

ENGAGING WITH THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW PROCESS:

A Guide for Members of
the Women's Major Group



The Women's Major Group (WMG) was created at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where governments recognized Women as one of the nine important groups in society for achieving sustainable development. The WMG is an official participant in the United Nations processes on Sustainable Development. Other processes use the major group or similar systems, with the WMG active in the processes of the United Nations Environment Program since 1996.

The Women's Major Group has the responsibility to facilitate women's civil society active participation, information sharing, and input into the policy space provided by the United Nations (e.g., participation, speaking, submission of proposals, access to documents, and development of sessions).

The WMG is self-organized and open to all interested organizations working to promote human rights-based sustainable development with a focus on women's human rights, the empowerment of women, and gender equality.

It is facilitated by a team of Organizing Partners at the global and regional levels and is supported by a small secretariat.

The current Organizing Partners of the WMG are: Women Environmental Programme Nigeria; Kenana Association for Sustainable Development and Women Empowerment; the Women's Environment and Development Organization; Women Engage for a Common Future; the International Women's Health Coalition; the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development; Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality; and, Equidad de Género: Ciudadanía, Trabajo y Familia.

Contents

I. Introduction	6	How do I connect with the official process?	18
II. What are the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?	7	How do I work with other civil society organizations?	19
III. What is a Voluntary National Review?	8	VI. What do I do if I can't connect to the official process?	20
What are Voluntary National Reviews?		Being excluded from the entire process or some parts of it	20
What happens in the review process?	8	Writing Shadow Reports	20
IV. Why engage with a VNR process?	9	Analysis Via Priority Questions	21
V. How do I engage with my country's official process?	12	Data Collection	21
How do I find out what my country is doing?	12	VII. What do I do after the HLPF?	23
What is my country supposed to do in preparing its VNR?	14	Using the VNR for advocacy and holding governments accountable	23
Principles	14	Maintaining CSO coalitions	24
Process	15	Preparing for another report	25
Written Report	16	VIII. Where can I find more information and resources?	26

I. Introduction

When governments adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, they also called for the establishment of a process that would allow governments to report voluntarily and share lessons learned about their implementation of the goals. In the spirit of “nothing about us without us,” this guide provides tools and case studies to help women’s rights and feminist organizations understand the SDGs¹ and engage in Voluntary National Reviews (VNR).²

Specifically, this guide covers:

1. Why it is valuable to engage with a VNR process;
2. How you can engage with an official VNR process, including working directly with the government;
3. What to do if you cannot engage with the official process, including creating shadow reports;
4. What to do after the High Level Political Forum (HLPF)³ ends, including holding your government accountable; and
5. Where you can find more information and resources.

The exact approach you use will depend on your overall advocacy objectives and strategy, as well as the openness of your government to civil society engagement.

Women’s rights and feminist organizations, particularly at the grassroots level, have the expertise and perspectives needed to ensure that governments implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) in an inclusive manner that leaves no one behind. To that end, we hope this guide provides the necessary tools to equip and empower feminists and women’s rights advocates pushing for full implementation of the SDGs.

II. What are the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets that all United Nations (UN) Member States agreed to in 2015. A blueprint to guide global sustainable development policies and programs, the 2030 Agenda and its goals “seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.”⁴



Unlike the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Member States and civil society designed the 2030 Agenda to be universal, implemented by all countries, including industrialized countries in the Global North. While countries may “localize” the goals and targets, the interrelated and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda means that every country should take action on all of the 17 goals. In other words, in adapting the goals and targets to a local context, countries should not remove or ignore any of them.

III. What is a Voluntary National Review?

What are Voluntary National Reviews? What happens in the review process?

Governments participate in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in order to share progress, challenges and their lessons learned in implementing the SDGs at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The HLPF is the global body responsible for monitoring and reviewing progress toward the 2030 Agenda. It meets annually at UN Headquarters in New York for eight days in July. Currently, countries present their VNRs during the ministerial segment, the final three days of the HLPF.

As the name implies, countries opt into the VNR process. The VNR is both a product – the written report submitted to the HLPF – and a process that should involve civil society throughout, as this guide will describe. The VNRs should report on national progress on the SDGs, describe the ways in which national development policymaking aligns with the SDGs, and provide a space for stakeholders to learn about, input into, and comment on government actions toward implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Prior to the HLPF, countries prepare a full written report as well as a set of main messages summarizing their full report (for more details about the written report, see Section V). During the HLPF, countries deliver an oral presentation and then engage in a dialogue about the report with other Member States, as well as representatives of the Major Groups and other stakeholders (MGoS).⁵ UN Web TV⁶ broadcasts all of these presentations and the following question and answer periods. You can watch the video live and/or through the video archive.

