



INTRODUCTION

Setting the Scene and Overarching Objective

COVID-19 has laid bare the severe and deep-seated socio-economic and political inequalities dominating societies globally. In a world already troubled by a rise in corruption and unrest; an erosion of media freedoms and the rule of law; diminishing civic space and trust in public and private institutions; and an increase in violence globally,⁸ COVID-19 has put into stark relief such deep-seated injustices and fragility, calling for a new social contract. In the words of the UN Secretary-General,

“the response to this pandemic, the widespread discontent that preceded it, must be based on a new social contract

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and a new global deal that create opportunities for all and respect the rights and freedoms of all”.⁹

In “building back better”, this resource seeks to support the advancement of more peaceful, just and inclusive societies through Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) of the 2030 Agenda. It does so by offering guidance and good practices on how the Voluntary National Review (VNR) can be best used to advance and accelerate Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) implementation at national and subnational levels.¹⁰

Ultimately, it is at national and subnational levels that peaceful, just and inclusive societies will be achieved

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In utilizing this resource, please reference the “Navigating This Resource” section below for an overview of the topics and actors addressed throughout.

Navigating this Resource and What It Contains

Guidance and good practices herein approach the VNR as a tool for strengthened SDG 16 (and all SDGs) impact across actors and institutions, and as linked to national development plans (NDPs) and strategies, as well as related frameworks and state and local processes.

The remainder of the Introduction is meant to briefly outline the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) on peaceful, just and inclusive societies, and the Voluntary National Review process. It will also address overarching challenges and opportunities for support, as well as highlight the guiding principles used when producing this document.

Part 1 is focused on Mainstreaming and Accelerating SDG 16 Implementation through the VNR process. It is divided into 12 chapters and covers a wide range of institutions, sectors and actors and how each can be engaged or best utilized for strengthened SDG 16 implementation through the larger VNR process. Part 2 offers insight and lessons learned for improved repeat reporting, focusing on the design of the VNR for stronger implementation (of SDG 16 and all SDGs). With 10 years left in the 2030 Agenda, Part 3 highlights additional opportunities for SDG 16 engagement as we collectively continue in this Decade of Action and Decade of Accountability to realize peace, justice and inclusion and the larger 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

From governments to parliaments, supreme audit institutions and national human rights institutions, and from civil society to media, the private sector, and the UN and other international organizations, this resource draws from more than 40 interviews and consultations as well as desk research incorporating over 100 sources.

8 As noted in the Secretary-General’s 2020 SDGs Progress Report, “in 2019, the number of people fleeing war, persecution and conflict exceeded 79.5 million, the highest level recorded since these statistics have been systematically collected”. UNDESA (2020). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*, p. 21. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>

9 UN Secretary-General (2020). Speech transcript: *Secretary-General’s Nelson Mandela Lecture: “Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era”*. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-07-18/secretary-generals-nelson-mandela-lecture-%E2%80%9D-delivered>

10 Saferworld (2019). Briefing: *Time to invest: how to support action on SDG16*, p. 4. <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1224-time-to-invest-how-to-support-action-on-sdg16+>

As such, it is intended for a diverse audience of practitioners and policymakers engaged in SDG 16 and the VNR, reflective of the multi-stakeholder perspectives included herein.

Highlighting the universality of SDG 16, case studies draw from over 20 countries, include recommendations for the reader and bring in national, state and local perspectives. Key resources are also listed at the end of each chapter for supplementary analysis and review. For more on the specific topics, processes and actors addressed, please see the Table of Contents.

In supporting a whole-of-government and a whole-of-society approach, policy and programmatic coherence, coordination and partnership – vertically, horizontally and within and across stakeholder groups — are emphasized throughout this resource. To this end, the case is further made for broad inclusion in, and ownership of, the VNR process as critical to SDG 16 implementation, through continuous engagement and action across actors and institutions and with a particular emphasis on civil society. Additional attention is placed on linking VNR processes with national development plans and strategies, as well as to other relevant frameworks, including human rights reporting and follow-up, to streamline implementation, avoid duplication and meet multiple objectives.

Finally, this guidance resource builds upon and complements a variety of other related resources referenced at the end of each chapter and throughout the footnotes.

