

2. THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENT AND PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

What Is It?

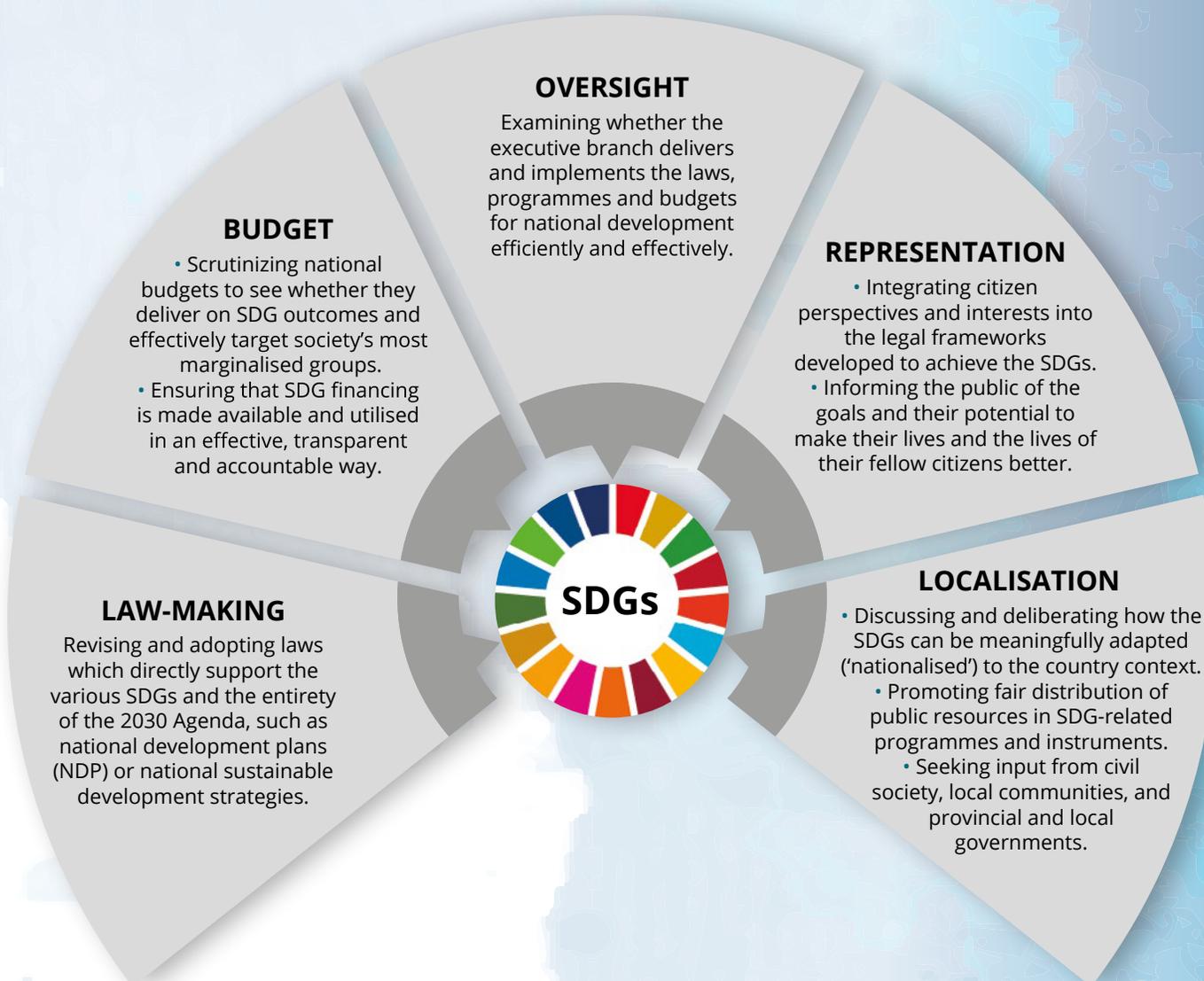
Parliaments have a constitutional responsibility to oversee how all of the SDGs are nationalized, implemented and supported by the government. However, at their core,

parliaments directly relate

to two SDG 16 targets

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SDG 16.6 on developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels and SDG 16.7 on ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.⁷¹ Composed of representatives from different geographical areas or constituencies,



