the SDGs, working both to build awareness among governments of how libraries' work to provide access to information facilitates delivery across the full range of goals, but also to help libraries adopt the Goals in their own planning and advocacy. Under the former angle, IFLA works therefore to highlight examples of how this broader understanding of libraries' roles is already at work.

This is the goal of this report, which explores Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports. These Reviews are part of the structures put in place by the 2030 Agenda in order both

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[1] To note in particular the lack of a culture goal, a point underlined by the Culture2030Goal campaign of which IFLA is a member: https://culture2030goal.net/
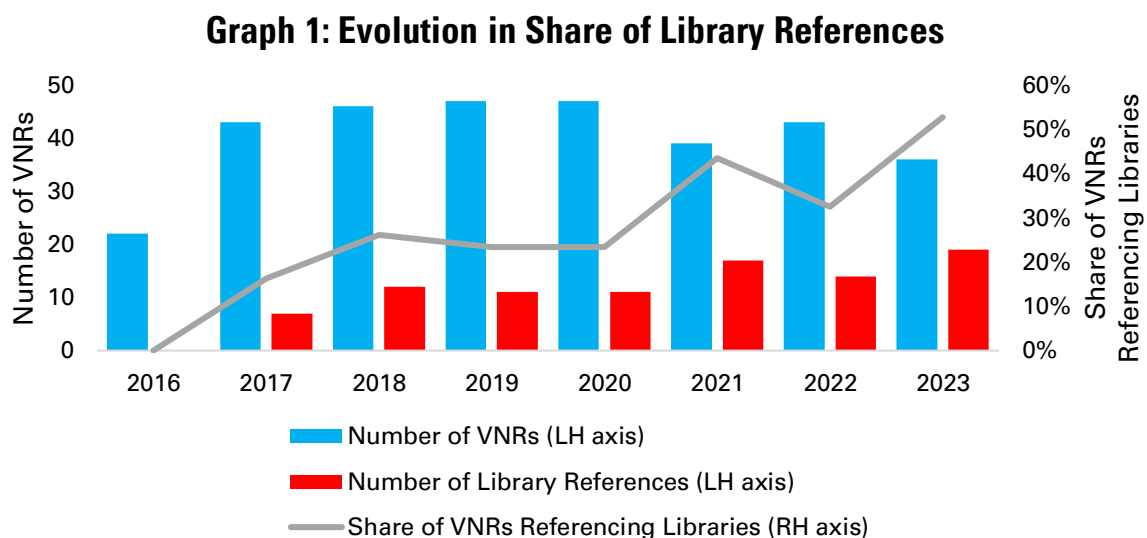
to ensure monitoring of progress, but also to allow for the exchange of good practice and mutual learning. They offer a good overview of how governments are approaching the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including what they consider as relevant or not, as well as identifying successes, challenges, and priorities for the future.

The Report follows on from similar editions produced for 2016-2020[2], 2021[3] and 2022[4], and follows a similar model, working through a search for the word "librar*" (or the equivalent in the language of publication of the VNR). A first section looks at overall data about the spread of countries referring to libraries in any way, before the second explores the different ways in which VNRs talk about libraries, SDG by SDGs.

An Overview of Libraries in 2023 VNRs

At time of writing, 36 Voluntary National Reviews have been published. These are almost all from countries performing these for a second time, with only one 1st-time reporter, and one 3rd-time reporter. The largest single group of these come from Europe (13 countries), followed by 8 from Asia-Oceania, 7 from Sub-Saharan Africa, 4 from the Middle East and North Africa, 3 from Latin America and the Caribbean, and one from North America.