Background: The 2030 Agenda, SDG 16 and the Voluntary National Review

Adopted in 2015 by all 193 UN Member States,

Transforming Our World: the 2030

Agenda for Sustainable

Development



(the 2030 Agenda) is a 15-year global plan of action “to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all, while strengthening universal peace in larger freedom”.¹¹ In many ways, the 2030 Agenda, with its pledge to “Leave No One Behind” (LNOB) and its

17 SDGs and 169 targets



builds upon its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).¹²

However, unlike the MDGs and as one (of several) distinguishing features, the SDGs include a goal that is centered on

transparent, accountable and

participatory governance

rule of law



and peaceful societies: SDG 16.¹³ Specifically, SDG 16 seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, to ensure access to justice for all and to develop effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Also unlike the MDGs, the SDGs also apply to all countries universally.

The VNR is a voluntary, Member State-led, peer-learning process through which progress made in achieving the SDGs is presented. As a tool, the VNR is being increasingly undertaken by Member States to capture successes as well as challenges in realizing the 2030 Agenda.¹⁴

SDG 16 as a Sustainable Development Goal and as an Enabler

SDG 16 is identified as both an outcome and enabler of sustainable development, given its interlinkages with other SDGs. Without peace, justice and inclusion, achieving SDGs such as ending poverty (SDG 1), ensuring education (SDG 4) and promoting economic growth (SDG 8) can be difficult or impossible. Responsive and

11 United Nations (2015). *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

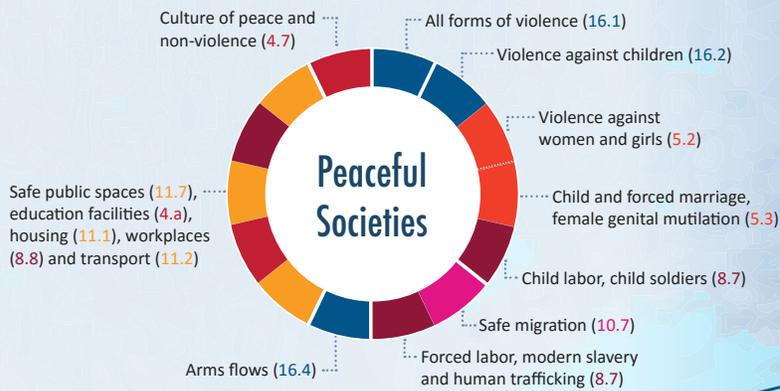
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>

12 UNDESA. *The 17 Goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

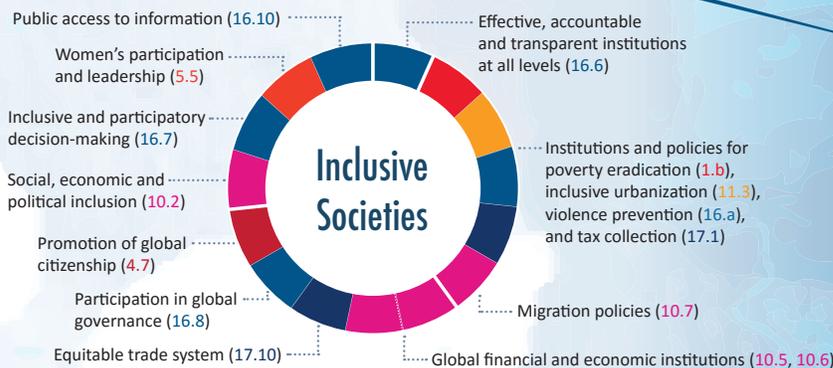
13 TAP Network (2016). *Goal 16 Advocacy Toolkit: A practical guide for stakeholders for national-level advocacy around Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, p. 17. http://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TAP_AdvocacyToolkit_1pgFINAL.p Antonio Maria Costa of UNODC (2008). Rule of law: A “missing” Millennium Development Goal. Speech Transcript:

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/rule-of-law-a-missing-millennium-development-goal.html>

14 For more on the VNR process, please see the [UN DESA's 2020 VNR Handbook](#).



We are determined to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence.



PATHFINDERS

FOR PEACEFUL, JUST AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

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accountable institutions uphold the rule of law and protect human rights and ensure equal opportunity and access to basic services. At the same time, strengthening women’s participation and leadership (SDG 5) connects to improving inclusive and participative decision-making. To this end, beyond [SDG 16’s 12 targets](#) there are [24 targets from seven other SDGs](#) that are linked to peaceful, just and inclusive societies.¹⁵ Together, these targets are referred to as SDG16+.¹⁶ While focused on SDG 16, this resource will also refer to SDG 16+, when relevant.