The VNRs, like the rest of the HLPF, are meant to be an opportunity for governments to share experiences, successes, challenges, and lessons learned to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In this way, the VNRs and the HLPF are distinct from accountability processes, such as the Universal Periodic Review⁷ of the Human Rights Council or reporting to human rights treaty monitoring bodies, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.⁸

While VNRs are a central part of the work of the HLPF, they are only one part of the Forum. In addition to the VNRs, the HLPF reviews global progress toward a sub-set of the 17 goals each year through roundtables and presentations, examines interlinkages with other processes, addresses countries in special situations, holds dialogues with Major Groups and other stakeholders and non-state actors, and provides guidance on implementing the 2030 Agenda.

IV. Why engage with a VNR process?

UN Member States agreed to a set of guiding principles to the follow-up and review process for the 2030 Agenda, including that the review process be substantive, based on knowledge, and open, inclusive, participatory, and transparent for all, particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable (General Assembly Resolution 70/1).⁹ To achieve these principles, all stakeholders must be involved in the review and implementation process, including all levels and sectors of government, civil society, the private sector, members of parliament, and national human rights institutions.

“The participation of stakeholders promotes sustainable decisions, by giving groups affected by those decisions the opportunity to communicate their needs and interests. Participation and consultation also builds ownership of the 2030 Agenda, and therefore contributes to a whole-of-society approach to the implementation of the SDGs. Stakeholder groups have highlighted that they should be actively engaged throughout the process of design, implementation, monitoring and review of the 2030 Agenda.”¹⁰

By engaging with your Voluntary National Review process, your organization may, among other things:

- Support and amplify your existing advocacy priorities and projects.
- Influence the content and process of your government's report.
- Establish, build, and maintain relationships with your government.
- Establish, build, and strengthen national coalitions.

Members of the Women's Major Group (WVG)¹¹ shared why they engaged in the VNR process and what they learned or gained from their engagement:

- **Support and amplify existing advocacy priorities and projects**

The number one lesson is that the engagement in the VNR should always build on your existing advocacy priorities. Do not reinvent the wheel, but ensure that engagement in the VNR is well embedded in your existing national advocacy engagement. In that way, it's more likely to be effective and actually lead to some national changes (Rineke van Dam, Advocacy Officer for Rutgers, the Netherlands).

- **Influence the content and process of your government's report**

[Our] main goal was to influence the government's report and to bring qualitative information to improve the government's analysis of quantitative data. We added qualitative data from studies developed by different academics, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and ministerial groups to complement the government's quantitative analysis and of course to bring a different evaluation perspective. For example, the government recognized they didn't achieve a decrease in maternal mortality, but they didn't point out so clearly why. In our report, we highlighted the cause, which is unsafe abortion (Mabel Bianco, FEIM, Argentina).

- **Establish, build, and maintain relationships with your government**

Our goal is to bring local people to the policy dialogue so that local voices are heard. We have tried to engage with government by communicating with different government departments and making alternative comments into the draft government policy papers, acts, and regulations. We have often submitted our position papers to the government on various thematic issues. Initiating local level social accountability mechanisms by inviting local government authorities to share goals and compile milestones is a good strategy to engage with the formal review process. Rather than criticizing the government report, the key objective for us was to emphasize that the government and other development partners should work together and agree on critical areas regarding the progress and achievement on SDGs. Sometimes, the government counterpart utilizes the progress report for vote banking, but the ideal scenario should be that the government equally take responsibility of failures and learn from those. We want to work with the government together as development partners and the recognition means a lot to our ongoing struggle (Shaila Shahid, Senior Programme Coordinator, International Centre for Climate Change and Development, ICCCAD, Bangladesh).

- **Establish, build, and strengthen national coalition work**

Through the Argentinian Alliance of Civil Society Organizations for the Follow-up of International Agreements (the AAO), we developed a report to influence the government's VNR and contributed to improving civil society advocacy on implementation of the 2030 Agenda. We incorporated many observations we had made in shadow reports for treaty monitoring bodies, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention Against Torture, and others. Members of the AAO worked together to develop this document, which provides our feedback on the goals, targets, and indicators in the Argentine government's VNR. The report discusses SDGs 1, 3, 5, and 8 from a gender perspective to indicate where the government's report falls short. After the HLPF, we continue to influence the implementation of Agenda through the different ministries. (Mabel Bianco, FEIM, Argentina).

Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways (WWHR) in Turkey illustrates how a combination of these outcomes can result from engaging with the VNR process.