A key headline is that 2023, at least on the basis of the 36 Voluntary National Reviews that have been published, has been a record year. For the first time, over half of VNRs refer to libraries, up from 33% last year, and well above the previous record of 44% in 2021. Graph 1 shows the trend below.
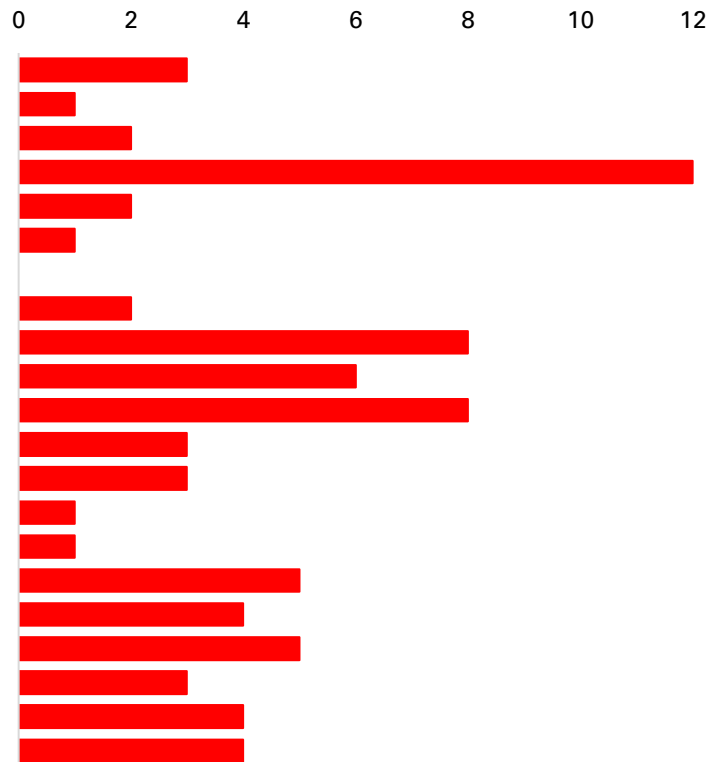
Graph 1: Evolution in Share of Library References

Legend:
- Number of VNRs (LH axis)
- Number of Library References (LH axis)
- Share of VNRs Referencing Libraries (RH axis)

[2] References to Libraries in UN SDGs Voluntary National Reviews, 2016-2020, https://repository.ifla.org/handle/123456789/1422

[3] Recognising Libraries as SDG Implementation Partners in 2021, Part 1: A Record Year for Voluntary National Reviews, 13 July 2021, https://www.ifla.org/news/recognising-libraries-as-sdg-implementation-partners-in-2021-part-1-a-record-year-for-voluntary-national-reviews/

[4] Libraries in Voluntary National Reviews of SDG Implementation 2022, https://repository.ifla.org/handle/123456789/1988
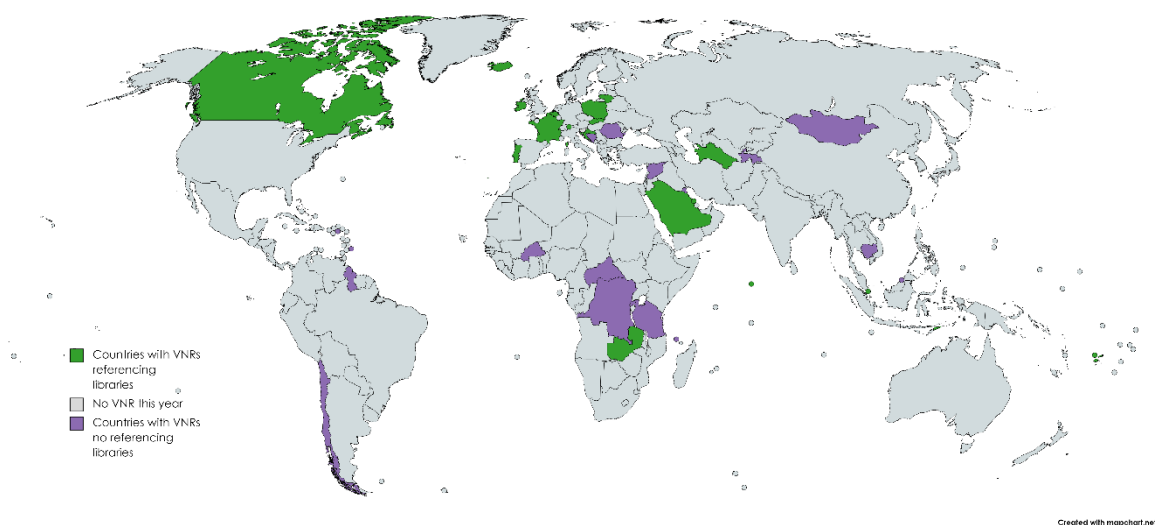
We can break down the data for library references by region, which demonstrates very different shares of reviews referencing libraires. Setting aside North America (where Canada's inclusion of libraries mean a score of 100%), other regions with a significant focus on libraries are Asia-Oceania (5 out of 8 or 62.5%), Europe (10 out of 13 or 76.9%) and MENA (2 out of 4, or 50%). However, Sub-Saharan Africa (1 out of 7 or 14.3%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (none of 3, or 0%) are doing less well, for now.

