Progressing national SDGs implementation:

Experiences and recommendations from 2016

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in September 2015, represent the most ambitious sustainable development agenda ever agreed by UN Member States.

This comprehensive set of 17 goals and 169 targets[1] marks a new universal agenda which applies to all countries, rich and poor, who have promised to ensure no one will be left behind in the implementation of the goals. Getting the accountability structures fit for purpose is key in ensuring this pledge is fulfilled. The UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is the key global forum in charge of monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. This report aims to contribute to ensuring this intergovernmental forum is as effective as it can be in holding governments to account and supporting their efforts to make progress on the goals.

The first UN High Level Political Forum since the agreement of the Sustainable Development Goals took place in July 2016. The forum is mandated to conduct regular State-led reviews and thematic reviews of the implementation of the Agenda, with inputs from other intergovernmental bodies, regional processes, major groups and other stakeholders.

Twenty-two countries volunteered for national review at this year's HLPF. These countries were: China, Colombia, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Madagascar, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, Norway, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Togo, Turkey, Uganda and Venezuela.

In addition, several civil society groups produced their own reports to provide their perspectives of government action on implementation and reporting. The participation of civil society and all relevant stakeholders is a key element of successful monitoring and review at the HLPF. These shadow reports are a vital accountability tool, providing an objective view of countries' progress towards the SDGs by challenging and verifying countries' claims.

In order to inform future implementation and reporting on Agenda 2030 by both governments and civil society, this report aims to:

- Provide an overview of a selection of national reviews presented at the HLPF and equivalent civil society reports.

- Share examples of best practice.

- Make recommendations for country and civil society reporting under the follow-up and review of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

- Make recommendations for future revisions of the Secretary-General's voluntary reporting guidelines. This summary provides a synthesis of the key messages from a wider report, which reviews a selection of country national reviews and counterpart civil society papers from this first year of reporting to the HLPF.

Due to time and capacity limitations, this review focuses only on the 16 country reviews that were published in English.[2] The executive summaries and full reports for each of these 16 countries were analysed.

The analysis comprised a literature review, which concentrated on a set of key questions. Using these guiding questions, notable aspects for knowledge sharing and examples of best practice were drawn out and recorded.

The country reports were also assessed according to whether they adhered to the UN Secretary General's common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews (VNRs).[3] The guidelines provide a foundation against which to compare the reports and the high level analysis provides a basis from which to draw out recommendations for future revisions of the guidelines.

In addition to the country reports, relevant civil society inputs – including statements and reports – which provide an important verification and accountability mechanism in the reporting process, were also reviewed. The civil society analysis mirrored that of the country analysis, focusing on a proportion of the same 16 countries and only including inputs made available in English.[4]

A joint report by UKSSD and Bond

Initial steps towards implementation at the national level

As well as aiding the assessment of progress towards achieving the SDGs, the VNRs are intended to be a tool for the sharing of knowledge and experiences of implementing the goals at the national level particularly in the early years of implementation.

To facilitate the sharing of best practice and lessons learned, this report summarises key activities outlined in the 16 VNRs under the following thematic headings:

1. **Incorporation of the SDGs in national frameworks and policies**
2. **Leadership, governance and institutional mechanisms for implementation**
3. **Efforts to conduct a baseline or gap analysis**
4. **Integration and policy coherence**
5. **Leave no one behind**
6. **Raising awareness and creating ownership of the SDGs**
7. **Stakeholder engagement in reporting and implementation**
8. **Measurement and reporting**

Highlights from this report are summarised below.

1. Incorporation of the SDGs in national frameworks and policies

Covering how countries are beginning to integrate the SDGs into national legislation, policies and programmes as well as any plans to develop dedicated national action plans for the SDGs.

- The majority of countries reviewed, including **Egypt, Finland, Germany** and **Montenegro**, intend to use their **national sustainable development strategies** to implement the SDGs, and have taken steps to **align existing objectives** with the goals.
- **Sierra Leone** has integrated the SDGs into the **national budget** and intends to produce a **National SDGs Investment Plan**, to be derived from a costed needs-based assessment.
- **Uganda** has developed and disseminated development planning guidelines for sectors and local governments to facilitate the **integration of the SDGs in sector and local government planning frameworks**.
- **China, Finland, France** and **the Philippines** all intend to develop dedicated **national implementation plans** for the delivery of Agenda 2030.

2. Leadership, governance and institutional mechanisms for implementation

Covering how countries have adapted existing sustainable development mechanisms, as well as instituted ones, to deliver Agenda 2030.