- Our efforts to participate and advocate in the global review processes of SDGs – which included preparing a shadow report on gender equality and SDG implementation in Turkey (with a focus on gender equality and women's status) for the first review of Turkey at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) – initiated a dialogue with the focal point for SDG implementation under the Ministry of Development. We were invited to participate in the Commission Meetings on Women's Status in Development for the preparation of the 11th National Development Plan Turkey in which we gave inputs regarding gender equality. Our advocacy efforts around the SDGs at the international level has initiated a communication opportunity with the state, a space which had been nearly closed for independent, rights based, feminist organizations. WWHR has also provided input on Turkey's SDG Action Plan prepared by Ministry of Development (Yesim Erkan Yetiser, Advocacy Coordinator for Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways, Turkey).

V. How do I engage with my country's official process?

Each country will develop their own, unique official process for conducting their VNR, which means there is no single formula for engaging in the process. However, the UN created a handbook¹² for how countries should prepare their VNR. Throughout this guide we provide useful excerpts from this handbook.

How do I find out what my country is doing?

- **Step 1:** find out whether or not your government has developed a national action plan for SDG implementation and read it if is available. This national plan may explain your country's follow-up and review structure and/or processes.

If there is no action plan yet, find out whether a process for developing a national plan exists and find ways to ensure that feminist voices are heard in the process. It will be important to understand who the key players are and what their positions are in order to advocate with them during the process of developing a national plan.

- **Step 2:** identify and map out which government agencies are responsible for implementing and monitoring the SDGs. It may be that some are officially tasked with SDG coordination and others are more informally involved. Your government might have created a specific coordination mechanism for SDG implementation and review. Sector-specific ministries and departments may also be involved in implementing specific goals, e.g. the Ministry of Education on goal 4 (education).

Governments may adopt multiple implementation and coordination mechanisms across departments and ministries. In many countries, they may be building on coordinating mechanisms first established to support the MDGs. It is worth mapping as much of this as possible. Among the agencies likely to be involved are:

- Ministries of Planning and Development
- Ministries of Finance and Budgeting
- Line ministries, such as Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women, Ministry of the Environment (or equivalent)
- Interministerial working groups or coordinating councils
- National Statistical Offices
- Legislative/Parliamentary Commission

As outlined in their VNR report, Azerbaijan created a National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development established under the Ministry of the Economy. The Council has four working groups focused on economic growth, social issues, environmental issues, and monitoring and evaluation, and has representatives from 17 ministries and numerous other state agencies.

See Figure 2 below for the coordination mechanism developed by the Czech Republic as described in their 2017 VNR report.¹³



Figure 2: institutional structure for sustainable development cooperation with Czech Republic, reproduced from the 2017 VNR report

- **Step 3:** Consult your country's page on the official VNR database page. This page will have:
 - Tabs for each VNR report submitted to the HLPF.
 - Previous reports, including to different UN Commissions, such as the Commission on Sustainable Development (no longer active) or the Commission on the Status of Women.
 - Official statements made during UN meetings.
 - Partnerships and commitments from the Partnerships for SDGs online platform.¹⁴
 - Focal point for the VNR. This may be a ministry or an individual.

What is my country supposed to do in preparing its VNR?

In order to help countries create strong and meaningful reports for the VNR, UN agencies and other actors have created guidelines and best practices¹⁵ (see Section VIII for a list of additional references).

PRINCIPLES

When countries adopted the 2030 Agenda, they agreed on a set of principles for the VNR process and report:

- Voluntary and country-led taking into account different national realities, capacities, and levels of development;
- Track progress in ways that respect the universal, integrated, and interrelated nature of the three dimensions;
- Support the identification of solutions and best practices;
- Open, inclusive, participatory, and transparent;
- People-centered, gender-sensitive, respect human rights, and have a particular focus on those furthest behind;
- Build on existing platforms and processes;
- Rigorous and based on evidence; and
- Benefit from the support of the UN system and other multilateral institutions.

(Adapted from General Assembly Resolution 70/1, paragraph 74⁹)

PROCESS

The UN's Division of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) operationalized these principles and developed a step-by-step handbook described earlier.

Within this handbook, the UN recommends a four stage, overlapping process to create a VNR (figure 3):

1. Initial preparation and organization
2. Stakeholder engagement
3. VNR preparation
4. HLPF presentation

For stakeholder engagement, the UN explicitly recommends, “ensuring that all stakeholders, including all levels and sectors of government, **civil society** and the private sector, members of parliament, and national human rights institutions, are involved in the review and implementation processes.”¹⁶ In addition, the UN also recommends that countries provide space to stakeholders to share their views on SDG progress during their official VNR presentation at the HLPF.

