



DIPLOMACY TRAINING PROGRAM

AFFILIATED WITH THE FACULTY OF LAW AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES
A training program for peoples of the Asia-Pacific region

THE SDGs, HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEVELOPMENT

The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Advocacy for Human Rights – Short Guidance Note¹

Summary:

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals² (SDGs) consist of 17 Global Goals and 169 Transformational Targets to be achieved by 2030. All governments have agreed to them, and all governments have agreed to report on progress towards their achievement. The reporting process is called the Voluntary National Review (VNR).

The VNR provides an opportunity for CSOs to promote human rights-based development priorities and policies and to raise concerns about development that is negatively impacting on their human rights – including their right to a clean and healthy environment.

Human Rights are in the DNA of the 17 SDGs.³ The Goals, Targets and Indicators can be linked directly to over 90% of the rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The important voice and role of civil society is recognised through what are called the [Major Groups and Other Stakeholders \(MGoS\)](#). The VNR should therefore be seen by CSO advocates as a further opportunity for international accountability, linked to the human rights machinery of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures. This process can also link to the mechanism for achieving the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to meet the Paris targets for climate change.

This guidance note explains the VNR process, suggest some ways to engage with it to promote advocacy objectives and provides some background.

The VNR Process Explained:

Each July, a number of VNRs take place at the UN in New York during the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). Every year a theme is selected with a group of SDGs to be prioritized for the HLPF's eight days. The VNRs take place during the three-day ministerial segment.

The VNRs include a short presentation by the government of the country under review, questions/recommendations from other governments, a question from the [Major Groups and other Stakeholders \(MGoS\)](#) and then finally a statement from civil society. The whole process takes 25 minutes per country.

The VNR includes all 17 Goals – with an emphasis on that year's thematic focus.

The VNR is conducted in public, is accessible and recorded. Full reports are available.

Opportunities for CSO Engagement – 4 Key Steps:

Step 1: Preparation of Participatory Process

States volunteer to present their report at the HLPF each year, giving 12 months' notice before their VNR at the next HLPF. These 12 months enables engagement across government departments and with civil society. Usually this period lasts from July to January (6 months before the VNR).

CSOs can use this time to develop awareness and understanding of the [SDGs and their connection to human rights](#) - and to reach out to engage others, in their communities and nationally about what sustainable development means for them, what the key challenges are to sustainable development and what they want their government and business to do. This awareness raising has its own value, and the outcomes of the engagement can inform CSO engagement with governments, the UN system and international development agencies.

Tip: *Can you find out which government departments are involved in preparing data and reports for the government presentation? Is it possible to meet with them? Can you raise issues of disaggregated data to make sure the situation of vulnerable or marginalised groups is included? Can you ensure that these officials are aware of the recommendations from UN human rights treaty bodies, UN Special Procedures and UPR? If there*

¹ This draft guidance note has been prepared by the [Diplomacy Training Program](#) (DTP) based on article by DTP trainer and human rights defender, Joshua Cooper

² Also known as the 2030 Development Agenda

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/SDGS/Pages/The2030Agenda.aspx>

is a Global Compact Network of companies in your country then they may be making a submission, be willing to meet?

This awareness raising and outreach can also be used to inform the CSO report to the VNR. The process of engagement and consultation can include reference to the recommendations that have been made by the UN's human rights treaty bodies, the UN's Special Procedures and the UPR. Some of these will be directly relevant to the realisation of the SDGs.

The UN Country Team, bringing together the UN's specialised development agencies, will be involved in helping the government to prepare for the VNR and will be supportive of civil society engagement in the process. Bilateral donor agencies may also be supportive.

Civil society can also meet with UN Country Teams on the SDGs and partner with the UN agencies, programs and funds based in the nation. Civil society can discuss options to organize together to be part of the UNDP MAPS Action Plans. **Tip:** *Identify the officials within the government who will be coordinating the report for the VNR and if possible reach out to them to seek CSO engagement in the process.*

Step 2: Interaction Among All Actors (January - July prior to the VNR)

States will be finalising their report for the VNR during this period and it is therefore important to engage with relevant government officials if possible.

CSOs need also to agree the priorities that they have that they want to include in their reports and to highlight to the government, the UN and others, including any issues of concern that are undermining or stopping progress towards realisation of the SDGs.

Major international NGOs based in NY and [MGoS](#) can be contacted to begin strategizing and organising advocacy around the VNR session in New York. CSOs can organise side events. Formal side events during the HLPF need to be co-sponsored by a UN Agency or a Government.

Step 3: The Voluntary National Review at the UN High-Level Political Forum in New York

Governments are usually represented in the VNR through a number of high-level officials/representatives. They will make their presentation – which may include a mixture of speakers and multi-media presentations with economic and social data. **They are limited to 10 minutes.**

CSOs then have the opportunity to make a two-minute statement. This is usually an oral statement based on a written submission. These can highlight key issues – which may include the lack of disaggregated gender data addressing the situation of women, Indigenous peoples, persons with a disability etc. It could highlight UPR recommendations that have not been acted on, or major development projects such as mines, and the lack of action to address climate change. **Tip:** *To be credible, representative and effective this means consultation among CSOs in the country under review.*

Other governments can then ask questions of the government under review. Given the time constraints, these are usually limited to about 3 questions. Effective NGO advocacy ahead of the VNR and in New York, can help to influence the content of these questions. **Tip:** *You can contact embassies in your capital city to ask them to ask questions/make recommendations in the VNR – or you can contact their missions to the UN in New York.*

CSOs can try to increase the scrutiny of the government's record on the SDGs by working to interest the media in the VNR, including through encouraging interviews with officials, broadcasting clips from the session, and doing their own social media. Communities can view the consideration of the country and hear the national report and various member states and MGoS commenting on their country. Viewing parties in local venues are positive ways to encourage more effort to understand politics in the world.

Step 4: Following Up

The fourth and final step comes after the VNR in July and is the need to follow-up.

The best outcome will be if the government is willing to address the concerns raised by CSOs, review its plans to realise the SDGs and engage CSOs and communities – and representatives of those left furthest behind in development planning. CSOs will need to discuss and take stock in relation to next steps. In some situations, it may be possible to organise follow-up discussions with the government, with UN agencies and development partners. The process of engaging with the VNR may have led new relationships to have been built.

Coming up in July 2020: Bangladesh; Brunei Darussalam; India; Micronesia (Federated States of); Nepal Papua New Guinea; Qatar; Samoa; Solomon Islands.