- In **Egypt, Finland, Germany** and **Sierra Leone** the promotion of sustainable development and implementation of the SDGs are guided by **leadership at the highest political level**.
- **China, Egypt, Norway** and **Sierra Leone** have all put in place **new mechanisms** to coordinate SDGs implementation and **the Philippines, the Republic of Korea** and **Uganda** have plans to do the same.
- **Estonia, Germany, Switzerland** and **Turkey** intend to use **existing sustainable development mechanisms** to deliver the SDGs.
- **Egypt** and **Finland** are both leading efforts at the **regional level** to facilitate the implementation of the SDGs.
- **Estonia, Finland** and **Germany** all have an existing **Commission or Council for Sustainable Development** that facilitates input from non-governmental actors.

3. Efforts to conduct a baseline or gap analysis

Covering the extent to which countries are establishing baselines depicting the current national situation, in addition to undertaking comparative and gap analyses, to provide information on weaknesses and challenges for implementation.

- **Egypt, Philippines, Samoa, Sierra Leone** and **Turkey** have all analysed the **alignment of the SDGs and their existing national sustainable development strategies**.
- **Estonia, the Republic of Korea** and **Sierra Leone** have also taken steps to **map existing policy measures** against the SDGs.
- **Finland** and **Norway** have both identified national **weaknesses and challenges for the implementation** of Agenda 2030.
- **Georgia** and **Sierra Leone** have both begun to **set national targets and establish baselines** against national indicators.
- **Switzerland** and **Turkey** both intend to conduct **future baseline and gap analyses** in order to identify priority areas for action.

4. Integration and policy coherence

Covering how each of the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental – are being integrated into implementation at the national level in order to realise the interlinkages between the goals and targets – a key transformational aspect of the SDGs.

- **Germany** and **Switzerland** both treat sustainable development as an **overarching goal or regulatory concept** to which all policies and activities are to be aligned.

- **Finland** and **Montenegro** both use **composite indicators** to provide a comprehensive view of sustainable development.

- **Finland** and **Uganda** both highlight the **role of stakeholders in Policy Coherence for Sustainable development**, promoting a multi-stakeholder approach and emphasising the need to coordinate relevant stakeholders around particular SDGs to ensure harmonised implementation.

- **Finland** and **Montenegro** both have **coordination bodies** to promote policy coherence and inter-sectorial cooperation.

5. Leave no one behind

Covering how countries are engaging with, and planning to deliver, the commitment to ensure that no one is left behind in their implementation of the SDGs.

- **Georgia, Germany, Mexico, Samoa, Sierra Leone, the Philippines** and **the Republic of Korea** have all highlighted **disaggregated data** as a key element for identifying the impacts of the complex SDGs targets on all sections of the population.

- **Egypt, Finland, the Republic of Korea** and **Uganda** all shared examples of existing national programmes and initiatives focused on targeting the vulnerable and tackling inequality.

- **Uganda** stressed that leaving no one behind requires not only a targeted focus on the most vulnerable but more emphasis on **participation**. In line with this, **Finland** has committed to considering **new modes for interacting with vulnerable and marginalised groups** as part of its National Implementation Plan for Agenda 2030.

6. Raising awareness and creating ownership of the SDGs

Covering how countries are raising awareness and ownership of the SDGs among the general public and engaging society in action in order to deliver Agenda 2030.

- Both **the Republic of Korea** and **Norway** have recommended including content on the SDGs as a part of the **school curriculums and textbooks** to reach out to children and the youth.

- **Finland, the Philippines** and **Uganda** all plan to develop **communication plans** to raise awareness of the goals among the public.

- **Estonia, Finland** and **Uganda** have all held **launch events** to introduce Agenda 2030 to government, stakeholders and the general public.

- **The Philippines** and **Uganda** have both used **radio** to raise awareness of the goals and plan to appoint **SDGs ambassadors or champions**.

- **Montenegro** and **Uganda** both discussed using their **voluntary review as an awareness-raising tool** at the national level.

7. Stakeholder engagement in reporting and implementation

Covering the extent to which participatory mechanisms are being put in place to ensure key stakeholders are able to engage directly with government and provide input into key policies activities – including the preparation of VNRs.

- **Germany, Norway**, **the Philippines** and **the Republic of Korea,** all held **dialogues or informal consultations** to seek input from key stakeholders for their national reviews.

- **Turkey** sought input through an **online consultation process**, while **Finland** conducted a survey to gather views on the implementation of Agenda 2030.

