

# Libraries in Voluntary National Reviews 2022

12 July 2022

This week at the UN High-Level Political Forum in New York, 45 Member States are presenting their Voluntary National Reviews of implementation of the 2030 Agenda – the UN’s roadmap for sustainable development from 2016 to 2030.

These reviews are a key part of the mechanisms within the Agenda to ensure its effectiveness, both through encouraging countries to set out their progress and receive questions from their peers and civil society internationally, and by providing an opportunity for collective reflection domestically.

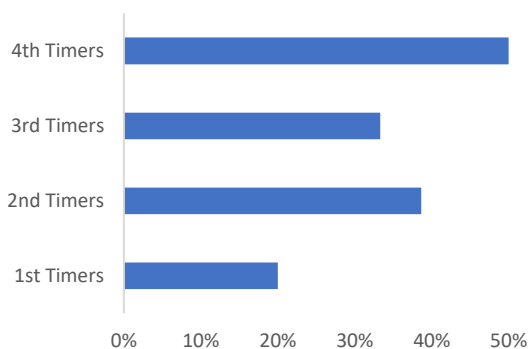
When done well, they are built on a wide-ranging review of the current situation, in turn based on widespread consultation with all actors involved in realising sustainable development, including of course libraries. They can also identify useful steps for the future, again potentially relating to libraries.

IFLA has previously analysed published Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), starting with an overview of those published in 2016-2020, followed by a 2021 update. This article extends this work into 2022.

## Overview

Of the 43 Voluntary National Review reports published at the time of writing, 14 reference libraries. This represents 33% of the total, just under a third. This is a lower figure than in 2021, but still much higher in previous years, where little more than a quarter of VNRs mentioned them.

**Share of VNRs referencing libraries by number of VNRs completed**



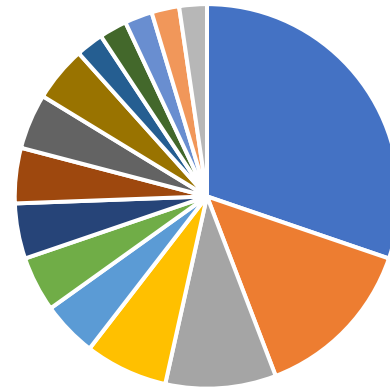
The countries which do reference libraries, however, come from four of the five world regions where VNRs did take place in 2022 – the exception is the Middle East and North Africa, where there were only two VNRs – in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. There were no VNRs in North America this year.

We can also look at whether those countries with more experience of VNRs are more likely to reference libraries, although it’s important to note that we are working with relatively small numbers meaning that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions.

Nonetheless, the numbers in the graph above left do seem to indicate that countries which have already done one VNR in the past are more likely to reference libraries in future ones.

In terms of the range of SDGs covered, there are references to 15 of the 17 goals in total, as well as to the role of libraries in general in promoting the 2030 Agenda in the population.

The graph to the right sets out the prevalence of references to libraries according to the context of which SDG they are made. The most common is SDG 4 – quality education. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the work of school and university libraries, as well as the traditional role of public libraries in enabling lifelong education. Next comes SDG 11, which covers both the safeguarding of heritage and strong communities, and then SDG 9 – industry, innovation and infrastructure – which relates to connectivity, and SDG 10 – reducing inequalities.



- SDG4 ■ SDG11 ■ SDG9 ■ SDG10
- SDG1 ■ SDG12 ■ SDG13 ■ SDG16
- SDG17 ■ SDG3 ■ SDG2 ■ SDG5
- SDG6 ■ SDG7 ■ SDG8

A further 6 SDGs are referenced in two VNRs each (SDGs 1 – end poverty, 2 – good health and wellbeing, 12 – sustainable consumption and production, 13 – climate action, 16 – peace, justice and strong institutions, and 17 partnerships for the goals), and 4 are mentioned in just one each (SDGs 2 – zero hunger, 5 – gender equality, 6 – clean water and sanitation, 7 – affordable and clean energy, and 8 – decent work and economic growth).

Overall, this represents a larger number of SDGs linked to libraries than in any previous IFLA analysis of Voluntary National Reviews, as well as a more equal distribution of references than in previous years.

It is worth pointing out also that two countries this year – Argentina and Latvia – both included significant sections about libraries in their 2022 Reviews.

