

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Why this Guidance Resource?

Amidst extraordinary and unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19, compounding already strained systems of governance globally, failing institutions, shrinking civic space and increasing social unrest driven by entrenched, structural injustice, this resource seeks to support the realization of more peaceful, just and inclusive societies through Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process.

Now five years into the 2030 Agenda, the world is backsliding on SDG 16. Intended for a range of actors and institutions, this resource provides policy guidance and case studies on advancing SDG 16 implementation at national and subnational levels by more effectively leveraging VNR and post-VNR processes. Ultimately, the question is: how can we ensure that the VNR is maximized for SDG 16 impact, including improved subsequent reporting?

As such, this resource first introduces the 2030 Agenda, SDG 16, and the VNR, before detailing approaches to mainstreaming and accelerating SDG 16 implementation through the VNR. This including the what, who and how of approaches highlighted. Finally, the resource adheres to a set of guiding principles, including that which underpins the entire 2030 Agenda: Leave No One Behind.

## What are some of its Key Findings and Messages?

Since 2016, there has been an increase in the number and quality of VNRs, indicating their growing relevance and utility for governments and other stakeholders. As of HLPF 2020,<sup>1</sup>

205 VNRs have been presented

from 168 countries



More than twice as many countries – 47 – presented in 2020 than in 2016 (22).

## SDG Coordination Bodies or Mechanisms as a means of strengthening VNR processes and SDG 16 Implementation

As part of this growth, increasing attention has been placed on SDG Coordinating Bodies and Structures. They bring together government institutions and incorporate the SDGs into integrated policies, and corresponding budget lines, with actions attributable to the responsible ministries, departments and agencies, including in terms of SDG 16 and related priorities. They can also systematically incorporate other stakeholders, such as NHRIs and civil society. As such, well-functioning coordination structures are, in and of themselves, a means of SDG 16 implementation. However, while

85% of countries provided

information on follow-up and review

processes at the national level in 2019

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often through coordination structures, how reporting occurs, by whom and to whom, is often still unclear, ultimately pointing to issues of accountability.<sup>2</sup>

Additional focus has been placed on how post-VNR processes can be used to translate SDG 16-specific VNR commitments and findings into national action as linked to national development plans, sector strategies and the like.

## Government Oversight and Stakeholder Engagement – Accountability and Practicing a Whole of Government and Whole of Society Approach

Related to accountability, this resource highlights the role of parliaments and Supreme Audit Institutions – from government audits on SDG implementation and integrating anti-corruption mechanisms to parliamentary committees ‘reporting back’ on a government’s VNR and integrating the SDGs into the work of parliament.

1 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF 2020). Secretariat Background Note: *Voluntary National Reviews at the 2020 High-level political forum on sustainable development*, p. 1. [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26384HLPF\\_2020\\_Background\\_note.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26384HLPF_2020_Background_note.pdf)

2 Kindornay, S. (2019). Presentation: *Progressing National SDGs Implementation: Fourth Edition: An independent assessment of the Voluntary National Review reports submitted to the High-level Political Forum in 2019*. <https://sh.ccic.ca/PPT-ENG>

Whether as related to strengthening institutions, increasing access to decision-making, reducing corruption or supporting the rule of law, these bodies are directly relevant to SDG 16 implementation. While nascent, there is growing acknowledgement of their role and unfulfilled potential in supporting VNR and post-VNR processes.

Fundamental to accountability and to the whole-of-society approach is civil society engagement – in VNR design, delivery and follow-up. This is particularly true amidst shrinking civic space. Meaningful and diverse civil society participation in VNR processes not only reflects inclusive and effective governance and decision-making, but also helps to ensure that SDG 16-related provisions in a VNR are taken forward.

Where possible, follow-up should be tied to national development plans, dialogues and/or sector strategies, ideally through existing points of entry and with a focus on aligning SDG 16-related government programmes and projects with those implemented by civil society. This can help mainstream implementation, consolidate the multi-stakeholder processes and better capture progress.

### Civil society also plays a key role

in supporting those most at risk of being left behind by filling data gaps, providing relevant programming and advocating for groups not otherwise properly seen or heard.<sup>3</sup>

Other important stakeholders include academia and research institutions (especially in terms of monitoring and reporting), the media and journalists (in terms of accountability, awareness-raising and access to information) and the private sector.

### Localization and Ownership: Listening and Engaging from the Community-level Up

A foundational tenet of the 2030 Agenda, the promise to “leave no one behind”, highlights the importance of inclusion, engagement and impact from the ground up. Local and regional governments (LRGs), with strong,

democratic and accountable institutions, are prerequisites for achieving SDG 16. National governments themselves have stressed that they cannot tackle the 2030 Agenda alone, and all SDGs have targets directly related to the responsibilities of local and regional governments. However, according to the

### 2019 Localizing the SDGs Report

42 percent of countries reporting in 2019 consulted LRGs in VNR preparation, and only 33 percent were involved in national coordination mechanisms.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to LRGs, localizing SDG 16+, more broadly understood, speaks to the critical importance of meaningfully engaging civil society and non-state leaders and stakeholders, at various levels of governance, in order to ground SDG 16 and the VNR in lived realities and impact. Particularly now as communities globally continue to struggle with COVID-19, it is critical to focus on localizing SDG 16 and, to this end, to linking VNRs with Voluntary State Reviews (VSRs) and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs).