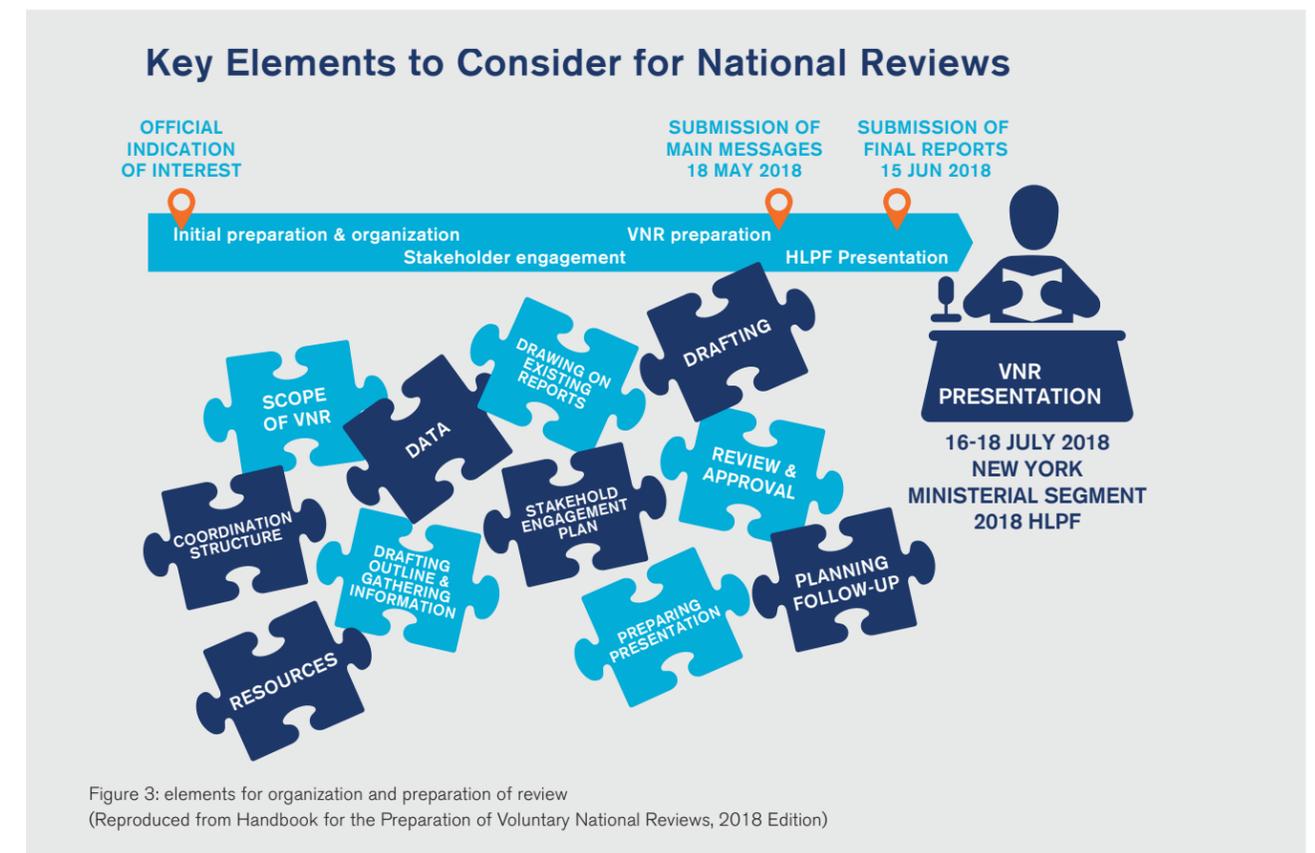


Figure 3: elements for organization and preparation of review
(Reproduced from Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews, 2018 Edition)

WRITTEN REPORT

While the VNR process has many components as outlined above, the written report holds a centrally important space. The UN created voluntary common reporting guidelines to help countries prepare comprehensive reports. Section III of those guidelines outlines the recommended structure and content for a VNR summarized below:

1. Opening statement from a high-ranking government official

2. One to two-page highlights synthesizing the report

3. Introduction describing the country context and linkages to other international agreements (e.g., Paris Agreement)

4. Methodology and process for preparing the review

5. Policy and enabling environment
 - Creating national ownership of the SDGs, including involving all stakeholders in the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda, **specifically explaining how women have been engaged**
 - Incorporating SDGs into national frameworks, including examining policy coherence and linkages, and initiatives undertaken by non-state actors
 - Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development
 - Leaving no one behind, **including particular attention to national efforts to empower women and girls**
 - Institutional mechanisms, including the roles of ministries, agencies, and non-governmental stakeholders
 - Structural issues, including possible external consequences of domestic policies