71 Inter-Parliamentary Union & United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2016). Parliaments and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Self-Assessment Toolkit, p. 7. <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/sdg-toolkit-e.pdf>

a modern parliament or legislature



tends to have

the following fundamental functions:



oversight of government bodies, especially the executive branch; budgeting; lawmaking; and representing the interests of citizens.⁷² In advancing the SDGs,

SDG localization



can also be added to parliament's list of core functions.⁷³

In performing these functions, parliaments and parliamentary committees may use a number of procedures including, but not limited to adopting legislation and amending laws; scrutinizing government, including ministers, ministries and civil servants through inquiries and hearings on matters of public interest; and gaining access to official documents and information.⁷⁴ Set within an SDG's context, this means,

"If the goals are to be

achieved in any given country



*parliament must play a significant and informed role. The laws needed to create the legal framework for the SDGs will have to be scrutinized and adopted by the parliament. The annual state budget that allocates funding for SDG implementation will need to be passed by the parliament. Parliament must also monitor the implementation and parliamentarians must represent their constituents to promote citizen participation in the implementation of the SDGs.*⁷⁵

Well-functioning parliaments may then contribute to SDG 16.3 on promoting the rule of law, SDG 16.5 on reducing corruption and bribery, SDG 16.10 on public access to information, and various other SDGs. For example, in terms of SDG 3 on health, parliament can ensure that specific targets are included in a national development plan, with the required legislative, fiscal, representative and oversight action to support implementation.

The Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) is the only international network of parliamentarians focused on combating corruption. Its members represent more than fifty countries in all regions of the world. They are current or former legislators who collaborate on a nonpartisan basis. GOPAC explicitly recognizes the value of civil society partnership, committing to 'achieve accountability and transparency through effective anti-corruption mechanisms and inclusive participation and cooperation between parliamentarians, government and civil society.'

Parliament's role in strengthening SDG 16 implementation at national and subnational levels through VNR and post-VNR processes is therefore twofold: as a reflection of its core functions (SDG 16.6 and SDG 16.7) and in how it advances SDG 16 specific recommendations stemming from the VNR. As captured by a 2019 study by Partners for Review and evidencing growing acknowledgement of their role, many of the 2019 VNRs reported on the role of parliament, through consultations, representation

72 TAP Network (2019). *SDG Accountability Handbook: A Practical Guide for Civil Society*, p. 24.

<https://sdgaccountability.org/sdg-accountability-handbook/>

Partners for Review & Together 2030 (2018). *Engaging parliaments on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: representation, accountability and implementation: A handbook for civil society*, p. 10.

<http://www.partners-for-review.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Engaging-parliaments-on-the-2030-Agenda-and-the-SDGs.pdf>

73 [Here](#), localization refers to how the SDGs are adapted to a country context, including in public resource distribution and in seeking input from civil society, local communities, and local and regional governments.

Partners for Review & Together 2030 (2018). *Engaging parliaments on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs*, p. 7.

74 TAP Network (2019). *SDG Accountability Handbook: A Practical Guide for Civil Society*, p. 25.

75 GOPAC, UNDP, IDB (2019). *Parliament's Role in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals*, p. 10. <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Parliamentary%20Development/parliaments%20role%20in%20implementing%20the%20SDGs.pdf>

in SDG coordination mechanisms, as related to budget approval, awareness-raising and oversight.⁷⁶

Why Is It Important?

The 2030 Agenda recognizes parliaments' essential role through "their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and [...] in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of our commitments".⁷⁷ As representatives of their constituencies, parliamentarians have a responsibility and an opportunity to support people-centered policies, legislation and budgets. It is through this representational role that national ownership of the SDGs can be driven and ensured, further calling for their meaningful engagement in the VNR process – preparation, delivery and follow-up.

Further, while the executive branch often introduces laws and budgets and is responsible for their implementation, parliament is responsible for passing laws, reviewing fiscal plans and ultimately monitoring government implementation efforts.

To this end, oversight, in particular, is critical to assessing the impact and process of government action

However, this parliamentary function comes with challenges.⁷⁸ Issues around political space and party politics; access to information; a lack of human and financial resources; limited parliamentary powers in following up on recommendations to government once made; competing demands; and a lack of commitment on the part of some parliamentarians can hinder attempts at accountability.

Given the increasing complexity of governance

and SDG implementation/monitoring⁷⁹, working relationships with other oversight bodies, such as Supreme Audit Institutions and Anti-Corruption Commissions, as well as civil society organizations, are critical to effective parliamentary oversight.