This may both indicate different approaches to VNRs from one region to the next, but also suggests a potential area of focus for future library work in terms of how libraries can become involved in VNRs. '

Graph 2: Number of VNRs Referring to Librares (by SDG)

We can visualise the spread of those VNRs referring to libraries, or not, in the below map:

Countries with VNRs referring libraries

No VNR this year

Countries with VNRs no referencing libraries

Created with mapchart.net

References to Library Contributions by SDG

As highlighted in the introduction, the SDGs provide a particularly valuable framework for thinking through and presenting the contribution of libraries to development, given their much broader scope. Member States have started to recognise this, as evidenced by the contexts in which there are references to libraries in VNRs.

This section looks at each SDG for which there are relevant references – in reality, all of them exception SDG 7 (energy). In each case it looks to highlight how the connection is made between the work of libraries and success in this area.

First, however, it is worth taking a quick overview of the overall spread of references (Graph 3). This makes clear the spread of library references across almost all SDGs. Perhaps unsurprisingly, SDG 4 (quality education) is most often referenced (in over half of the VNRs mentioning libraries), but SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure, covering both research and connectivity) and SDG (sustainable cities and communities) are also widely referenced as areas where libraries can contribute, followed by SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and SDGs 16 and 17 (peace, justice and strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals respectively).

SDG 1 – No Poverty

This goal focuses on driving forwards efforts to help those in the toughest situations, both through financial aid, and access to basic services. For **Ireland**, libraries represent just such a basic service, enabling everyone to be part of the community regardless of money. Crucially, too, it sets out how libraries, through providing information for all, can indeed offer routes out of poverty, through opportunities for learning, employment, or access to further support. This role of libraries as a gateway to other services – as a simple one-stop-shop – also appears in the **Maldives**' VNR, while **Canada** highlights how libraries are helping to bridge the digital divide in ways that enable an escape from poverty.

SDG 2 – Zero Hunger

This SDG looks at the need to support productive and sustainable agriculture that ensures that everyone has reliable access to healthy food. Libraires play their part here too. **Ireland's** Review highlights not only broader initiatives (Grow it Yourself and Grow it Forwards) to promote sustainable food, but also work to help people grow more of their own while also understanding broader questions about food production and consumption.

SDG 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing

This is the goal that underlines the need to ensure access to health services, and to improve outcomes for all. There is an important reference in particular to promoting mental health and wellbeing, rather than simply acting when things go wrong. The need for a positive approach has been particular important during the COVID pandemic, with Lithuania's Voluntary National

Review underlining how libraries there provided emotional support alongside access to protective equipment. Meanwhile, Ireland's VNR notes work in libraries to promote positive aging, to run the Keep Well initiative (focused on sharing knowledge, enhancing mental health, and building social connections), and to participate in the Health Ireland at your Library initiative, which offers a set of nationwide materials and information services.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION
SDG4 – Quality Education
Education – from early years, throughout life – is the focus of SDG4. As highlighted above this is the single most referenced SDG when libraries are included in Voluntary National Reviews.

In some cases, there are broader discussions of this, for example in the case of **Fiji**, whose VNR connects the drive to develop a national school library programme to its wider efforts to deliver on this SDG, while **Lithuania** sets out how libraries support community access to quality education, and **Turkmenistan** places libraries at the heart of the university of the future. **Canada** underlines the scale of this contribution, underlining that public libraries there run nearly a quarter of a million programmes a year, reaching over 5 million people. Inversely, **Timor Leste** and **Zambia** set out a lack of adequately resourced libraries as holding back progress towards SDG4.