- **The Philippines** and **the Republic of Korea** both drew upon **existing research and outputs** relevant to the SDGs in the formulation of their reports.

- **Finland** consulted **Members of Parliament** in the preparation of their review while **Norway** sought input from **indigenous peoples** and from the **national human rights institution**.

8. Measurement and reporting

Covering the steps countries are taking to establish national indicators, as well as monitoring, reporting and data collection systems.

- **Estonia, Finland** and **the Republic of Korea** all have an **existing set of sustainable development indicators** at the national level and are taking steps to update them in line of the SDGs.

- **The Philippines** and **Sierra Leone** have both held stakeholder consultations on the development of SDGs indicators.

- **Egypt, Estonia, Finland** and **Turkey** have all **conducted assessments of the percentage of global SDGs indicators that are currently measureable at the national level**.

- **Montenegro, Samoa** and **Uganda** all highlighted **measurement and data collection as a key challenge** and emphasised the need for capacity building and strengthening of statistical mechanisms.

Recommendations for country reporting to the High Level Political Forum

Drawing on the analysis of the 16 VNRs, the report makes the following 10 recommendations for country's Voluntary National Reviews to the HLPF.

1. Commit to submitting a report at least three times as part of the 2030 Agenda

Member States should see VNRs of progress as a crucial part of the implementation and accountability of Agenda 2030 and strive to participate in the review process at the HLPF at least three times during the 15 year lifespan of the 2030 Agenda. Regular VNRs will not only benefit countries in sharing best practices, but will allow the HLPF to assess ongoing progress.

2. Engage a broad range of stakeholders at an early stage

A range of views and perspectives should be collected as an important part of preparing for reporting – in order to provide an objective view on national progress, highlight gaps and make VNRs more robust. Mechanisms should be put in place to enable civil society and other stakeholders to feed their perspectives into VNRs and to review them before their submission to the HLPF. The VNRs should provide details of how stakeholders have been engaged in their preparation.

How to structure your report

3. Use the UN Secretary-General's guidelines as a backbone

The guidelines outline the key components of VNRs. Used by UN member states they would provide a common backbone, facilitating comparisons between countries. In addition, their use would encourage countries to address challenging, but vital, topics, such as SDGs integration and progress being made on the commitment to leave no one behind.

4. Focus on quality, not quantity

Keeping VNRs concise improves their accessibility and increases the likelihood that they will be read by peer countries, stakeholders and citizens. This increases their value as a tool for knowledge sharing, accountability and awareness raising.

5. Use structure as a way to increase accessibility and engagement

A clear structure and compelling narrative significantly improves the accessibility and appeal of the reports while intuitive design can help to engage the reader, as well as signpost key points. All VNRs should include a contents page to help navigate the report based on the Secretary-General's guidelines. Images, tables and graphs are all expedient ways of sharing what can be complex and dense information.

What to include in your report

6. Include a summary to engage more people

A concise summary is a vital tool for sharing key messages with a broad audience. The summary should include a synthesis of the process and findings of the VNR, highlighting key activities and good practice, as well as challenges, lessons learned and areas where further support is needed. A good summary should be no more than five pages long.

7. Identify obstacles and areas where support is needed

The VNRs provide an opportunity for countries to highlight key obstacles in implementing the goals at the national level and to seek advice and support where it is needed. This approach helps to identify common challenges where further guidance is needed from the international community, as well as highlight opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships.

8. Detailed examples add huge value

VNRs should include sufficient detail to allow lessons to be shared and assessments of progress made. VNRs should avoid generalities and use concrete examples to demonstrate how the SDGs are being integrated into national frameworks.

9. Don't avoid challenging topics

The integrated nature of the SDGs and commitment to 'leave no one behind' are two of the most challenging aspects of this new Agenda. Few countries chose to address them in detail in their reporting, yet it is in these areas where the sharing of experiences can be most valuable. Countries are encouraged to tackle difficult issues in their reporting, in order to foster learning and development.

10. Spell out the next steps

A clear set of next steps can be used to outline the key actions and activities countries will undertake in the future to implement Agenda 2030 at the national level. They provide a vital tool that civil society and other stakeholders can use to hold governments to account for their actions.

Recommendations for civil society reporting

The report identified and analysed counterpart civil society inputs and reports for 10 of the 16 country VNRs reviewed.[5] Drawing upon the analysis of civil society contributions, the report makes the following 10 recommendations for civil society reporting.