However, globally and as⁸⁰

captured by the Inter-Parliamentary Union many parliaments remain unaware of the VNR

Further, within the relatively small percentage of parliaments that do know about the VNRs, it appears that most have not been meaningfully consulted: for example, through hearings or government-led consultations or through actual participation at HLPF. This presents two missed opportunities. Engaging parliament is not only a means by which SDG 16 can be put into practice, but it is also an empowering exercise for parliamentarians themselves.

Updated SDG 16 VNR Guidelines

provide a useful starting point in articulating what meaningful stakeholder engagement requires.⁸¹

76 It is also important to note that, while acknowledgement of the role of parliaments has increased, as has their engagement, not all forms of engagement or consultations are thorough or rigorous. P4R (2019). Voluntary National Reviews submitted to the 2019 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development – a Comparative Analysis, p. 5.

<https://www.partners-for-review.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/P4R-Analysis-VNRs-2019.pdf>

77 United Nations (2015). *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, #45.

78 Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017). *Global Parliamentary Report 2017—Parliamentary oversight: Parliament's power to hold government to account*, p. 24.

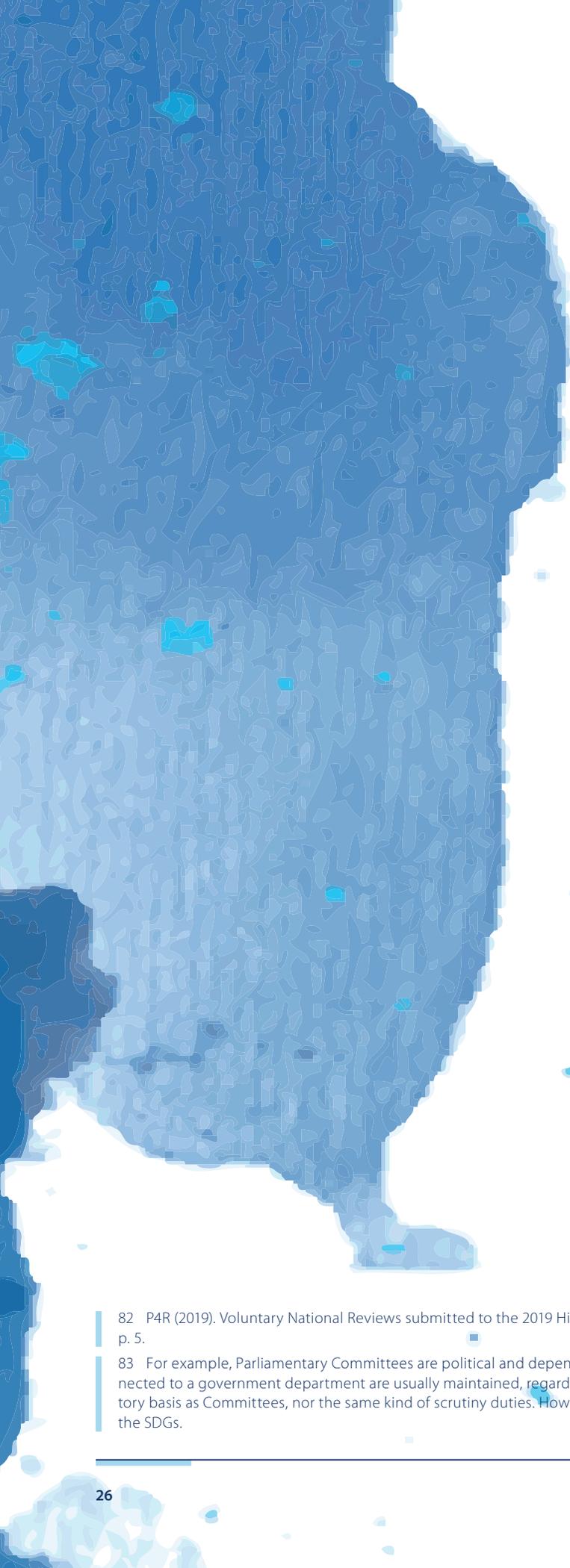
79 Among various other duties and responsibilities, for example, parliament should verify that the necessary data is collected, processed and shared and that the National Statistics Office has the resources and capacity to do so. Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017). *Global Parliamentary Report 2017—Parliamentary oversight: Parliament's power to hold government to account*, p. 24.