In addition, and importantly, SDG 16 carries the human rights principles of inclusion, participation, transparency, accountability, equality and non-discrimination. Such principles underpin the 2030 Agenda and are expressly translated into action in SDG 16 targets. SDG 16, therefore, is a catalytic and critical component of an integrated 2030 Agenda, grounded in human rights and focused on bringing about more inclusive and just systems, an ambition made all the more relevant, given the current global context.

As an enabler of all SDGs, SDG 16 should also be seen as a guiding pillar for all follow-up actions to implement and mainstream various SDGs post-VNR.

Voluntary National Reviews and the High-level Political Forum

As alluded to, the¹⁷

VNRs are the follow-up and review component of the 2030 Agenda

Carried out by national governments, they are meant to track progress in implementing the Agenda and its SDGs at country level.¹⁸ They aim to facilitate the sharing of experience by governments and other stakeholders in order to identify opportunities and challenges for

acceleration, while strengthening policies and government institutions and mobilizing multi-stakeholder support and partnership towards SDG implementation.

Conducted by developed and developing countries and involving a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society, VNRs are presented at the

High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

which takes place annually under the auspices of the

UN Economic and Social Council

(ECOSOC).^{19, 20}

While the official presentation of a VNR at HLPF is an important step it is not an end in of itself

Rather, it is a means to accelerate action, transformation, accountability and stronger subsequent reporting. The VNR should provide a comprehensive and honest report on a country’s situation in SDG implementation and indicate next steps in addressing challenges identified in order to accelerate action and fine-tune implementation strategies. On the heels of HLPF, post-VNR processes offer an important opportunity for accelerating actions across stakeholders for coherent delivery of SDG 16 and the larger 2030 Agenda.

At the 2019 HLPF and for the first time since the 2030 Agenda’s adoption, SDG 16, among others, was subjected to a detailed review. As part of this campaign leading up to HLPF 2019, a coalition of SDG 16+ global initiatives supported a series of²¹

15 Global Alliance (2019). *Enabling the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda Through SDG 16+: Anchoring Peace, Justice and Inclusion*, p. 24. <https://www.sdg16hub.org/content/global-alliance-enabling-implementation-2030-agenda-through-sdg-16-anchoring-peace-justice>

16 For more on SDG 16 and SDG 16+, please see the [Pathfinders Roadmap](#) and the Global Alliance’s “[Elements](#)” of Peace, Justice and Inclusion.

17 Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. Voluntary National Reviews Database. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

18 For more on Voluntary Local Reviews and Voluntary State Reviews and how they interact with VNRs, please see Chapter 4.

19 United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC): Home. <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/home>

20 UNDESA (2020). *Handbook for preparation of Voluntary National Reviews for the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF 2020)*. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25245Handbook_2020_EN.pdf

21 SDG 16 Hub (2019). The SDG16+ Consultations. <https://www.sdg16hub.org/hlpf2019/consultations>

six regional technical

consultations on

SDG 16+

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Aiming to highlight progress on monitoring, reporting and implementation of SDG 16+ and to distill key messages for the

thematic review of SDG 16, the

consultations made key policy

recommendations

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identifying how inclusive planning, monitoring and reporting can be leveraged and advocating for how the progress on SDG 16+ enables progress across the 2030 Agenda.²²

SDG 16 will be reviewed at the

2021 HLPF

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under the thematic focus “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, that promotes the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: Building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.”²³

Acknowledging the cyclical nature of the VNR – pre-VNR, VNR and post-VNR – this resource will emphasize how the reporting process can be best used to advance SDG 16 implementation through multi-stakeholder processes and with national and local-level impact.

22 2019 HLPF review of SDG implementation https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23672BN_SDG16_LV.pdf

23 SDG Knowledge Hub by IISD (2020). *HLPF 2021 to Focus on Nine SDGs Linked to Pandemic Recovery*. <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/hlpf-2021-to-focus-on-nine-sdgs-linked-to-pandemic-recovery/>

47

countries

submitting
VNRs

7

reporting for a
second time

46 of 47
countries

reporting
noted
involvement
of the private
sector

VNR Trends²⁴

Even during a global pandemic,

47 countries signed up

www

to present a

VNR in 2020

– the same number as those which presented in 2019. Out of 47, 20 were second-time presenters and one country reported for a third time.²⁵ In 2019 and 2020, a cap was made at 47 VNRs despite more interest. Moreover, it is important to note that, for 2021, this cap has been lowered due organizational limitations.

