

Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF)

I. Introduction

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) are the cornerstone of the follow-up and review framework of the 2030 Agenda. They culminate in a country report to and presentation at the HLPF. They are most productive when they involve an inclusive and thorough review process, when they produce tangible lessons and solutions, and when they are followed by action and collaboration that drives SDG implementation.

The common reporting guidelines seek to support member states in conducting VNRs. They were initially prepared by the Secretary-General in December 2015.¹ They have been updated in December 2017 to reflect lessons learned during the two years that have followed.² They provide a framework for certain common elements within reports while allowing for flexibility so countries can adapt to their own circumstances.³

II. Guiding principles

In paragraph 74 of the 2030 Agenda, Member States identified a number of principles to guide the follow-up and review process at all levels. In preparing the voluntary national reviews, it is important that these principles be taken into account:

- a) The follow up and review processes will be voluntary and country-led, will take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and will respect policy space and priorities. As national ownership is key to achieving sustainable development, the outcome from national-level processes will be the foundation for reviews at the regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on national official data sources.
- b) They will track progress in implementing the universal Goals and targets, including the means of implementation, in all countries in a manner which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development.
- c) They will maintain a longer-term orientation, identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices. They will help to mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships, support the identification of solutions and best practices and promote the coordination and effectiveness of the international development system.
- d) They will be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support reporting by all relevant stakeholders.
- e) They will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind.
- f) They will build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist, avoid duplication and respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities. They will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.

¹ See annex to Secretary-General's Report on critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level, A/70/684.

² See para 8 of resolution 70/299 of 29 July 2016.

³ It is important to note that the UN Development Group in 2017 released guidelines for the preparation of national SDG reports, with a view to providing coherent support by UN Country Teams to reviews at the national level. The UNDG guidelines provide case studies and tools for use in preparing a national SDG report, and can serve to complement the present Secretary-General's voluntary guidelines. See <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Guidelines-to-Support-Country-Reporting-on-SDGs-1.pdf>

- g) They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.
- h) They will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes, particularly in African countries, least developed countries, small island developing States, landlocked developing countries and middle-income countries.
- i) They will benefit from the active support of the United Nations system and other multilateral institutions.

III. Structure and content of a report for the HLPF

Countries are encouraged to structure the report along the following lines, which will promote consistency and comparability. Doing so will also help inform the process of review and generate reflections on implementation.

1. Opening statement. An opening statement by the Head of State or Government, a Minister or other high-ranking Government official could highlight the current status of SDG progress and how the Government is responding to the transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda for Development including through its national development plans, strategies, or other relevant documents.

2. Highlights. A one-to-two-page synthesis highlighting:

- the review process
- the status of SDG progress
- how the Government has respond to the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs and to the principle of leaving no-one behind
- two or three examples of each of the following: good practices, lessons learned and challenges encountered on which it wishes to hear about other countries.
- two or three areas where it would need support in terms of finance, capacity-building, technology, partnerships, etc.

3. Introduction. The context and objectives of the review could be presented here. The introduction may briefly describe key features of the country context as it pertains to the 2030 Agenda, national review cycle, and whether and how existing national reports have been used. It could outline how the policy architecture reflects the three dimensions of sustainable development and what policy tools have enabled this integration, as well as links to other international agreements such as Addis Ababa Action Agenda, Paris Agreement, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, etc.

4. Methodology and process for preparation of the review. This section may discuss the methodology that was adopted for the review, including its scope, depth and limitations and how the principles on follow-up and review from the 2030 Agenda, including paragraph 74, were used. Information on the process for preparation of the national review may be presented, including, for example, how different levels and sectors of Government contributed to the review and whether and how the whole-of-Government approach was used; whether parliaments were engaged; whether national evaluation/oversight institutions contributed; what mechanisms have been used to engage stakeholders from civil society, academia and the business sector and, where applicable, whether the UN Country Teams were engaged. The section could describe how the national report to the HLPF was discussed at the national level and who was engaged in the discussions.

5. Policy and enabling environment.

(a) Creating ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals. The review could outline efforts made towards all stakeholders, such as national and local governments, legislative bodies, the public, civil

society and the private sector, to inform them of and involve them in the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda, including goals and targets. The review could address how different groups, particularly women and young people, have been engaged and how direct citizen engagement has been facilitated.

(b) Incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals in national frameworks. The review could outline critical initiatives that the country has undertaken to adapt the Sustainable Development Goals and targets to its national circumstances, and to advance their implementation including examining policy coherence and interlinkages. It may describe national efforts made to integrate the Goals into the country's legislation, policies, plans and programmes, including the sustainable development strategy, if there is one. The countries are encouraged to be specific in identifying the main challenges and difficulties experienced in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals as a whole. Countries are encouraged – even in cases of incomplete data – to provide, as far as possible, an analysis of the causes of their SDG implementation challenges and possible ways forward, including the role of different actors. Countries could consider referring to major efforts undertaken by local authorities and non-State actors to implement the Goals, the role of science-policy interfaces, and partnerships.