Libraries' role in supporting school readiness among the youngest children is also clear, for example in **Canada's** Review, which cites the example of Regina Public Library, which found that 96.7% of parents participating in an early literacy programme were using lessons and materials 4-6 months later. Meanwhile, in Vancouver, 95% of parents and caregivers reported feeling more confident in helping their children following engagement in another library programme. **Ireland's** libraries are also noted as contributing to universal literacy, for example through providing Little Library Bags, as are **Chile's**, which offer backpacks full of books.

Libraries are also a key resource for those who have left formal education. **Ireland's** VNR underlines how its libraries support adult literacy and skills, both through providing access to materials and connecting potential learning to courses.

Another aspect is the value of libraires – digital and physical – in providing content that can complement and enable wider education for all. **Bahrain's** VNR for example highlights its My Digital Library initiative, which performs this role, as does **Turkmenistan's** in talking about the role of eLibraries. **Croatia** too underlines how libraries can broaden access to content beyond what students typically received in the classroom.

Libraries' ability to support inclusive access to education is also highlighted, for example in **Canada**, which underlines how they offer an inclusive and safe space for learning, or **Croatia**, where libraries are playing a leading role in supporting access among Roma communities. **Poland's** review notes the particular place of libraries in enabling access to education for newcomers, in particular people displaced by the war in Ukraine.

Finally, **Ireland's** review highlights the particular importance of information literacy as a skill that libraries are uniquely well placed to deliver. The **Maldives** set out how libraries build digital and related skills more broadly in the population, while **France** discusses how libraries can provide education for sustainable development.
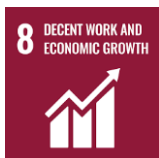
SDG5 – Gender Equality

This goal is all about combatting a key and persistent divide in society between men and women. In addition to their broader role as a space open for all, as appears in many VNRs, the reviews of Ireland and the Maldives highlight how libraries specifically help reduce inequalities here.

Ireland for example notes the place of libraries in addressing period poverty as an issue that can create significant problems for women, as well as in offering spaces that are safe and trustworthy for migrant women in particular, helping to connect them with opportunities to develop language, digital and entrepreneurial skills. The **Maldives** meanwhile single out how libraries offer 'safe spaces for social dialogue for both genders in vulnerable situations, particularly women and children'.

SDG6 – Clean Water and Sanitation

Closely linked to health is the need for everyone to be able to access water and the tools necessary for sanitation. While this is not necessarily often associated with our institutions, **Ireland's** VNR this year highlights how the place of libraries in communities mean that they can be perfect venues for distributing sanitary products that help address period poverty.

SDG8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth

This is the goal that brings together work to boost employment and economies more broadly. The **Maldives** in particular make a connection with the work of libraries, noting that the development of school and public libraries, in particular on outlying islands, can be a means of supporting sustainable socioeconomic development an tourism. Meanwhile, **Ireland's** VNR sets out how libraries provide support for job-seeking and skills development (especially for groups at risk of marginalisation), as well as for the growth of the social economy.

SDG9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

SDG9 covers a wide range of factors that underpin inclusive growth, in particular research and innovation, as well as universal connectivity and wider digital transformation. Concerning research, **Ireland's** VNR highlights support for open access and open science capacity which in turn promote to accelerate progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. **Saudi Arabia's** Review cites the digital library it has created to support research publication.

Concerning connectivity, **Timor Leste** notes efforts to connect all educational institutions and their libraries to the internet, as well as to develop digital libraries to ensure that they can access the content that makes being online meaningful. The

Maldives, similarly, highlights how digital and physical libraries can combine to maximise positive development impacts, as does **Bahrain**. **Ireland** in the meanwhile complements free internet access with digital skills provision, but notes also the need to invest in upgrading library IT infrastructures and give staff the training they need to realise the potential of libraries. **Croatia** too highlights how libraries look to make the difference between connectivity and meaningful access by offering computing classes to children.

Canada also offers such classes (especially in relation to subject areas with high failure rates), but also stresses in particular the role of libraires in combatting digital divides, in urban and rural areas alike, to the benefit of people living in poverty. It cites research that showed that 58% of respondents to a survey among people using technology at Toronto Public Library didn't have any other way of getting online, and 78% of these, as a result of this use, were more engaged in the community.