As mentioned, in 2019, 47 countries submitted VNRs, with seven of those reporting for a second time. Participation of youth was more readily reported in 2019 than in prior years and 46 of 47 countries reporting noted involvement of the private sector (compared to just half of those reporting in 2017). Most VNRs noted the challenges posed by data availability or quality to achieving the SDGs, with no country able to support analysis of all SDG 16 indicators with data. As evidenced by

the Global SDG

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Indicators

database

and

White & Case

www

VNR analysis

while over 85 percent of countries that submitted 2019 VNRs reported on at least one SDG 16 indicator, comprehensive reporting on SDG 16 lags behind that of other SDGs.²⁶

24 This section to be updated in due course with greater analysis of the 2020 VNRs. Global Alliance (2019). *Enabling the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda Through SDG 16+: Anchoring Peace, Justice and Inclusion*.

25 United Nations. High-Level Political Forum 2020 (HLPF 2020). Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. United Nations. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020>.

26 UN Statistics. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/> & White & Case (2019). Voluntary National Review (VNR) Aggregated Chart – 2019 Review: SDG16+ Focus. https://www.sdg16hub.org/system/files/2020-01/UN%20VNR%20CHART%202019%20-%20All%20Country%20Reports_White-Case%20.pdf

As of HLPF 2020, 205 VNRs have
been presented from
168 countries



33 countries have been presented
twice and two countries (Togo and Benin)
have presented 3 times



²⁷ This is a marked increase from the first HLPF in 2016, when 22 countries decided to undertake the VNR.

Going forward,

SDG 16 reporting
guidelines by the
Global Alliance



with greater emphasis on inclusion, National Human Rights Institutions and civil society, provide important additional support and guidance in using the VNR for strengthened SDG 16 implementation.²⁸ UN Women has also recently produced

a guidance note



to support gender-responsive VNRs.²⁹

In parallel, civil society has increased support to VNRs, including by³⁰

developing spotlight reports
and analyzing these vis-à-vis
government reviews



Multi-stakeholder reporting processes are being strengthened through dedicated awareness-raising on committing to a whole-of-society approach to reporting.

Overarching Challenges and Opportunities for Support

The below offers a brief snapshot of some of the overarching challenges and opportunities for support facing the SDG 16 community. All have been impacted by COVID-19.

The Voluntary Nature of the 2030 Agenda

The 2030 Agenda is a political declaration. It is not legally binding for member states.³¹

There are no defined consequences
if countries fail to make serious efforts
to meet the SDGs or their targets



However, despite its voluntary nature, the 2030 Agenda is a political commitment and carries a sense of obligation at national and global levels. By making such ambitious commitments to deliver on a wide range of sustainable development issues at the international level, governments have, in essence, declared themselves accountable to the peoples to whom these commitments have been made.

Ensuring Meaningful Participation through a Leave No One Behind Lens

The 2030 Agenda pledges to leave no one behind (LNOB) and that Member States will endeavor to reach the furthest behind first. With its emphasis on inclusive and accountable governance, access to justice, upholding human rights and promoting non-discrimination and sustained peace, SDG 16 is key to ensuring that the most vulnerable and marginalized are engaged as actors

27 Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. Voluntary National Reviews Database.

28 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>

29 UN Women (2020). Guidance Note: *PREPARATIONS FOR GENDERRESPONSIVE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS FOR UN WOMEN COUNTRY AND REGIONAL OFFICES*. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/guidance-note-on-preparations-for-gender-responsive-voluntary-national-reviews-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5109>

30 TAP Network 2030 and GIZ (2020). *SDG16 in VNRs and Spotlight Reports: Reporting on Progress, Reflecting on Inclusive Accountability Measures and Recommendations for going ahead*. https://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GIZ_TAP_2020_SDG-16-in-VNRs-and-Spotlight-Reports_Final-Version.pdf

31 TAP Network (2019). *SDG Accountability Handbook: A Practical Guide for Civil Society*, p. 6. <https://sdgaccountability.org/sdg-accountability-handbook/>

and beneficiaries of the 2030 Agenda in line with the principle to LNOB.³² Through the lens of SDG 16 there is an opportunity to further link the implementation of the 2030 Agenda with international human rights standards and principles as they are mutually inclusive and complementary.

