

# 7. ENGAGING ACADEMIA AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS, THE MEDIA, POLITICAL PARTIES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

## What Is It?

Most 2019 VNRs referenced some sort of<sup>193</sup>

engagement by

academia



In some cases, academics and research institutions were engaged through multi-stakeholder consultations, such as through the SDG National Committees or Council. In other instances, academia was involved in the actual preparation of the report, providing, for example, robust analytical reports and research in supporting the development of the VNR report's statistical annex, on SDG 16 or other SDGs.

Academia has also been involved in awareness-raising and in promoting sustainability centres, entering partnerships with government partners to create academic centres or research portfolios focused on the SDGs. Such partnerships often offer more long-term, systemic engagement for strengthened SDG and SDG 16 implementation. To this end, Pakistan reported on the establishment of 'SDG Centres of Excellence' that aim to spearhead research on different SDGs. Overall, the role of academia and research institutions in the VNR process is technical and advisory in nature.

Similarly to academia, members of the

media and journalists have been

engaged in VNR preparation

and validation



(again through National SDG Committees/Councils or Working Groups).<sup>194</sup> Following from the VNR, media has also been engaged more broadly in disseminating the VNR and its key findings, thereby raising awareness and driving accountability. The main role of media is to inform without fear or favour.<sup>195</sup> As such, media has an inherent role to play in accountability, awareness and access to information, thereby linked directly to SDG 16 and its related targets. Where media freedom, independence and pluralism are threatened, media then cannot perform this role or perform it fully.

## Why Is This Important

On the part of **academia and research institutions**, analysis, critical thinking, assessment of complex data, and problem-solving are important parts of the academic skillset and of universities' wider role. Furthermore, and has been stated before in terms of other stakeholder groups, these processes of monitoring and review should be<sup>196</sup>

"open, inclusive, participatory

and transparent"



In terms of **media**, and as highlighted by UNDP and UNESCO,

at its most fundamental, a free,

independent and pluralist media sector

is a prerequisite to functioning democracies



<sup>193</sup> P4R (2019). Voluntary National Reviews submitted to the 2019 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development – a Comparative Analysis, p. 30. <https://www.partners-for-review.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/P4R-Analysis-VNRs-2019.pdf>

<sup>194</sup> P4R (2019). Voluntary National Reviews submitted to the 2019 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development – a Comparative Analysis, p. 31.

<sup>195</sup> While explicitly political media exists, formal and informal, media's primary role is information dissemination.

<sup>196</sup> UN General Assembly (2015). RES/70/1 Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

[https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_70\\_1\\_E.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf)

# COVID-19 Tracker

and the creation of more peaceful, just and inclusive societies.<sup>197</sup> However, and according to

UNESCO's 2020 World

Trends report

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in the World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development series, while "[i]ndependent media play an essential role in societies [...] journalism is under increased threat as a result of public and private sector influence that endangers editorial independence."<sup>198, 199</sup> To this end, ARTICLE 19's 2018-2019

Global Expression Report

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notes that freedom of expression is at its lowest point in a decade internationally, jeopardizing media's role in supporting SDG 16 and the larger 2030 Agenda.<sup>200</sup>

Such restrictions and threats to freedom of expression and access to reliable and independent journalism

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are often then compounded<sup>201</sup> during times of crisis.

Both generally and for the media, the right to information plays an important role in open and inclusive societies. Within this context, a

'COVID-19 Tracker'

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created by the Centre for Law and Democracy, keeps track of legal measures taken by countries to temporarily alter or suspend right-to-information obligations due to COVID-19.<sup>202</sup> Again, while media are an important user group of the right to information, they are only one such user group.