Finally, **Portugal** looks wider, and identifies libraries as part of the wider infrastructure available to communities, notably in the Azores.

SDG10 – Reduced Inequalities

Under SDG 10, the 2030 Agenda focuses efforts to tackle wider divides in society, notably those that affect persons with disabilities, migrants and other minority groups. **Canada's** review underlines a broad role in making communities inclusive, while **Croatia** for example highlights how libraries promote the inclusion of Roma, especially children, while **Poland** underlines the work of libraries to support and enable the integration of Ukrainians, alongside wider efforts to promote diversity. **Ireland** too has developed services focused on helping migrant communities to benefit from wider services and fulfil their rights, as well as to support and celebrate the LGBTQ+ community.

Singapore's VNR offers the case of the Punggol Regional Library as an example of accessibility, which combines an accessible building and collections with assistive technologies. Crucially, the logic of 'no decision about us without us' was respected, with the project shaped by consultation with over 500 persons with disabilities and their care-givers.

SDG11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities

This is the goal that covers questions around sustainable urbanisation and equitable regional development. Notably, it highlights the importance of public space, as well as the safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage.

On the latter point about heritage, **Slovakia's** VNR highlights the connection between support for libraires and wider safeguarding efforts, while **Ireland** too references the work of libraries to preserve and give access. **Saudi Arabia** looks at culture more broadly, noting how library activities and events contribute to this.

There is also a lot of recognition of the work of libraries to regenerate and strengthen communities, for example in the case of **France**, **Ireland** (in particular rural communities), **Lithuania**, **Poland**, **Portugal** and **Singapore**. **Portugal** in particular sets out its view that libraries represent a pillar of community infrastructure, and contributes to addressing regional inequalities.

The particular role of libraries as public spaces also appears. **Ireland** underlines the value of a nationally distributed set of physical spaces where communities can meet and come together. **Canada** too talks about the role of public libraries in particular in providing locally adapted services in safe, civic spaces open to all, in urban and rural areas alike, and adds how they foster community engagement and civic participation through local programmes and partnerships with other civil society organisations and local governments.

SDG12 – Sustainable Consumption and Production

As the first of the SDGs focused on the planet, SDG12 looks at questions around changes in production models and behaviour. In this context, **France's** and **Ireland's** VNRs underlines how libraries can help change behaviours to favour sustainability, while both **Iceland** and **Ireland** argue that libraries are exemplars of the circulate economy, enabling better sharing of resources.

SDG13 – Climate Action

This goal looks at climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as how to mobilise energy and resources for action. **Canada's** VNR highlights the work of the Canadian Federation of Library Associations in particular in localising climate action through individual library associations and municipal library boards. Efforts there include creating a national benchmarking across Canadian libraries to demonstrate how libraries are addressing climate change. Meanwhile, **Ireland's** VNR references work to produce and share materials on climate change, as well as to carry out activities around climate awareness, adapted to local audiences.

SDG14 – Life under Water

This is the goal focused on ensuring that maritime resources are protected and that the seas remain healthy. On this topic, Ireland's VNR refers to work in public libraries to promote care for seals and marine life within communities.

SDG15 – Life on Land

Mirroring the focus on the seas under SDG14, SDG15 looks at how to ensure that land resources, including biodiversity and forests, can be safeguarded for future generations. In this respect, **Liechtenstein's** Voluntary National Review highlights how the National Library has served as a site for collecting data about fine particulate matter in the air, while **Ireland's** Review cites library efforts to promote biodiversity more generally.

SDG16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

SDG16 is an important cross-cutting goal, focusing on a key precondition for success elsewhere in the agenda – the upholding of rights and the ability of institutions to deliver in a way that is responsive to the needs of citizens. Crucially, it also includes explicit reference to access to information.

Lithuania's Canada's and **Ireland's** reviews underline this last point and the role of libraries in providing this, as well as how this in turn contributes to vibrant democracies, and civic participation. Meanwhile, Poland underlines how libraries support access to information for children in particular, while, Portugal's gives the specific example of a national digital library helping to progress towards SDG16.