80 Inter-Parliamentary Union (2019). Institutionalization of the SDGs in the work of parliaments, p. 3.

https://www.ipu.org/sites/default/files/documents/final_-_survey_analysis_updated_feb_14_2019_edited-e.pdf

81 Global Alliance (2020). A Guide to Report on SDG 16 in Voluntary National Reviews.

<https://www.sdg16hub.org/content/global-alliance-guide-report-sdg16-voluntary-national-reviews>



How Can This Be Used?

An entirely government-driven VNR is at odds with transparent and accountable decision-making as epitomized in SDG 16 (in addition to being at odds with VNR guidance). Involving parliaments in the VNR process is one way by which a whole-of-society approach can be strengthened in practice. Ideally, HLPF delegations should include parliamentarians. Parliament's core functions — oversight, budgeting, lawmaking and representation — often overlap in practice. This section details how parliaments' core functions can and should be incorporated into VNR and post-VNR processes to advance SDG 16 – from preparation to review, monitoring and implementation.

An analysis of the 2019 VNRs by Partners for Review

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highlights that parliamentarians are increasingly included in national SDG Councils, Committees or Working Groups in preparing for the VNR, as well as engaged through workshops, conferences and roundtables.⁸² While parliamentary representation in such SDG institutional mechanisms is still somewhat limited, recognition of their oversight role is growing.

While different types of parliamentary committees can be used to exercise oversight,⁸³ committee oversight generally enables parliament either to assess whether policies, laws and programmes are effectively implemented – or, if not, to make recommendations. Committees allow parliamentarians to examine critical issues, including as related to the most vulnerable, while engaging a wide cross-section of stakeholders in their deliberations and debate. In terms of the VNR, this can translate into a parliamentary committee “reporting back” to parliament on the government's performance.

82 P4R (2019). Voluntary National Reviews submitted to the 2019 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development – a Comparative Analysis, p. 5.

83 For example, Parliamentary Committees are political and dependent on the interest of Members of Parliament to continue, though those connected to a government department are usually maintained, regardless of MP changes. “All Party Parliamentary Groups” do not have the same statutory basis as Committees, nor the same kind of scrutiny duties. However, they are less vulnerable and provide additional means to keep attention on the SDGs.

UK: An Exercise in Oversight, Reporting Back to Parliament on the UK's First VNR

Following the UK's presentation of its first VNR at the 2019 HLPF, which focused in part on SDG 16, the International Development Committee (IDC) within the UK's House of Commons (one of the UK's two parliamentary houses) produced a report assessing the UK's performance, which was presented to Parliament and made available to the public. A few of the findings, as paraphrased,⁸⁴ include:

- A lack of stakeholder engagement and a rushed process, despite having had adequate time. This prevented stakeholders from meaningfully engaging in, or influencing, the final VNR.
- Engagement recommended by the UN – consultation with stakeholders like human rights institutions, trades unions; business and industry; civil society; parliamentarians and UK academia – was not only late but also ad hoc and superficial.
- The VNR itself was selective and partial, relying on cherry-picked data. It skirted discussion of some serious issues, for instance: food security, poverty trends and EU withdrawal.
- The implication is that the UK is not taking the SDGs seriously – as integral to, and coherent with, the government's overall agenda. This is also evident in making DFID the lead coordinating department, as opposed to the Cabinet Office, whose role is “supporting collective government, helping to ensure the effective development, coordination and implementation of policy”.

In acting upon the UK's commitment to the SDGs, the IDC recommended that overall responsibility for SDGs be given to the Cabinet Office and that the SDGs be built into cross-government planning, spending review and reporting processes, among other actions. In addition, the report recommended that a commitment be made to produce another VNR in 2022, through a more collaborative and consultative process and with more rigorous, data-driven and contextualized evaluation of the UK's performance against the SDG targets.