The right to information is critical for accountability for the 2030 Agenda, not just SDG 16. Public access to reliable, credible, user-friendly and free data and information is key to holding governments to account, to evaluating public officials in implementing and monitoring the SDGs, and to facilitating effective participation. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests should provide citizens with the right to access public information relevant to the SDGs. As we reflect upon the

fundamental role of media

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to SDG 16 and in upholding FOIAs, additional thought should be given to the various multiplier effects of

197 UNDP and UNESCO (2019). Entry points for media development to support peaceful just and inclusive societies and Agenda 2030 – a background discussion note, p. 2. <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Global%20Policy%20Centres/OGC/UNDP%20UNESCO%20Entry%20points%20for%20media%20development%20to%20support%20peaceful%20just%20and%20inclusive%20societies%20and%20Agenda%202030.pdf>

198 UNESCO's 2020 World Trends report in Freedom of Expression and Media Development specifically finds that the greatest menace to editorial independence in a growing number of countries across the world is media capture, a form of media control that is achieved through systematic steps by governments and interest groups.

199 Dragomir, M. (2020). Reporting facts: free from fear or favour: preview of In Focus report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development. UNESCO Digital Library. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373572>

200 Article 19 (2019). The Global Expression Report (2018-19) (webpage). <https://www.article19.org/resources/global-expression-report-2018-19-global-freedom-of-expression-at-a-ten-year-low/>

201 Global Forum For Media Development (2020). Joint Emergency Appeal for Journalism and Media Support. <https://gfmfd.info/emergency-appeal-for-journalism-and-media-support-2/>

202 RTI and Centre for Law and Democracy (2020). Database: COVID-19 Tracker. <https://www.rti-rating.org/covid-19-tracker/>

media development for the realization of SDG 16 and the 2030 Agenda more broadly.

**While 127 countries have adopted right to information or freedom of information laws, with at least 27 having adopted relevant guarantees**

since 2014, significant challenges persist in terms of implementation.<sup>203</sup>

It is equally important to consult all political parties. This type of engagement can help with longer-term sustained policies despite political changes. Raising public awareness through educational institutions, the media and political parties, is crucial to sustaining positive change in national priorities and plans.<sup>204</sup>

### How Can This Be Used?

As mentioned, for academia and media channels of engagement and consultation should include national SDG Councils and Committees, as well as technical working groups focused on SDG 16 and other SDGs. This engagement can then translate directly into national development planning. For example, and as highlighted by

**UNDESA's 2019 VNR Synthesis Report**

Ghana's medium-term national development policy framework (2018-2021) was prepared mainly through the engagement of cross-sectoral planning groups comprising representatives of the public sector, private sector, civil society, academia, journalists, think-tanks, faith-based organizations and other groups.<sup>205</sup>

Other means of engagement include surveys, workshops or other events, particularly for academia and political parties/parliaments. According to the 2019 VNR, 12 countries had representatives from academia in the national SDG council or in (permanent) technical or advisory groups, while 24 countries included members of academia in surveys, consultations, workshops and/

or other events. Academic centres may provide for more systematic engagement in post-VNR processes and implementation, lending themselves to more regular contributions to NDPs in terms of research, analysis, monitoring, etc.

In terms of awareness-building of political parties, El Salvador and Guatemala set up a Technical and Planning Secretariat directly in the Office of the President in 2018 to ensure broader consultation processes. As a result, these countries have highlighted that their VNRs have evolved from government strategies to national strategies.<sup>206</sup>

203 United Nations (2020) The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, p. 21. UN Stats. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>

204 Partners for Review (2019). [Documentation paper on a Side Event during the Third meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development](#)

205 UN DESA (2019). HLPF 2019 Voluntary National Reviews Synthesis Report, p. 30. [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/252302019\\_VNR\\_Synthesis\\_Report\\_DESA.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/252302019_VNR_Synthesis_Report_DESA.pdf)

206 Partners for Review (2019). [Documentation paper on a Side Event during the Third meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development](#)