1. Acknowledge good practice as well as areas for improvement

The civil society reports reviewed were, for the most part, highly critical of governments' action on the SDGs. Holding the government to account by demonstrating where actions are not sufficient is an important role of civil society. Efforts should be made, however, to present a constructive picture of implementation, good practice where appropriate, as well as highlighting areas where more work is needed.

2. Bring together a variety of voices

A report that brings together diverse views and perspectives from a variety of actors in the civil society community will carry more weight than one from a single individual or organisation. Where this is the case, reports should provide clear information on whom the publication represents and how inputs were gathered.

3. Respond directly to the government progress report

Shadow civil society reports can be powerful platforms to challenge and verify the claims made in government progress reports to the HLPF and the most effective civil society reports reviewed were those that directly discussed and challenged the assertions made in the corresponding country reports. Civil society is encouraged to respond directly to the government reports to the HLPF. To facilitate this, governments should, in addition to engaging civil society in the production of VNRs, provide the chance for civil society to review and respond to progress reports at the earliest possible opportunity.

4. Avoid generalities and make clear recommendations for action and improvement

General or sweeping statements are difficult for governments to respond to and easy for them to ignore. Civil society reports should make direct and focused observations and draw upon the knowledge and experience of the civil society community to offer solutions and make recommendations for action.

5. Provide examples and evidence to back up claims

The use of concrete and evidence-based examples can help to clearly demonstrate where issues lie, give more weight to civil society arguments and make it more difficult for government to rebuff them.

6. Provide insight into civil society engagement

Shadow reports can be used to showcase the value of civil society engagement and demonstrate good practice in civil society engagement and collaboration. They can challenge the assertions of government, judge whether mechanisms are adequate, highlight good practice and make recommendations for improvement where needed. Reports should analyse the mechanisms for civil society involvement and engagement in the reporting process, as well as broader SDGs implementation.

7. Demonstrate civil society's commitment to implementation

Civil society shadow reports should make it clear that civil society is a supportive partner in SDG implementation and demonstrate this with examples of the activities that civil society will be undertaking to deliver the SDGs either independently, alongside or in partnership with government.

8. Keep reports short and focused

Two of the best civil society reports reviewed (Switzerland and Uganda) were both under 10 pages long, yet still made a host of clear observations and recommendations to be taken on board by government. Government and civil society representatives alike are more likely to engage with a concise document that highlights key areas for action.

9. Engage the reader with good design and structure

Good report structure and design can help to engage the reader from the outset, guide them through the key points and improve accessibility. Clear headings should be used to break the report down into manageable sections and signpost these to the reader. Colour and images can both be used effectively to highlight different sections and convey key messages.

10. Ensure reports are easy to disseminate

Several of the civil society documents reviewed were not published as reports as such but as commentaries on a website. This not only makes them difficult to read and engage with, but also does not facilitate easy dissemination, particularly in areas where Internet is unreliable. Shadow analysis from civil society should be published as a stand-alone, downloadable document that can be easily shared and disseminated in both electronic and hard copy formats as appropriate.

Recommendations for future revisions of the Secretary-General's voluntary guidelines for national reporting

The Secretary-General's guidelines are a key tool to help countries to formulate and structure their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

They also provide a common basis against which the reports can be compared. The guidelines will be regularly updated in the coming years, as experience is developed, and there must be an opportunity to feed in recommendations.

To review the reports and draw out key recommendations for future guidelines, the 16 VNRs were assessed against the current set of guidelines to determine which components countries included in their reports.

Table 1: Assessment of VNRs against the UN Secretary-General's common reporting guidelines

Legend: ● = addresses this component as instructed in the guidelines; ◉ = addresses this component to some extent; ○ = does not address this component.

	China	Egypt	Estonia	Finland	France	Georgia	Germany	Montenegro	Norway	Philippines	Republic of Korea	Samoa	Sierra Leone	Switzerland	Turkey	Uganda
Statement by HoSG	○	○	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	○	●
Executive Summary	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
Introduction	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Methodology for review	○	●	●	●	◉	●	●	◉	●	●	●	◉	●	●	◉	●
Creating ownership	○	○	●	●	○	●	○	◉	●	●	●	○	●	●	◉	●
Incorporation in national frameworks	○	◉	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Integration of 3 dimensions	○	◉	◉	●	○	●	○	●	○	○	◉	○	○	●	●	◉
Goal and targets	○	●	●	○	●	●	●	○	●	◉	◉	◉	○	●	○	○
Leave no one behind	○	●	○	●	○	●	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	◉
Institutional mechanisms	○	●	●	●	○	●	○	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	◉	●
MOI	○	●	○	○	○	◉	○	●	○	●	●	○	○	●	○	●
Next steps	○	●	●	◉	●	●	●	●	◉	●	●	○	●	●	○	●
Statistical annex	○	◉	○	◉	○	●	○	●	○	◉	◉	○	●	●	◉	●
Conclusion	○	●	●	●	○	●	○	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●