In the case of Latvia, there is a feature section on the activities of the National Library of Latvia, as well as of the Library Association of Latvia, with an emphasis in particular on how libraries and museums provide spaces where people can engage with ideas and each other and develop critical thinking skills. In a particularly welcome step, the government shows a strong understanding of the potential of libraries to drive transformative change:

*Latvian libraries, like every library in the world, are sustainable in nature and mission. The library is a place for everyone, regardless of social status, gender, and beliefs. A library provides reliable information and preserves cultural heritage; it is a repository, a meeting place, a place for lifelong learning, and a conduit of change.*

Argentina’s Voluntary National Review contains a three-page section on the work of the Library of Congress of the Nation, which sits under SDG 4 but in fact touches on a wide range of issues. The Report, in particular, offers images of the library’s outreach across the country. It also underlines the following concerning public libraries:

*Public libraries occupy a strategic place in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They have the essential social function of guaranteeing the right of access to information, for free, to the whole community, contributing to achieve a fairer and more equitable society, a better skilled and informed citizenry, indispensable conditions for the development of a more democratic nation with better opportunities for everyone, as made clear in Goal 16.10.*

These features are great examples of demonstrating very clearly how libraries are key actors and partners in development, and hopefully will provide a model for others.

## Insights by SDG

This section looks at the fourteen SDGs in connection with which the role of libraries is referenced in VNRs in 2022.



**SDG 1 – End Poverty:** this is the SDG that focuses on putting an end to poverty, including lack of access to basic public services. In this respect, Côte d’Ivoire underlines, in the context of its work to ensure access to public services in deprived areas, the development of libraries. Meanwhile, Latvia’s review points explicitly to the National Library’s work in promoting prosperity as contributing to fighting poverty.



**SDG 2 – Zero Hunger:** this is the agriculture, food security and nutrition SDG. Here too, it is the Latvian VNR that references this, again given the work of the National Library both to support farming across the country, but also to support research and other work relevant to nutrition and sound policy making.



**SDG 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing:** clearly COVID has shone a new light on the importance of action for health in general, but also in particular in the need to gather, manage and apply health information effectively, as well as to build health literacy. This latter point is recognised in Pakistan’s VNR, which highlights the role of digital libraries in helping women look after their health. In the meanwhile, Latvia’s VNR also highlights health as an area of focus for the National Library.



**SDG 4 – Quality Education:** as highlighted above, this is the most popular SDG to be connected to libraries, and covers, schooling, literacy, and also sustainability education. Within this, though, different aspects of libraries’ contribution are recognised. In Botswana, Gabon, and Kazakhstan, it is underlined that school libraries play an essential role in strengthening the ability of schools themselves to achieve their goals. Gabon even provides data around the share of

schools which do have libraries, although this primarily serves to underline how much work there is to do.

The place of libraries in adult also appears, for example in Côte d'Ivoire, where programmes to build public libraries are seen as key to allowing parents to develop literacy skills, and so better support children. Eritrea makes a similar point, underlining its own library-building programme, while Sri Lanka and Pakistan reference libraries as generally supporting education.

Digital libraries – often curated by physical institutions – also are referenced as making a positive difference, notably in the reports of Ghana, Lesotho, and Uruguay. Greece does the same, but in the specific area of sustainability education.

Sustainability education in general actually appears in a few other VNRs, notably Latvia, which highlights efforts to train and support librarians in bringing the message to the public, Argentina's reference to the Library of Congress' and Sri Lanka where libraries are seen as a partner for SDG education.



**SDG 5 – Gender Equality:** this SDG is the one that looks at different aspects of equality between men and women, including in terms of access to skills, resources and possibilities. Here, Pakistan's Voluntary National Review gives the example of a digital library programme focused on helping women and girls, in particular those with print disabilities, to enjoy their right to education.



**SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation:** as suggested by the title, this is the goal looking at sustainable water management. Argentina's VNR refers to this, highlighting the work of the Library of Congress to achieve this more effectively, both improving its own environmental performance and providing a good example



**SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy:** this goal is the one that looks at questions around energy generation and efficiency. Argentina's VNR highlights how the Library of Congress there has taken steps to become greener and draw on this work to provide an example for others.



**SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth:** this is the SDG under which there are goals around ensuring not only that economies as a whole are healthy, but also that everyone has the possibility to develop skills and find good quality work. The Latvian VNR highlights both aspects of this, underlining how the National Library of Latvia contributes more broadly to economic growth through family business centres, broader provision of access to information, but also broader efforts to ensure decent salaries in libraries and across the cultural sector.



**SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure:** it is under this goal that efforts to drive universal connectivity appear. Three VNRs reference this, with Lesotho’s in particular setting out the role of libraries in providing ICT-enabled learning, while Sri Lanka’s and Uruguay’s both talk about how libraries help ensure the presence of useful content for learning online, thereby increasing the value of connectivity.



**SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities:** this goal looks at what can be done more broadly to reduce inequality and exclusion in societies, with a particular focus on providing solutions tailored to the needs of refugees and people with disabilities. Argentina’s VNR strongly underlines the commitment of the Library of Congress to use its resources to combat inequality, deploying information, training and knowledge to this end. Latvia’s review also stresses the importance of libraries as spaces and resources for building cohesion, open to everyone, while Pakistan’s, already as highlighted above, highlights how libraries are helping people with print disabilities in particular.



**SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities:** under SDG11 is consideration of all of social cohesion, the safeguarding of heritage, and territorial equalities – i.e., avoiding the exclusion of rural and remote areas. Six countries link this to the work of libraries.

In terms of building and supporting rural libraries as a means of promoting territorial cohesion, Sri Lanka, Côte d’Ivoire, Eritrea and Gabon, which even includes statistics on school library provision per region.

Argentina’s VNR goes further, underlining the outreach efforts undertaken by the Library of Congress to bring services to all parts of the country, including through supporting community libraries there.

Latvia’s in the meanwhile highlights the role of libraries in supporting community cohesion, but also notes the work of the National Library in safeguarding heritage as a key reference point for the country and source of strength.



**SDG 12: Sustainable Consumption and Production:** activities here look at efforts to reduce resource use and promote recycling and reuse. Two VNRs talk about libraries’ work here, with Latvia’s making the connection between work with heritage and the circular economy. Argentina’s review, in a similar vein to its references to SDGs 6 and 7, underlines the proactive efforts taken by the Library of Congress to promote sustainable resource use, both in order directly to reduce environmental impacts, and to set an example to others.



**SDG 13: Climate Action:** covering climate change mitigation and adaptation, it is again the VNRs of Argentina and Latvia that make links between the work of libraries and this goal, stressing the potential of libraries both in providing education around sustainability, and in setting an example for others.



**SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions:** this is the Sustainable Development Goal that underlines the need for access to information in general, as a matter of human rights and to enable effective democratic governance. Once more, it is Argentina and Latvia that most explicitly recognise the connection between libraries and democracy, with Argentina in particular highlighting target 16.10 and the contribution of libraries to the wider policy of active transparency, as well as supporting global initiatives around access to information. Meanwhile Latvia talks about the importance of trust in institutions, and in libraries in particular, as public institutions.



**SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals:** the 17<sup>th</sup> goal is a cross-cutting one, under the wider theme of ensuring policy coherence and connections in support of achieving the SDGs. In this respect, Argentina's VNR stresses work to build partnerships, both at the national and local levels. Latvia stresses the importance of partnerships between institutions, and across borders, as a means of boosting performance towards the SDGs.



**Libraries as shop windows for the SDGs:** in addition to the individual SDGs, it's worth remembering that a key task for anyone involved in the 2030 Agenda is to raise awareness of it. Some of these examples have already appeared under SDG 4, which includes sustainability education, but it is worth highlighting again.

At a basic level, the provision and dissemination of SDG information is a first step, with libraries well placed to do this for their communities, as happens in Greece through its online SDG library. Jamaica has been able to mobilise its network of parish libraries as spaces to bring people into contact with the Goals and get them involved in efforts to implement them. Sri Lanka also sees libraries as a partner, in general, in getting more people aware of and engaged in the SDGs.

Meanwhile, and more specifically, Argentina and Latvia both saw proactive efforts to develop training, initially for librarians, but then on this basis, to reach out to communities.

## Conclusion

The range of 2022 Voluntary National Reviews – at least those which have already been published – offer a further strong set of examples of governments which have recognised the potential of libraries as partners for development. While Argentina and

Latvia stand out for the depth and breadth of their coverage of how libraries contribute to delivering on the SDGs, every reference is a proof of the importance of our institutions for success in the SDGs.

We hope that these examples can be drawn on by libraries and library associations around the world in their advocacy for inclusion in Voluntary National Reviews, from the earliest stages, as well as in the planning, implementation and monitoring of wider development strategies.

## ANNEX – VNRs Referencing Libraries in 2022

COUNTRY	VNR No	Link
Argentina	3 <sup>rd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Argentina%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Argentina%20Report.pdf</a>
Botswana	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Botswana%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Botswana%20Report.pdf</a>
Cote d'Ivoire	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Cote%20dlvoire%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Cote%20dlvoire%20Report.pdf</a>
Eritrea	1 <sup>st</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Eritrea%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Eritrea%20Report.pdf</a>
Ghana	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Ghana%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Ghana%20Report.pdf</a>
Gabon	1 <sup>st</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Gabon%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Gabon%20Report.pdf</a>
Greece	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Greece%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Greece%20Report.pdf</a>
Latvia	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Latvia%20Report%201.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Latvia%20Report%201.pdf</a>
Kazakhstan	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Kazakhstan%20Report%20English.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Kazakhstan%20Report%20English.pdf</a>
Jamaica	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Jamaica%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Jamaica%20Report.pdf</a>
Lesotho	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Lesotho%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Lesotho%20Report.pdf</a>
Pakistan	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Pakistan%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Pakistan%20Report.pdf</a>
Sri Lanka	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Sri%20Lanka%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Sri%20Lanka%20Report.pdf</a>
Uruguay	4 <sup>th</sup>	<a href="https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Uruguay%20Report.pdf">https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR%202022%20Uruguay%20Report.pdf</a>