## South African SDG Hub: Partnering on the VNR and SDG Country Reports<sup>207</sup>

The **South African SDG Hub** is a think tank at the University of Pretoria designed to connect South African policy-makers with the most relevant South African research related to the SDGs.<sup>208</sup> In 2018, the Hub released a report on the challenges and opportunities related to SDG implementation in country. One of the topics covered was SDG 16. In 2019, the Hub released a report on alignment between the SDGs, the African Union's Agenda 2063 and South Africa's National Development Plan and again included analysis of the role of SDG 16. In 2019, the Hub played a leading role in drafting South Africa's first extensive SDG Country Report, which in turn fed into South Africa's VNR. It continues in its partnership with the Presidency of South Africa today, supporting policy development and analysis around national priority issues. In supporting one of **South Africa's 2019 VNR Main Messages**, focused on ensuring that South African citizens have access to government information, the Hub created and supports an online portal of open-access peer-review articles, tagged by SDG.<sup>209</sup> Going forward, it will continue to make this platform more user-friendly and aims to invite researchers from South Africa's 26 public universities to draft briefing notes and articles related to the SDGs.

Going forward, additional attention may be directed to

increasing partnerships

among universities



and research institutions, south-north/north-south as well as south-south, in terms of sharing research and expertise and capacity-building.<sup>210</sup>

In addition to the channels of engagement mentioned above, media can also be instrumental in disseminating VNRs and highlighting, through reporting, failures or a lag on the part of government in acting on recommendations. Media can report on where SDG commitments are or are not being met, including in terms of legislation and policy related to media freedoms and access to information. This again speaks to the role of media in accountability and awareness in advancing implementation, as well as the need for media protection. International actors can help promote this by supporting media freedom and development, including encouraging national media actors to engage with such processes.

To this end, several VNR reports expressed a need for strong communication and awareness-raising efforts around the VNR, with media as a critical actor in such efforts at national, regional and global levels. Additional capacity-building efforts for media actors may prove critical, not just in information dissemination about a VNR as linked to a country's NDP and SDG 16, but also about the 2030 Agenda at global, regional, national and local levels.

While 30 of the 47 countries providing a VNR in 2019 have adopted legal frameworks on access to information or the right to information,



more can be done to make these effective.<sup>211</sup> Media engagement, at local and national levels, is key to following up on the implementation of such frameworks and to ensuring that access to information then further supports the responsiveness and quality of public services.

207 This case study draws from interviews with the South African SDG Hub.

208 South African SDG Hub (webpage). University of Pretoria. <http://sasdgghub.up.ac.za/>

209 Government of South Africa (2019). South Africa Voluntary National Review 2019, p. 100.

[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23402RSA\\_Voluntary\\_National\\_Review\\_Report\\_The\\_Final\\_24\\_July\\_2019.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23402RSA_Voluntary_National_Review_Report_The_Final_24_July_2019.pdf)

210 Long G. (2017). Universities, Academics and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Global Policy.

<https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/13/12/2017/universities-academics-and-2030-agenda-sustainable-development>

211 UNESCO (2019). Powering sustainable development with access to information: highlights from the 2019 UNESCO monitoring and reporting of SDG indicator 16.10.2. UNESCO Digital Library. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000369160>



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### Key Resources:

- [Voluntary National Reviews submitted to the 2019 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development – a Comparative Analysis](#), Partners for Review (2019);
- [Entry points for media development to support peaceful just and inclusive societies and Agenda 2030 – a background discussion note](#), UNESCO and UNDP (2019);
- [The Global Expression Report 2018-2019, ARTICLE 19 \(2019\): Joint Emergency Appeal for Journalism and Media Support](#), Global Forum for Media Development (2020);
- [COVID-19 Tracker](#), the Centre for Law and Democracy (2020);
- [Powering sustainable development with access to information: highlights from the 2019 UNESCO monitoring and reporting of SDG indicator 16.10.2](#), UNESCO (2019).

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The 30 countries with access to information laws were: Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Chile, Côte D'Ivoire, Croatia, Fiji, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, Iceland, Indonesia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Liechtenstein, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palau, Philippines, Rwanda, Serbia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Timor-Leste, Tunisia, Turkey, UK, Tanzania and Vanuatu.