● The report addresses this component as instructed in the guidelines

◉ The report addresses this component to some extent in this or another section of the report but does not fulfil the brief as laid out in the guidelines

○ The report does not address this component

Drawing upon the analysis the following recommendations are made:

- Only 4 out of 16 countries chose to include an **opening statement by a Head of State or Government**. These statements can be an impactful way to demonstrate a country's commitment and the profile it is giving to this agenda and their inclusion should become standard practice.

- Most countries included an **executive summary** in their reports. The inclusion of an executive summary is **vital for accessibility and broad dissemination** of essential findings, especially at this important stage of sharing lessons on implementation, and should be encouraged.

- Many countries included some information on the **methodology** used to prepare their reports but the information was mixed in terms of quality and usefulness. **Countries should share lessons learned and provide information that can support other countries in the preparation of their reports**.

- Many countries highlighted **raising awareness and creating ownership** of the SDGs as a key challenge at the national level but only half addressed this in their reviews. **Countries should be encouraged to share lessons learned, key initiatives and successes in creating ownership of the goals at the national level**, to support other countries in this endeavour.

- The **incorporation of SDGs in national frameworks** was a key component in many reports at this early stage of implementation and can be useful in supporting other countries to incorporate the SDGs into their own national frameworks.

- The **integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development** was highlighted as a key implementation challenge by many, but few countries addressed this component substantially in their report, suggesting most countries did not know how to approach the issue. **Countries should be encouraged to share lessons learned, key initiatives and successes in this area. Further guidance and support from the Secretary-General and the UN** would be helpful in this regard.

- This year, only a few countries chose to review the status of **goals and targets** at the national level, but this component is expected to become the main aspect of the reports going forward, as assessments of progress begin. **At this stage, information provided on the methodologies and outcomes of baseline and gap analyses that have been conducted can be highly valuable**.

- **Leave no one behind** was emphasised by most as an important component of Agenda 2030, but was also highlighted as a challenge. Only a handful of countries chose to address the topic substantially in their reports. **To ensure that focus remains on the principle of leave no one behind going forward, meaningful reporting on progress to fulfil the pledge should be made a permanent feature of future reporting guidelines, underpinned by support and guidance from the Secretary-General and the UN**.

- Many countries addressed **institutional mechanisms** in their reports. This section can provide **vital information and support for capacity and knowledge building and should be prioritised in the early years of implementation**.

- Only a handful of countries addressed **means of implementation** and the content and quality was mixed. **Further guidance on how to approach this section would be useful in future guidelines**, especially as the approach and expectations will be different for developed and developing countries.

- A clear set of **next steps** that a country is committing to can be a useful tool for member states, stakeholders and citizens to track progress and hold governments to account. **The inclusion of next steps in both the main report and the executive summary should be encouraged**.

- Few countries included a **statistical annex**, but many addressed reporting, measurement and indicators to a significant degree, providing key knowledge and lessons. **Future guidelines should provide a space for discussion of these topics as well as for the provision of statistical information**.

- **Governance** did not feature in the Secretary-General's guidelines and few countries addressed it in their reports. **Governance and leadership arrangements would be a useful additional component to include in future revisions of the guidelines**, especially in the initial years of reporting.

1. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld

2. Those from China, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Montenegro, Norway, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Turkey and Uganda.

3. The UN Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines can be found here: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9768 Guidelines%20from%20SG%20report.pdf

4. Civil society reports from Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Samoa, Switzerland and Uganda were identified and reviewed.

5. These were produced by civil society in Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Samoa, Switzerland and Uganda. Relevant inputs were not found for China, Estonia, Georgia, Montenegro, Sierra Leone and Turkey.

About Bond

Bond is the civil society network for global change. We bring people together to make the international development sector more effective. bond.org.uk

Bond hosts the Bond SDGs Group, which brings together 150 organisations in the UK who focus on the international development aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Group, previously Bond Beyond 2015 UK, has been working for the past four years to secure an ambitious set of new global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which integrates the social, environmental and economic pillars of sustainable development. Their focus is now on the implementation of the SDGs. For more information please contact Mariana Rudge: mrudge@bond.org

About UKSSD

UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) is an open platform that supports public, private and voluntary organisations working towards sustainable development in the UK.

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