SDG17 – Partnerships for the Goals

Complementing SDG16, SDG17 looks at the need to work together within and across borders in order to support SDG delivery. In this context, **Belgium's** review highlights the example of a development project that brought together a library in Belgium with contacts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to develop a library there. Domestically, **Lithuania's** VNR talks about the importance of cooperation between the National Library and others to achieve goals, while **Canada** references partnerships with civil society organisations and local government alike.

SDG17 also includes references to the need to share knowledge, something that can be achieved more effectively through open access and science. **Ireland's** VNR makes clear libraries' role in making this happen.

Libraries making general contributions to the Goals

Outside of services and activities that help to achieve specific SDGs, there are also countries which underline the cross-cutting nature of library contributions, reflecting the logic in the 2030 Agenda in favour of holistic approaches. For example, **Lithuania** underlines how, in general, "libraries contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the sustainable development according to the scope and capacity of their activities", while the **Maldives** set out how libraries act as one-stop-shops that provide information resources across a range of SDGs.

Poland's VNR also highlights its work to explore how the SDGs can implement all 17 SDGs, and **Ireland** underlines that "Libraries are uniquely positioned to implement many specific aspects of the vision of the 2030 agenda". Finally, **Canada** highlights the work of its Federation of Library Associations to implement the SDG framework as a whole.

Libraries promoting the SDGs

There are also countries which include the role of libraries in building awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals in general in their VNRs. For example, **France**, underlines that its over 16 000 libraries play a

major role in the adoption and implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as a basis for driving behaviour change. **Ireland's** VNR underlines how active libraries were in the country's SDG week, while in **Poland**, libraries have been leading in making local government aware of the SDGs.

Linked to this, libraries are also recognised as having a role in delivering Education for Development, as recognised by **Croatia** and **Poland**, while **Ireland** notes the role of the creation of resource libraries, and **France** highlights how libraries support such learning outside of schools.

Library involvement in preparing Voluntary National Reviews
VNRs are supposed to be developed on the basis of wide-ranging consultations with all relevant stakeholders, which should logically include libraries. However, it is only in France, Ireland, Lithuania and Singapore that this is formally noted. We know of libraries being asked to provide input in Canada, and this may have been the case elsewhere, but is not evidenced in the Reviews.

Conclusion

2023 has in some respects continued the trend seen in recent years of libraries being recognised, across the 2030 Agenda, for the diversity of their contributions to development. This reinforces the arguments made by IFLA since the agreement of the Agenda, given the cross-cutting of information in supporting progress.

The positive news is that the share Voluntary National Reviews referring to libraries has reached a record high of over 50%, well above the previous high of 44% in 2021. However, there is still strong variation in both the degree of involvement of libraries evidenced in reports, and the range of goals mentioned, even if across the 36 Reviews published, only one goal is not associated with libraries in any explicit way.

Ireland is clearly an exceptionally strong example here, with a comprehensive chapter exploring the range of different contributions libraries make to development. It offers a great model for other countries. Beyond this, Canada, Poland and the Maldives have also produced very welcome reports that we can hope will inspire others.

We encourage library associations and libraries to draw on the examples shared in their own engagement with governments, both around VNRs and wider sustainable development planning and implementation.

Annex 1: VNRs referring to libraries

Country	Number of VNRs published	Link
Bahrain	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/bahrain/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Belgium	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/belgium/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Canada	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/canada/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Croatia	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/croatia/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Fiji	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/fiji/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
France	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/france/voluntary-national-review-2023
Iceland	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/iceland/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Ireland	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/ireland/voluntary-national-review-2023
Liechtenstein	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/liechtenstein/voluntary-national-review-2023
Lithuania	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/lithuania/voluntary-national-review-2023
Maldives	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/maldives/voluntary-national-review-2023
Poland	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/poland/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Portugal	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/portugal/voluntary-national-review-2023
Saudi Arabia	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/saudi-arabia/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Singapore	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/singapore/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Slovakia	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/slovakia/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Timor Leste	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/timor-leste/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Turkmenistan	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/turkmenistan/voluntary-national-reviews-2023
Zambia	2	https://hlpf.un.org/countries/zambia/voluntary-national-review-2023