6. Progress on all the goals and targets understanding that some goals and targets may be described in more detail

7. Means of implementation, including financing and data needs, and multi-stakeholder partnerships

8. Next steps, including ongoing review and dissemination of the report

9. Conclusion, including lessons learned and emerging issues

10. Annexes, including comments on the government report from stakeholders

In addition to these guidelines, civil society has recommended additional key principles:

- **Report on the progress of all 17 SDGs.** A topline expectation is that the scope of member states' VNRs cover all 17 SDGs. Going a step beyond the UN Secretary General's recommendations, which imply a partial review of the SDGs is acceptable although review of all the goals is encouraged, CSOs have stressed the necessity of reviewing the progress towards the targets of all 17 goals. The selected goals under review at each HLPF do not mean member states should neglect reporting on all the goals in their VNR.

- **Report on how countries have mainstreamed the SDG targets into national plans.** In its review, countries should consider where they are in their national planning cycles, and how national priorities, plans, policies, and budgets have and can contribute toward the accomplishment of the SDGs.

- **Develop and publicize transparent methods for stakeholder engagement, especially in ways that are inclusive of marginalized communities, and report on that engagement.** Countries should report which communities in their context are vulnerable populations or otherwise marginalized. They should also include how they engage and consult with all relevant stakeholders, including CSOs, such as grassroots and women-led organizations that may be left out of critical discussions, and include the outcomes of these consultations.

- **Build transparent processes of information and data gathering.** Governments should explain how they gathered data. States should complement quantitative data with qualitative data, and should improve data collection and analyses, including disaggregation. Where there are gaps in the data, states should explain why.

How do I connect with the official process?

Connecting with the official process in your country will vary depending upon your context, your connections, and your government's institutional arrangements.

Possible actions you could take:

1. Find and reach out to your government's VNR focal point on your country's page of the VNR Database website. Most governments have identified someone in the government responsible for the VNR reporting process. Their names, positions and sometimes their contact information are available on the website.
2. Reach out to the Major Group and other stakeholders (MGoS) Coordination Mechanism¹⁷ list to ask if any other groups from your country are engaged in the VNR and/or SDG implementation process. On that list you can also request contact information for relevant agencies, officials, and civil society platforms.
3. If you have connections with relevant ministry officials, reach out to them, ask them what they know about the process and how you could get involved.
4. Engage with your national statistics office. They will often be responsible for preparing the data for the report.
5. If you have UN offices in your country or region, reach out to them to see if they can help you connect to the official process. UNDP plays a lead role in SDG implementation and reporting, but you can reach out to other UN agencies, such UN Women, UNFPA, or WHO, which also play important roles in SDG implementation and follow-up.

How do I work with other civil society organizations?

Civil society has engaged on the SDGs at all levels: national, regional, and global.

At the global level, the Major Groups and other stakeholders system exists to facilitate civil society engagement in SDG-related process. At the regional level, civil society has been creating official engagement mechanisms, including in Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Connecting with these regional and global mechanisms may open channels of information, build your networks, and increase your knowledge.

Within the regions, regional organizations and networks are making links from the local grassroots to the national and regional levels. An example at the regional level is the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development (APWLD),¹⁸ which is a membership-based regional feminist network. With more than 200 member organizations representing diverse women from 26 countries, APWLD builds capacities, produces and disseminates feminist analyses, conducts advocacy, and strengthens movements for women's human rights. For the SDGs, APWLD provides funding and technical support to selected partners to follow-up and review the implementation of the SDGs using the framework of feminist development justice¹⁹ to produce national reports. This program allows partners to build capacity to influence policies at the local, national, and regional levels, and to be able to hold governments accountable. A result of the first year of this program included a report by one of APWLD's partners from Nepal who works on issues impacting rural women. The process of developing a report that reviewed the progress of SDG implementation using feminist development justice allowed this group to gain recognition in Nepal, a lack of which had previously been a barrier to their work.

At the national level, many different models exist for engagement. Some countries have leveraged existing coordination platforms. For example, the Argentine Alliance of Civil Society Organizations for the Follow-up of International Agreements (the AAO) was created in 2010 monitor the agreements of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, as well as work on other commitments, including follow-up on the 2030 Agenda. In other countries, such as Kenya,²⁰ civil society has created SDG-specific platforms that bring together groups working on each of the pillars of the 2030 Agenda. For more examples, refer to the 2018 report from Together2030,²¹ which developed a mapping of national civil society coalitions working to promote and follow up on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level.

VI. What do I do if I can't connect to the official process?

Being excluded from the entire process or some parts of it

Since monitoring the implementation of the SDGs is a long, continuous process, exclusion from the entire review process or some parts of it does not immediately mean failure. There is still value in being involved with some parts of the process. If you experience total exclusion, there are other steps you can take while you prepare for another opportunity.

