

Q&A for Voluntary National Reviews at the 2021 HLPF

The Q&A should be read in conjunction with the DESA Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews. The Handbook is available in the six official languages of the UN: [English](#), [French](#), [Spanish](#), Arabic, [Chinese](#), Russian

Q: What are voluntary national reviews (VNRs)?

Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are part of the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Such reviews are carried out by the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). They are to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of [Major Groups and other stakeholders](#). VNRs allow the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Q: What should countries do to present their VNRs at the High-Level Political Forum?

Once a country has decided to carry out a review, the decision is communicated to the President of ECOSOC by means of a letter from the Permanent Representative or another official of the country concerned. There are a number of other steps that countries should consider when organizing and preparing the review. Many of these, and a sample letter, are contained in the [Handbook](#).

Q: Who is involved in the preparation and presentation of the VNR?

VNRs are state-led, prepared by government in a consultative, inclusive and participatory process involving all Major Groups and other stakeholders. This includes all sectors and levels of government, civil society, private sector, members of Parliament and other institutions. At the national level, Member States decide on which institution will lead the VNR. They are also encouraged to involve stakeholders in the national voluntary reviews in accordance with paragraphs 78 and 79 of [General Assembly resolution 70/1](#). The specific modalities for engagement are likely to vary from country to country and are to be decided by the national governments. At the global level, the HLPF supports effective and broad participation of Major Groups and other stakeholders in the follow-up and review processes at the HLPF in line with resolution 67/290. Representatives from civil society, academia, private sector, and parliament have been included in the delegations of some countries to the previous HLPFs. Major Groups and other stakeholders also commented and asked questions during the VNR presentations.

Q: Are there any guidelines for the preparation of VNRs?

The voluntary common reporting guidelines seek to support and guide countries in conducting VNRs. They were initially prepared by the Secretary-General in December 2015 and the guidelines has since been updated in 2019 to reflect lessons learned. They provide a framework for certain common elements within

reports while allowing for flexibility, so countries can adapt to their own circumstances. The updated guidelines can be found [here](#).

The guidelines reflect the principles identified in the 2030 Agenda. These are that reviews should be:

- a. “[...] 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 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 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. 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 mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships, support the identification of solutions and best practices and promote coordination and effectiveness of the international development system.
- d. They will be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support the 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.
- 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 programs, particularly in African countries, LDCs, SIDS and LLDCs and middle-income countries.
- i. They will benefit from the active support of the UN system and other multilateral institutions.”

The guidelines are voluntary, but the countries are encouraged to use them as they aim to introduce comparability among countries to make the HLPF discussion of good practices and the tracking of global trends more effective. Countries reporting in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 mostly found it useful to structure their reports accordingly. However, as the reviews are voluntary, each country will decide on the scope of its own review and the format in which it wants to present its findings.

Q: What should be the scope of VNRs at the HLPF?

The scope of VNRs is expected to be as broad as possible and should take into account country specific circumstances. Given that countries in 2021 will already be in year five of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, they are expected to report on the actions and measures taken to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and where available, to provide information on progress made, taking into account the principle of leaving no-one behind and on the impact of actions. Countries are strongly encouraged to report on all 17 SDGs or on the ones that are their priorities. It is not the expectation that the VNRs should focus on the SDGs being reviewed by the HLPF that year. It is also expected that countries will share good practices, gaps and lessons learned related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as well as possible areas where they would need support, or have identified the potential for partnerships.

Q: What sources of information are available to help countries prepare for the VNRs?

DESA has prepared a comprehensive and practical [Handbook](#) for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews, which provides information on all the steps that a country may take when preparing a voluntary national review. DESA has compiled synthesis reports of the [2016](#), [2017](#), [2018](#), [2019](#) and [2020](#) VNRs, which provide a snapshot of the status and trends of national implementation. While the synthesis reports provide a resource of good practices and lessons learned, countries are encouraged to consult the VNR reports prepared by their peers as a benchmark for their own preparation. These are available at [DESA's VNR Database](#).

There are also a number of other resources available on the web which will assist countries in preparing for their VNRs, including from the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) and the United National Development Programme (UNDP).

Q: How do DESA and other UN entities support countries in their preparation for the VNRs?

DESA organizes workshops for all participating VNR countries which are designed to strengthen preparations of voluntary national presentations, as well as to identify areas where countries need support. The preparatory workshops are based on countries' previous experiences in participating in the VNR process. The workshops are intended for working-level officials for developed and developing countries who are closely engaged in the VNR preparatory process. Countries may approach DESA for capacity building support. Depending on request for support by countries for the preparation and follow-up of their reviews, DESA and other UN entities will work with countries to identify their needs and provide capacity building support in these areas. Several developing countries that conducted reviews for the 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 HLPFs reported on assistance received from UN Country Teams.

Q: The HLPF will consider a specific theme and discuss a group of SDGs each year. Are the VNRs expected to address this theme and the group of SDGs in their reports and presentations?