While some governments are creating an enabling and safe environment for a diversity of voices, transparency and accountability, others are restricting them – a distinction that has only been further sharpened during a global pandemic. To date, around

100 countries up to COVID-19 

have called “states of emergency” in response to COVID-19,³³

with many exploiting this health crisis to clamp down on fundamental freedoms around expression, assembly and civic space 

The global decline in civic space for people to organize, participate, communicate and express their views 

for people to organize, participate, communicate and express their views at local and national levels threatens SDG progress and accountability generally, and particularly so for SDG 16.³⁴ This compels more robust, diverse and inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement in VNR and post-VNR processes, targeting the most marginalized and vulnerable communities.



2019 protest

Challenging Political Landscapes and Electoral Cycles

2019 saw a wave of protests 

with people from all corners of the globe rising up and demanding a new social contract.³⁵ In 2020, this upswing in mass, and often organic, political mobilization



CIVICUS Monitor

32 For more on links between SDG 16 and Leave No One Behind, please see the [2019 Global Alliance Report on SDG 16+](#) and a 2018 UNDP Discussion Paper on “What Does It Mean to Leave No One Behind?”.

33 COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker. ICNL. <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/?location=> Gross, O. (2020). Emergency Powers in the Time of Coronavirus...and Beyond. Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org/70029/emergency-powers-in-the-time-of-coronaand-beyond/>

34 IDEA International (2019). The Global State of Democracy 2019 Report: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise. Chapter 1: The global democracy landscape, p. 18. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/chapters/the-global-state-of-democracy-2019-CH1.pdf>

35 Wright, R. & Gessen, M. (2019). The Story of 2019: Protests in Every Corner of the Globe. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-story-of-2019-protests-in-every-corner-of-the-globe>

and protest has been followed by an extraordinary movement for racial justice and an end to systemic abuse, initiated in the US with global reverberations. Set against a global pandemic, these clarion calls for meaningful change in the fight against exclusion, corruption, impunity and injustice highlight the profoundly challenging nature of political landscapes in many contexts as well as the relevance of SDG 16 universally.

Further, changes in government administrations and electoral cycles can diminish ownership of the SDGs or shift priorities. To this end, internal political battles over mandates and funds, with officials seeking to protect or promote their agency's interests, may further threaten implementation of policy commitments as related to the SDGs and SDG 16, including as linked to national development plans, national strategies, sector reforms and the like.

Data³⁶

SDG 16 is considered one of the

most difficult SDGs

to monitor

Collecting, disaggregating and monitoring data as related to SDG 16 continues to be challenging due to administrative, political and capacity issues – National Statistical Offices, for example,

have not historically

focused

on SDG 16 related issues. Further, while complementary 'non-official' data exists, it is not often used.³⁷

As highlighted by the 2020 SDGs Report

timely, high-quality, open and disaggregated data is key to understanding, managing and mitigating the effects of COVID-19, and to building responses that support countries to get back on track to achieving the SDGs.³⁸

Global Pandemics and Unforeseen Crises

71 million will be pushed back

into extreme poverty

in 2020

the first increase in global poverty since 1998.³⁹ As of October 2020, over a million people have died due to COVID-19, with almost all countries affected. Gender-based violence has exponentially increased and there is serious concern that progress on gender equality will be pushed back.⁴⁰ Countries affected by conflict and fragility are more prone to its adverse impact, and some regimes are taking advantage of the pandemic to crack down on media freedoms, politicians and human rights activists.

Investments are needed more than ever to foster trust and rebuild the social contract, at the heart of SDG 16, to both deal with this current emergency and recovery phase and to be better prepared for the next pandemic, in whatever form it comes.

In leveraging the VNR for strengthened implementation, greater investment in SDG 16 across actors and sectors is critical, including in capacity-building, policy guidance, data and analytics, technology for scale, and partnerships. (Details embedded in subsequent sections.)

36 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), International IDEA & IDLO (2019). Conference in preparation for HLPF2019 – SDG16 Conference: Peace, Justice Inclusive Societies, p. 2.