The experience of a women's rights organization in Nigeria sheds some light on what to do after being left out of some parts of the VNR process:

- Initially, the Office of the Senior Special Assistant on SDGs to the President invited Echoes of Women in Africa (ECOWA) to a consultation workshop on the VNRs, Nigeria's first report. ECOWA did not receive funding to attend a consultation workshop. While discussions arose at the workshop about CSOs producing a shadow report alongside the government's VNR, the final decision was that there would not be a joint shadow report produced. Shortly before the HLPF, ECOWA learned that there was a validation workshop meant to review the government's VNR to which ECOWA was not invited. Many other CSOs expressed the same concern. ECOWA learned that fifty CSOs validated the report, but no grassroots organizations or coalitions were among them, and very few were women-led. With little coordination or collaboration on the report from the grassroots level, local voices were not included. At the HLPF, ECOWA asked questions put together by Nigerian CSOs during the Nigerian VNR presentation. ECOWA expressed concern of non-inclusion of CSOs as well as vulnerable groups including persons with disabilities. After the HLPF, ECOWA, based in Nigeria, has been able to use the government's VNR as an advocacy tool, as discussed more in depth in Part V. Based on their experience, ECOWA advises other groups who may be excluded from the process to not lose hope because there are other things CSOs can do in the meantime, such as build capacity and skills, engage with other organizations, and continue laying the groundwork to work with the government in the future (Louisa Ono Eikhomun, Executive Director, Echoes of Women in Africa – Nigeria).

Writing shadow reports

If engaging with your government on the official report or even getting access to the government report to analyze and comment is not possible, then developing an alternative or "shadow" report may be the best option.

In fact, developing a shadow report can be a powerful tool in any case. It provides a platform to work across civil society organizations, creates opportunities to engage with your government, helps determine a baseline to measure change over time, generates information and analysis to use in advocacy and media work, and helps to identify gaps and deficiencies in government policies and programs. If you are engaged in other types of international reporting, such as reporting to the CEDAW Committee, you may be able to use information and analysis from one shadow report to support another.

To begin to develop a shadow report, the most important first step is to define focus. What are the key research questions that you want to answer? Which SDG goals and targets should be the focus? Which issues are most important? Which issues do you have the capacity to address efficiently and correctly? Which issues and people are at risk of being neglected or left out of official reports? Define the priority questions first, then identify the data that are needed to answer those questions.

ANALYSIS VIA PRIORITY QUESTIONS

In preparing a shadow report, it is helpful to think of different levels of analysis and data collection:

- 1. Policy and legal framework:** What policies and laws exist that advance the priority goals and targets? What are the budget commitments? Are the rights and needs of the most marginalized taken into consideration in the existing laws, policies and budgets? What are the policy gaps? Which commitments are under-funded?
- 2. Implementation:** What is the state of policy implementation? Are laws enforced? Which are the most significant failures or weaknesses in implementation? What is the scale and reach of the policies and programs? Where is funding insufficient or not reaching the programs it is supposed to reach? Who is left out? Also, importantly, are there social controls (community, religious, workplace) that limit access for women and girls, even if policies and programs are in place?
- 3. Data availability and use:** What data are being collected by government? Where are gaps in data collection or analysis? Are data disaggregated? Are the data accessible, to civil society and others? Are data used to inform policy formation and implementation? Do you have qualitative data that you can use to complement quantitative data?
- 4. Outcomes or impact:** What are the outcomes of the SDG implementation? How does it affect the lives of women and girls? How does it affect the lives of the most vulnerable? How does the failure to implement SDG commitments affect women and girls?

DATA COLLECTION

It will be important to access and add to the baseline information that will be used to assess future outcomes. Some official baseline data from the UN can be accessed here: <http://sdgindex.org/download/> or here: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/>.

Civil society can also begin to gather data on issues or people that may not be captured in the official data. Think about other standards that exist, for example, using International Labor Organization conventions that are relevant to women's "informal" work.

Once you determine the focuses of the shadow report, then you can begin gathering data. The main sources of gender data include reviews of published literature and studies; official data, such as household and demographic and household surveys; other official statistics (census or administrative data); and reports from universities and NGOs.