### Data and Related Reporting Mechanisms

Data continues to challenge SDG 16 progress tracking, affecting not just coverage but also the quality of data available for SDG 16 and related targets. However, such challenges may also present an entry point for civil society and other stakeholders in data collection and disaggregation, as well as in monitoring and reporting. Given various data gaps, there are increasing calls to include non-official data sources alongside official data sources in broadening global and national monitoring of SDG 16. Separately, civil society spotlight reports can help to ensure an independent and robust assessment of progress.

Particularly in a COVID-19 world, more innovative and inclusive ways of generating, incorporating, disaggregating and managing data are needed. Ultimately, greater coherence, communication and collaboration are required among National Statistics Offices, UN custodian agencies, National Human Rights Institutions,

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2018), *Development Co-operation Report 2018: Joining Forces to Leave No One Behind: Chapter 6: Putting the last first? Civil society's role in leaving no one behind*. OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/dcr-2018-en>.

<sup>4</sup> Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments (2019) *3<sup>rd</sup> Local and Regional Governments Report, Towards the Localization of the SDGs*. <https://www.global-taskforce.org/3rd-local-and-regional-governments-report-towards-localization-sdgs-launched-2019-hlpf>

civil society and other data providers. In bridging the gap with civil society, data collected by civil society can then be validated or used by NSOs, a process that saves resources and empowers civil society organizations.

Data, in turn, provides a useful foray into leveraging other similar frameworks and reporting cycles for strengthened SDG 16 implementation and human rights reporting mechanisms in particular. Reporting can often seem burdensome to governments and other stakeholders. Linking the VNR with related reporting and review mechanisms and frameworks not only allows for greater policy coherence, coordination and impact, but may also broaden the number of stakeholders engaged and make better use of data generated by National Statistical Offices and other data sources.

### Financing and Partnerships

Amidst already declining Official Development Assistance, greater focus needs to be placed on innovative solutions to funding and financing gaps facing governments, civil society and other stakeholders working to advance SDG 16. Political and financial investments are critical to accelerating progress on SDG 16, with development agencies, international financial institutions and international organizations all having a fundamental role to play.

Multi-donor funding schemes and a greater use of innovative, institutional partnerships, in addition to ODA, to support programmes and policies that address both COVID-19, as well SDG 16 related priorities and targets, will be critical to supporting the underlying systems and social cohesion required to “build back better”. Further, standardizing a global approach to mapping ODA to the SDGs or their respective targets that allows for comparable monitoring may help in future alignment and prioritization of support as reflected in VNRs and NDPs. This may be particularly true for SDG 16 as an enabler of all other SDGs.

Going forward, a country’s VNR, as linked to a National Development Plan (NDP), including revised NDPs and based on inclusive, multi-stakeholder processes, offers direction in how to best support SDG 16 implementation at national and subnational levels, including as related to COVID-19.

### Strengthening VNR Design and Moving Forward in this Decade of Action and Accountability

When designing the VNR process, immediate next steps should be identified, such as reporting back to parliament and/or the media about the VNR presentation as well as longer-term implementation. Furthermore, issues related to budget allocation and SDG data need not only be addressed during the VNR, but also subsequently. Actions that are not necessarily directly related to the VNR, but that can nonetheless drive post-VNR implementation, should also be considered. This includes peer reviews and performance audits.

SDG 16 is set to again be under review in 2021. Against a COVID-19 backdrop and with only 10 years left in the 2030 Agenda, this next VNR process brings with it particular challenges as well as important opportunities in supporting countries and other stakeholders towards transformative change.

To ensure that the world emerges from the COVID-19 crisis stronger,<sup>5, 6, 7</sup>

the UN, all governments and all partners need to stay the course together

Indeed, the Decade of Action and Decade of Accountability

are rallying calls for more collaborative and innovative action, political mobilization and investment. UNGA,

5 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF 2020). Secretariat Background Note: *Launching the decade of action at a time of crisis: Keeping the focus on the SDGs while combatting COVID-19*, p. 3.

[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26298HLPF\\_2020\\_impact\\_COVID19.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26298HLPF_2020_impact_COVID19.pdf)

6 United Nations. Decade of Action – United Nations Sustainable Development. United Nations.

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/decade-of-action/>

7 TAP Network 2030 (2020). SDG Accountability Portal: About the Campaign for a Decade of Accountability for the SDGs.

<https://sdgaccountability.org/decade/>

HLPF, other forums and online platforms are to be leveraged for accelerated action, accountability and inclusion. As we mark the UN's 75th anniversary and in a world such as ours, collectively doubling down on SDG 16, through VNR processes and as a goal and as an enabler, is as pressing as ever.