The **government responded in turn**, “partially agreeing” with most of the IDC's recommendations, and then either “disagreeing” or “agreeing” with a few, including around the need for stronger engagement.⁸⁵

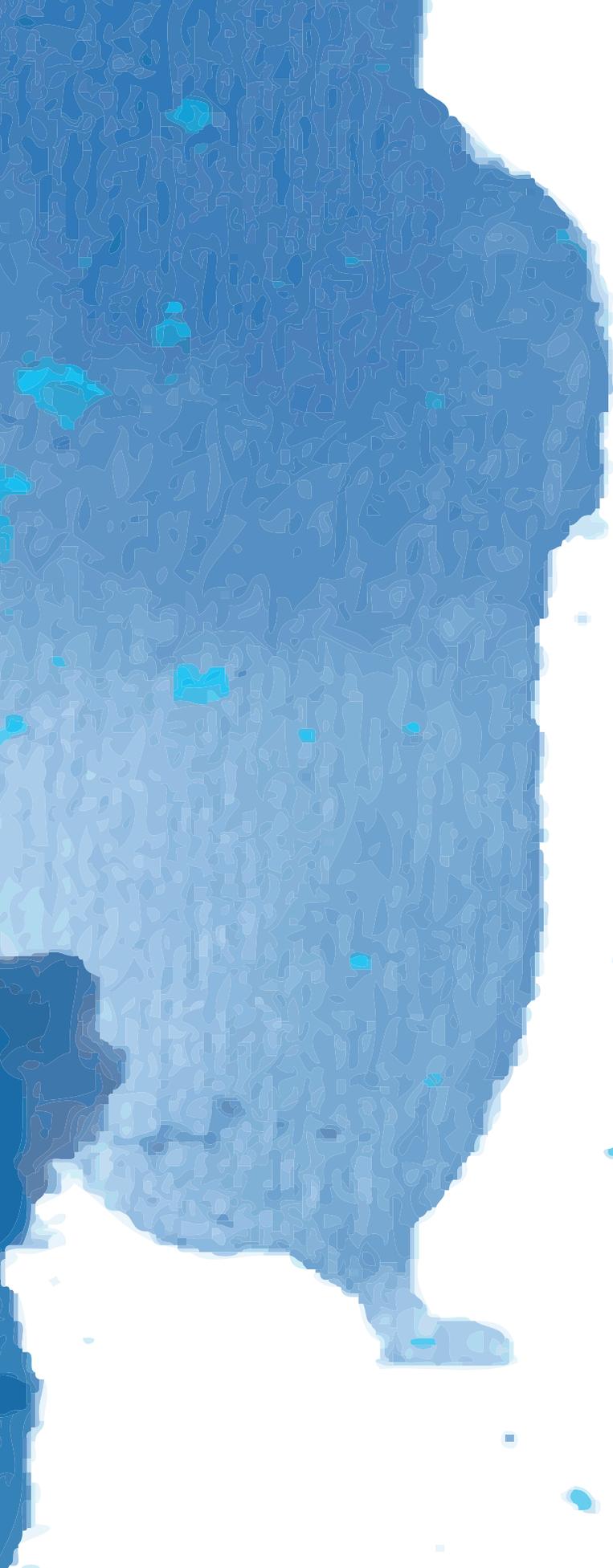
Take-aways and Recommendations: This case study highlights Parliament's oversight role and the importance of meaningful and institutionalized stakeholder engagement, early on and through substantive consultation, which had been lacking in this case, but which the UK **Government committed to improving** going forward.⁸⁶ As governments continue to grapple with COVID-19 response and recovery plans, including through an SDG framework applied domestically and internationally, parliamentary oversight and engagement are increasingly important in maintaining a transparency, accountable and inclusive process.

* This case study draws from interviews with a member of the IDC and Bond, UK.

84 12th Report – UK progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Voluntary National Review Contents (2019). <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/1732/173208.htm>

85 UK's progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Voluntary National Review: Government Response to the Committee's Twelfth Report (2019). <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/2651/265102.htm>

86 UK's progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Voluntary National Review: Government Response to the Committee's Twelfth Report (2019).



As mentioned, parliaments also have a role in the budget approval processes, training, localization efforts and awareness-raising. Parliamentary functions on budget approval and representation indicate that, in order to ensure a VNR has national ownership and includes a discussion of public resourcing, good practice would be to refer a draft VNR to the relevant parliamentary committee and have hearings on the draft VNR. These hearings would also include submissions from civil society, with a report to government before finalization. The representation function should strive to ensure that under-represented groups from Members of Parliament constituencies are supported as part of the LNOB mandate.