Some WMG members share their experiences on producing a shadow report:

- We produced a shadow report to ensure our input was included in the language and political framing, which we had initiated. We also recognized that a government report, even when open to CSOs, is still a government report. We want space to be able to define honestly what the challenges are, and what solutions we need as boldly as possible. [Working on the VNR] was an opportunity to start defining how multi-stakeholder partnerships work in delivering SDGs, but specifically, it was an opportunity for carving out the niche on what the role of women's rights organization is in such partnerships. The shadow report provided an opportunity to honestly interrogate progress and contribution of CSOs, but also boldly name challenges holding us back – especially lack of universal access to SRHR and restrictive policies on issues such as access to abortion. To have had that annexed as part of the government report was a great success. The shadow report compilation methodology is a best practice for how women's rights organization can demonstrate their role in advancing the gender agenda of the SDGs, but also in communicating the challenges and setbacks (Catherine Nyambura, Advocacy Officer, FEMNET).
- Rutgers produced a separate 'shadow report' to use it as material to influence the government VNR report, and to ensure inclusion of SRHR-related issues in both the national section as well as the contribution of the Netherlands to the international realization of the SDGs. The shadow report included data, analysis and concrete recommendations which we tried to get integrated into the government report. Note that in parallel, the Netherlands was going through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process in Geneva and Rutgers also produced a stakeholder submission for that. We used the same/similar messages (but adapted to the particular type of review) in order to have a consistent influencing strategy across the VNR and UPR processes. All of our messages were in line with our existing national advocacy strategies (Rineke van Dam, Advocacy Officer for Rutgers, the Netherlands).
- All India Women's Conference (AIWC) has been engaging with the SDG process from 2012 at the national level in India and at the global level through the Women's Major Group. As part of the VNR process, and with support from APWLD, AIWC held one national and two regional consultations on SDG implementation, with the participation of stakeholders and like-minded CSOs. The outcome of the consultations was useful for AIWC in creating an independent report,²² as well as AIWC's contribution to a collaborative shadow report,²³ developed by Wada Na Todo Abhiyan, a network of CSOs from across 18 states of India. Depending on expertise, the goals were divided among all the CSOs, which included non-women's organizations, and together they prepared the shadow report. AIWC's contribution to the shadow report primarily covered goal 5, but it also analyzed how goal 5 cuts across several other goals particularly relating to the areas in which AIWC works, such as women's health, education, environment and climate change. AIWC looked at the official indicators but also provided input for few other indicators based on the actual challenges faced by women in daily life. (Kalyani Raj, All India Women's Conference, India).

VII. What do I do after the HLPF?

Using the VNR for advocacy and holding governments accountable

The VNR creates an opening for engaging with your government on the SDGs before, during, and after the HLPF. The possibilities are endless and depend on your own advocacy priorities and capacities:

- Use the moment to create media attention around the SDGs or your specific issue by writing an editorial or blog, holding an event, like a VNR viewing party when the government presents at the HLPF, or creating other media materials.
- Use the moment to praise the government for positive steps or critique the government for inadequate reporting and/or implementation either publicly or privately.
- Use the information in the official report to engage with the official coordination mechanisms the report describes or find out more information about the stakeholder engagement plan described by the report.
- Use the official report and/or your own shadow report to have meetings with the government ministries, parliamentarians, country and regional UN agency offices, and/or donors, including to directly engage in dialogue on improving accountability.
- Use the data and analysis from the official report and/or your own shadow report in other international reporting mechanisms, including the UPR or treaty monitoring bodies.

The presentation at the HLPF is not the end of the process or the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is full implementation of the SDGs. The VNR process is one tool to meet that goal.

Below are examples from WMG members of what can happen after the HLPF, illustrating an ongoing process that can complement existing advocacy and priorities:

- After the HLPF, Echoes of Women in Africa (ECOWA), based in Nigeria, has been able to use the government's VNR as an advocacy tool to establish meetings and develop connections with the Lagos State Ministry of Economic Planning and Budget as well as the Special Advisers on SDGs to the President at the national level. The Director of SDGs of the latter department is responsible for collating ongoing national projects and aligning them with the SDGs. In their advocacy work so far, ECOWA has learned that the government is open to CSO involvement, presenting an opportunity for CSOs to inform the government's approach for monitoring and implementing the SDGs. For ECOWA and their peers, it is also an opportunity to sensitize the government on gender issues. A lesson

ECOWA learned is that CSOs must take initiative to approach the government, and seize opportunities for engagement (Louisa Ono Eikhomun, Executive Director, Echoes of Women in Africa – Nigeria).

- In combination with the outcomes of the Universal Periodic Review, we continued our push to strengthen the centralized instructions on comprehensive sexuality education in our national education policies. We have made strides forward in that. Also, there is recognition by the government that although in terms of policy, there should be universal access to contraceptives – barriers in access exist and that particular groups require attention. There are a number of strong local government examples where they addressed this challenge. Finally, there have also been concrete actions and follow up in relation to sexual violence in the Netherlands – as we have relatively high rates (also due to high reporting rates), (Rineke van Dam, Advocacy Officer for Rutgers, Netherlands).