(c) Integration of the three dimensions. The review might discuss how the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) are being integrated and how sustainable development policies are being designed and implemented to reflect such integration. This can also include an analysis of progress and initiatives related to the high-level political forum's theme for that year.

(d) Leaving no one behind: The review could also assess how the principle of leaving no one behind has been mainstreamed in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. In this regard, the review could detail how vulnerable groups have been identified, including through improved data collection and disaggregation, as well as what policies and programmes are being implemented to address their needs and support their empowerment. Particular attention should be placed on how national efforts seek to empower women and girls.

(e) Institutional mechanisms. The review could provide information on how the country has adapted its institutional framework in light of the 2030 Agenda. This could include information on how the views of different ministries, agencies, levels of government and non-governmental stakeholders are considered, as well as on the institution(s)/mechanism(s) in charge of coordination and integration for the 2030 Agenda. The review could consider highlighting efforts to mobilize institutions around the Sustainable Development Goals, improve their functioning, and promote change to achieve policy coherence across sectors. Information may also be provided on how responsibility is allocated among various levels of Government (national, subnational and local) for coherent implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. It would be useful to highlight how the country is reviewing progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, including possible plans for the conduct of national reviews that take into account the presentation of the voluntary national review at the HLPF, where applicable. This includes preparation of national SDG reports, supported by the UN Country Team, where applicable.

(f) Structural issues. Countries are encouraged to report on relevant structural issues or barriers they have faced, including the possible external consequences of domestic policies. Countries can highlight the transformative policies, tools, institutional changes they have used to address these issues or barriers.

6. Progress on Goals and targets:

Countries are encouraged to provide brief information on progress and the status of all Sustainable Development Goals. It would be desirable to describe critical difficulties encountered in reaching them and how they could be addressed, referring, when appropriate, to data provided in a statistical

annex. The review could indicate whether a baseline for the Goals has been defined and, if not, what are the remaining obstacles to doing so. Countries are encouraged to review all 17 SDGs; however, some could be addressed in more depth, for instance, to illustrate innovative policies to achieve goals, or examples that could be especially interesting for peer learning and in an international context.

The consideration of Goals could focus on trends, successes, challenges, emerging issues, and lessons learned, and describe what actions have been taken to address existing gaps and challenges. It could support the identification of gaps, solutions, best practices and areas requiring advice and support. The review may examine the agreed global indicators for SDGs and related targets, but countries may also choose to refer to complementary national and regional indicators. If countries are doing their second and subsequent voluntary national reviews it would be desirable to include the progress made since the previous review.

7. Means of implementation. Based on the above challenges and trends highlighted, the review may discuss how means of implementation are mobilized, what difficulties this process faces, and what additional resources are needed to implement the 2030 Agenda, including in terms of financing, capacity development and data needs, technology, and partnerships. The review could indicate how financial systems and resource allocations are being aligned to support the realization of the 2030 Agenda. Coverage of domestic resource mobilization could include the contribution of the private sector. Countries are also encouraged to cover technology, identify concrete capacity development and data needs, and the contribution of multi-stakeholder partnerships.

8. Next steps. Based on the outcomes of the review, the country could outline what steps are planned to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It could also indicate how it is planned to keep the Goals under review at the national and sub-national levels, including dissemination of reviews and their findings.

9. Conclusion. The section may present a summary of the analysis, findings and policy implications. It may discuss new or emerging issues identified by the review. Lastly, the country may indicate what lessons it has learned from the review process and how it will apply them in the future implementation and what support it would need in the future for preparing such reviews.

10. Annexes. Countries may include an annex with data, using the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators and adding priority indicators identified at the regional and national levels where appropriate. They may highlight whether statistics were collected from the national statistical system and pinpoint major gaps in official statistics on indicators. Countries may want to include additional annexes where they would showcase best practices and/or policies and strategies that has advanced implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They could also include comments from stakeholders on the report in an annex.

IV. Making presentations at the HLPF

Under the current modalities, the time provided for countries to present at the HLPF is limited. Countries may therefore wish to consider a number of options when conducting their presentations at the HLPF:

- Using videos, infographics and data visualization to communicate complex messages such as linkages and priorities in a very short period of time;
- Providing space for stakeholders such as civil society and the private sector to share their views on SDG progress.
- Working informally with other presenting countries in advance to compare review processes and findings.

Countries may also wish to consider how best to use the time around the formal meetings of the HLPF to further engage on the lessons emerging from the review process.