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23814SDG_16_MAIN_SUMMARY_SDG_Conference_Rome_May2019.pdf

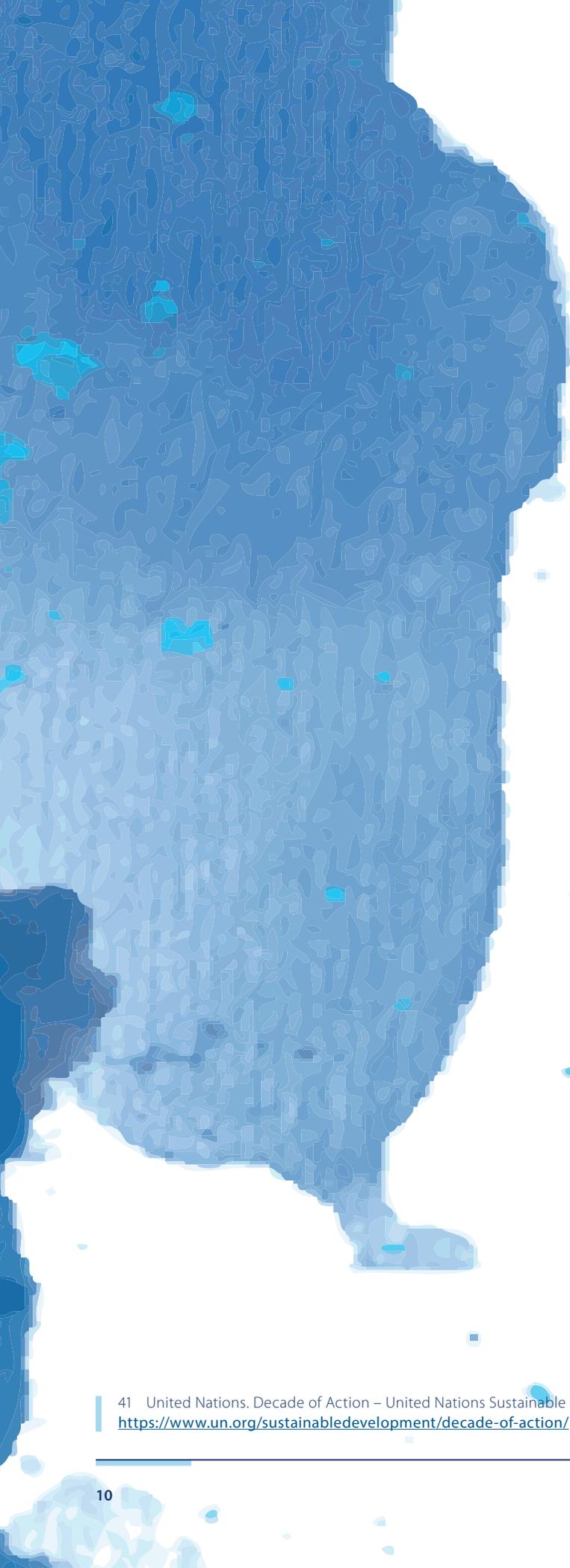
37 UNDESA, International IDEA & IDLO (2019). Conference in preparation for HLPF2019 – SDG16 Conference: Peace, Justice Inclusive Societies. p. 3.

38 UN DESA (2020). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*, p. 4.

39 UN DESA (2020): News: *UN report finds COVID-19 is reversing decades of progress on poverty, healthcare and education*

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/sustainable/sustainable-development-goals-report-2020.html>

40 As highlighted by UN Women, "[across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls. Not only should women's and girls' voices, needs and priorities be prioritized in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, but their experiences during the pandemic must also guide the future implementation of the 2030 Agenda.](#)"



Guiding Principles for the Mainstreaming SDG16 Resource

This guidance has been developed in line with the following guiding principles:

- Leave No One Behind
- Human rights-based and grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Inclusive, participatory and transparent
- Nationally led, multi-stakeholder and evidence-based
- The universality of the 2030 Agenda, and the SDGs as integrated and interlinked

As we move forward in this UN 75th Anniversary year and

Decade of Action

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this guidance resource will serve as a tool to maximize the potential of the VNR process to ensure progress towards realizing SDG 16 as an outcome and an enabler of the larger 2030 Agenda.⁴¹

Key Resources:

- [The Highest Aspiration. A Call to Action for Human Rights](#), United Nations (2020)
- [Guide to Report on SDG16 in Voluntary National Reviews](#), Global Alliance (2020)
- [Enabling The Implementation of the 2030 Agenda Through SDG 16+: Anchoring Peace, Justice and Inclusion](#), Global Alliance (2019)
- [Amplified Commitments and Partnerships for Accelerated Action: Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG 16+](#), endorsed by 130 Civil Society Organizations (2019)
- [White & Case Review of the 2019 Voluntary National Reports](#)
- [2020 VNR Handbook](#), UN DESA
- [Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), United Nations (2015)

41 United Nations. Decade of Action – United Nations Sustainable Development. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/decade-of-action/>