To this end, the legitimacy of a parliament and its members derives from the fact that they are elected to represent the people of a country (or state or province). Failure to meaningfully engage on issues of public interest, such as the VNRs, can jeopardize that legitimacy. Local forums, public consultations, party consultations, civil society partnerships, social media, surveys, meetings and participatory budgeting (discussed in chapter 4) are means by which parliaments can engage with citizens following a VNR, thereby increasing citizen engagement on the SDGs and advancing SDG 16 in practice.

In terms of legislative authority, statutory lawmaking remains almost universally the preserve of Parliament, with potentially significant impact in advancing VNR recommendations as linked to SDG 16 and national development or strategic plans. While every legislature has its own procedures, in general, Parliament engages on three types of draft laws – government sponsored, parliament drafted or citizen-led – all of which can advance SDG-related reform.

Timor-Leste: Translating VNR Priorities into Legislative Action through Parliament

Timor-Leste's National Parliament is developing and implementing a legislative package on justice sector reform. In line with its [Strategic Development Plan \(2011-2030\)](#), Timor-Leste's **2019 VNR** prioritized, among other issues, strengthening the justice sector as a means of consolidating peace, enhancing accountability and promoting the rule of law. The reform will contribute to strengthening justice institutions to ensure access to effective and efficient justice and protection, particularly for women, children and vulnerable groups.⁸⁷

With UNDP's support and through engagement of key actors within the justice sector, including the government, the Office of the President, justice institutions, civil society and development partners, this National Parliament legislation package aims to produce laws on: judiciary organization; programming of training for the justice sector; the statute of judicial magistrates; the statute of public prosecutors; amendments to the statute public defenders; as well as reviews of the criminal code and the criminal procedural code. The reform package is based on findings from the Legislative Reform Commission and the [Justice Sector Strategic Development Plan](#).⁸⁸ The project is still being implemented. Five draft laws have been presented to National Parliament with two more to be delivered by the end of July 2020.

Take-Aways and Recommendations: The VNR allowed Parliament and the government to reassess the country's development patterns, reviewing the policy and institutional mechanisms aligned with the SDGs and building stakeholder engagement around them. It functioned as a kick-starter for mapping existing policies and their compatibility with the SDGs. Parliament is also planning on assessing its own readiness to oversee government commitments to SDG implementation and how it might assist in framing and implementing SDG policies.

The Timor-Leste National Parliament, with support from UNDP and UNOSSC, is developing a proposal to establish a g7+ Parliamentary Assembly that will consolidate the work of g7+ in promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies (SDG 16). The g7+ Parliamentary Assembly will play an important role in amplifying the voice of fragile countries in Agenda 2030. Will also strengthen the commitment to new aid effectiveness principles for country-owned and country-led engagement in fragile situations.

As such, the VNR proved a useful tool in identifying the areas that require additional implementation support, opening paths to partnerships at all levels, including with other countries. **Going forward**, more attention should be paid to comprehensive communication strategies on the VNR and VNR follow-up for all stakeholders and relevant institutions, as well as on building a national legal framework to make the inclusion of VNR recommendations in state planning mandatory and binding on state institutions.

* This case study draws from interviews with UNDP, Timor-Leste.

87 Given that Timor-Leste is a young democracy, with many institutions still framed under [UN Transitional Administration of East Timor-issued regulations](#), this reform was deemed necessary to establish new and specialized courts, introduce permanent training for all justice professions and improve access to justice through an LNOB lens. *Timor-Leste's roadmap for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs*. (2019). <http://www.sustainablesids.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Timor-Leste-SDG-Roadmap.pdf>

88 Both documents propose to develop and implement a Legislative Package for Justice Sector Reform, based on sustainability and effectiveness of the justice policies and on the quality of service delivery by justice institutions. Council of Coordination for Justice (2010), *Justice Sector Strategic Plan for Timor-Leste 2011-2030*. http://www.mj.gov.tl/files/JSSP_ENGLISH.pdf

As a good practice, in advancing national ownership of the SDGs, parliaments should be supported in connecting their committee systems, structures and mandates to SDG-aligned national development priorities, with baselines and according to agreed-upon reporting mechanisms (to committees and then

plenary). Strengthening continuous reporting on SDG achievement, including through budget processes and involving relevant departments and ministries, would be instrumental in achieving a high quality and nationally-owned VNR.