Maintaining CSO coalitions

Given the breadth and interlinkages of the goals of the 2030 Agenda, working together with other CSOs can help everyone progress towards meeting full implementation of the Agenda. As mentioned in Section IV, the VNR process may help strengthen existing coalitions, as well as create or maintain new coalitions formed for this purpose.

Based on their experience, FEMNET offered these four tips for working in coalition on the SDGs:

1. Coordinate well in advance so that your engagement is informed by a good understanding of what the government's timeline and plan is. For example, find out if its coordination of line ministries, who you need to reach out to, if it's a drafting team, how you negotiate space or contribute.
2. Work across movements. Understanding who else is interested in the process helps consolidate a strong base and constituency to engage the government and to consolidate the issues.
3. Always define the process, clearly understand everyone's role and the resources required to engage. Budgets may be needed and it's always important to understand what amount of time and financial resources are required. The coordination among actors, engagement with government, and writing does need to be well resourced for quality input.
4. At all given times, the space may not be the most feminist and you might find yourself advocating among people who you didn't expect. Always have your agenda well lined up and coordinate with other feminists.

Argentina has a strong example of utilizing an existing CSO coalition for SDG follow up and review.

- The Argentine Alliance of Civil Society Organizations for the Follow-up of International Agreements (the AAO) was created in 2010 for the processes related to the 20th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development, as well as work on other commitments, including follow-up on the 2030 Agenda. Many diverse non-governmental and non-political party networks from across the country make up the AAO. These groups represent specific populations, such as indigenous women, people living with HIV, adolescents and youth, sexual diversity, people with disabilities, sex workers, sexual and reproductive rights advocates, education, and human rights. The AAO works jointly with the National Council for the Coordination of Social Policies, the governmental institution that is responsible for coordination of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The AAO provides qualitative analysis to complement statistical data (Mabel Bianco, FEIM, Argentina).

Preparing for another report

Most countries have not indicated how often they will report to the HLPF. A few countries will have reported twice by the 2018 HLPF, such as Colombia and Uruguay, while Togo reported three years in a row beginning in 2016. Since the reporting process is unpredictable, it is helpful to maintain some basic channels of communication and information gathering.

Possible actions you can take, include:

- Scheduling regular meetings with key stakeholders, such as ministries, parliamentarians, UN agencies, and civil society working on SDG implementation.
- Continue to monitor official and unofficial data sources on your country's SDG implementation, including civil society efforts such as Equal Measures 2030.²⁴
- Based on data gaps you already identified, work to remedy the gaps through your own data collection or through work with academia and statistical offices.
- Monitor the engagement mechanisms described in your country's VNR report, especially any civil society engagement mechanisms described.
- Continue to build awareness of the SDGs within your organization, networks, communities, and with your government.

VIII. Where can I find more information and resources?

Resources referenced in the report and additional resources are included in the following list.

Guidelines and resources from the United Nations to support preparation of the VNRs

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

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf

Handbook for the preparation of voluntary national reviews:

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17354VNR_handbook_2018.pdf

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

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf

Q&A for Voluntary National Reviews at the 2018 HLPF (to be read in conjunction with the handbook above):

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17429QA_for_VNRs_2018.pdf

Report of the Workshop for the 2018 Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF:

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17298Geneva_VNR_workshop_report_final_1201.pdf

Open SDG Data Hub by the UN Statistics Division: <https://unstats-undesa.opendata.arcgis.com/>

Guidelines and other resources to support preparation of VNRs created by civil society organizations

Guiding for Accountability: Together2030 recommendations for a revised set of guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in partnership with World Vision International: <http://www.together2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/REV-FINAL-T30-Recommendations-for-VNR-guidelines-October-2017-2.pdf>

National Civil Society Coalitions on the Sustainable Development Goals – A Mapping by Together2030 and Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment: <http://www.together2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FINAL-Mapping-of-National-CSO-coalitions-on-SDGs-March-2018.pdf>

Getting On Track in Agenda 2030: HIV in Voluntary National Reviews of Sustainable Development Implementation by the Global Forum on MSM & HIV: <http://msmgf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Getting-on-Track-in-Agenda-2030.pdf>

Fact sheet on how to do shadow reports for UN processes by Women Thrive Alliance: https://womenthrive.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Tool_UN_ShadowReporting.pdf

Linking the Universal Periodic Review to sustainable development: Explore the connections between the recommendations of the UPR and the SDGs, by the Danish Institute for Human Rights: <http://upr.humanrights.dk/>

The Road Towards 2030: How African Women Can Participate In And Influence the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development by The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET): <http://femnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/SDGs-Roadmap-by-FEMNET-Final-28.2.2018.pdf>

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