Fiji: SDG Integration and Parliamentary Committees

Since 2016, the Fijian Parliament has undertaken a series of initiatives to promote and ensure progress on SDG implementation. Recent efforts have focused, in particular, on mainstreaming and integrating the SDGs into its work and the work of Parliamentary Committees as a means of exercising its executive oversight role in implementing the SDGs and legislative function.⁸⁹

Building upon a 2017 self-assessment, Fiji's Parliament, along with partners, launched a guidance note in 2019 on integrating the SDGs across the work of Parliament Committees, addressing the alignment of committee systems, structures and mandates to SDG-linked national development priorities, with baselines and agreed reporting processes on progress.⁹⁰ Additional focus was placed on the use of SDG indicators in tracking progress towards SDG and NDP targets as Parliament and Parliamentary Committees scrutinize legislative bills, annual reports, sector performances, public expenditure and engage with the public.

While SDG 16 in particular suffers from a lack of baseline indicators as reflected in its National Development Plan,⁹¹ the Committees have nonetheless been able to move forward in support of SDG 16, including working with Fiji's NHRI on addressing police brutality.

The Standing Committees primarily focused on SDG 16 are the Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense. In exercising their oversight role, these Committees review the Annual Reports of institutions or agencies that fall within their purview and then ask questions of those entities, with responses and follow-up actions carried out in return.

For example, based on its 2016, 2017 and 2018 Annual Reports, the Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights asked Fiji's Human Rights Commissions how the Commission has sought to advance SDG 16, including in following up on complaints and allegations of police brutality and misconduct. In return, the Commission highlighted its actions and the responses of relevant institutions, whether Fiji's Police, its Corrections Service or the Judiciary, to allegations and grievances noted.

While the work of Parliament on SDG integration and the VNR are separate, parallel processes, Fiji's 2019 VNR placed significant focus on the rule of law as an enabler of development, highlighting the underlying importance of SDG 16 to the work of the Committees and to the NDP, despite a lack of data.

89 Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (2017). The Parliament of Fiji and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Self-Assessment (Rep.) http://www.parliament.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SDGs-Self-Assessment-Report-Draft_FINAL.pdf

90 UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji (2019). Oversight of the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. <https://www.pacific.undp.org/content/pacific/en/home/library/eg/guidance-note-fiji-parliament-standing-committee.html>

91 Fiji's 2017-2021 NDP only has 16.2 and 16.10 as targets listed under the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). As such, there are only a few SDG 16 baseline indicators included in Fiji's NDP. In addressing the data gap, discussions are underway on using proxy data in developing additional SDG 16-related indicators. However, having only proxy data may make it difficult to have line ministries agree on KPIs and the accompanying accountability implications.

Fiji: SDG Integration and Parliamentary Committees, cont.

Take-Aways and Recommendations: The lack of local baseline data and local targets reflected in Fiji's NDP for certain SDGs should not deter Parliament from working through its committees to push government ministries and departments to set targets and goals outside of the NDP. This would then allow Parliamentary Committees to monitor ministry and department progress in achieving those SDGs and targets through annual reports tabled by those ministries and departments to parliaments outside the NDP that the parliamentary committees can use to monitor progress.

In the absence of nationally-set baselines, targets and reliable data, Parliament should consider using the global targets (or regional targets, if existent for a particular SDG) as reference points in conducting government oversight.

** This case study draws from interviews with UNDP, Fiji.*

Finally, parliaments need to assess both how best to mainstream the SDGs into their work: through one overarching committee or through multiple, issue-specific committees, such as those on justice and human rights. This can best be done within new or existing structures, through caucuses or parliamentary groups, etc.

Key Resources:

- [Voluntary National Reviews submitted to the 2019 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development – a Comparative Analysis](#), Partners for Review, (2019);
- [2017 Global Parliamentary Report](#), UNDP and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017);
- [Engaging Parliaments on the 2030 Agenda](#), Together 2030 (2018);
- [Parliaments Role in Implementing the SDGs: a Parliamentary Handbook](#), UNDP, GOPAC, IDB (2017);
- [Institutionalization of the SDGs in the Work of Parliaments](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union, (2019);
- [Human Rights Handbook for Parliamentarians](#), OHCHR and Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016).

Interviews: Kit Dorey, Bond, UK; Bruno Lencastre, UNDP, Timor-Leste; Paddy Tornsey, Inter-Parliamentary Union; Alessandro Motter, Inter-Parliamentary Union; Charles Chauvel, Global Lead, Inclusive Processes and Institutions, UNDP; Nanise Saune-Qaloewai, UNDP, Fiji.