VNRs are meant to present national level implementation of the 2030 Agenda and therefore, countries are encouraged to provide information on progress and the status of all SDGs. However, some goals could be addressed in more depth which present a national priority. They are also encouraged to illustrate innovative policies to achieve goals or provide examples that could be especially interesting for other countries and stakeholders engaged in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level.

Q: Are the VNRs expected to include statistics and indicators and corresponding analysis supporting the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda?

VNR countries are encouraged to provide as much as possible analysis based on statistics and VNR indicators. However, it is up to individual countries to determine how they wish to include statistics and indicators in their VNRs. Countries may want to illustrate the main elements of the reviews with figures showing trends, as appropriate. 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.

Q: Which countries are presenting their reviews at the 2021 July HLPF?

44 countries (10 for the first time, 24 for the second time* and 10 third timers**) both developed and developing, will be presenting their voluntary national reviews. They are: Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan**, Bahamas*, Bhutan*, Bolivia, Cabo Verde*, Chad*, China*, Colombia**, Cuba, Cyprus*, Czech Republic*, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark*, Djibouti, Dominican Republic*, Egypt**, Germany*, Guatemala**, Indonesia**, Iraq*, Japan*, Lao People's Democratic Republic*, Madagascar*, Malaysia*, Marshall Islands, Mexico**, Myanmar, Namibia*, Nicaragua, Niger**, Norway*, Pakistan*, Paraguay*, Qatar**, San Marino, Sierra Leone**, Spain*, Sweden*, Thailand*, Tunisia*, Uruguay** and Zimbabwe*.

Q: When and where are VNRs presented at the 2021 HLPF?

VNRs will be presented during the HLPF at UN Headquarters in New York from 13 to 15 July 2021.

Q: How do countries participate in presenting their VNRs at the 2021 HLPF?

Voluntary national reviews at the HLPF aim at facilitating the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned. They are expected to be based on in-depth review processes at the national and local levels. The VNRs are a nationally led process that ultimately leads to presenting a report with an analysis of implementation at the HLPF.

The expectation is that each country participating in the VNRs in 2021 may present a focused report in writing and make a brief oral presentation during the 2021 HLPF under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council. Reports are to be submitted to the Secretariat one month prior to the 2021 HLPF in order to leave enough time to HLPF participants to study and read the VNR reports. Main messages from the VNR preparations should be submitted to the Secretariat by **3 May 2021** in one of the six official UN languages. The full VNR reports themselves are due by **11 June 2021**. Both documents will be posted on the website of the HLPF. The word count of the Main Messages may not exceed 700 words. Main messages are translated into all UN languages, while the full reports remain in the language in which they have been submitted to the Secretariat.

Q: At what level should countries be represented in their VNR presentations at the HLPF?

It is recommended that officials with the rank of Minister or equivalent lead the presentation during the three-day ministerial segment at the HLPF. A vast majority of countries so far had a representation at the ministerial level or higher. It is suggested by the Secretary-General that the report includes an opening statement by the Head of State or Government, a Minister or other high-ranking Government official,

highlighting the key messages from the review and touching on critical issues in implementation that the country wishes to highlight.

Q: How much time will countries have to present their VNRs at the 2021 HLPF?

Countries presenting a VNR for the first time will have 15 minutes for their presentation, followed by a similar amount of time for questions from other countries and stakeholders and factoring in time for podium changes. The 15-minute time allocation includes the use of audio-visual material, including videos. Countries presenting a VNR for the second time will be allocated a total of 20 minutes each in a panel format: 10 minutes will be allocated for the VNR presentation and 10 min for Q&A.

The presentations at the HLPF are intended to focus on the key messages emanating from the review process.

Q: What is the format for the presentation of the VNRs at the 2021 HLPF?

As was the case for the VNRs presented in previous years (2016-2020), it is expected that countries will utilize either a panel or individual format. In the panel format, the countries in a VNR session (between two and four) each make their presentation. Once all countries in the session have presented, questions are posed to the presenting countries. In the individual format, a single country presents, followed by questions from countries in the audience, as well as from Major Groups and other Stakeholders. Regardless of the format, countries presenting for the first time have fifteen minutes to present and fifteen minutes to interact with participants. This is then followed by the next VNR country in that VNR session. Countries presenting a VNR for the second time or third time will present in a panel format, with ten minutes to present and ten minutes for Q&A.

In 2020, presentations were made mostly by government representatives, but in some cases also by members of civil society, youth representatives and the private sector as part of the official delegation. Use can be made of slide presentations (PowerPoint) and short films. However, it is up to the countries to decide on their format of presentation.

Q: What can countries expect after participating in voluntary national reviews at the 2021 HLPF?

The implementation of the SDGS should build on the VNR presentation at the HLPF. After the presentation, lessons learned and outcomes of the VNR process can be fed into national-level follow-up and review processes. Participating countries are encouraged to continue engaging in the peer-learning exercises within relevant VNR networks, fostering an environment of mutual support, and to apply lessons learned to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at their national and local levels.

It is anticipated that a synthesis report will be prepared by the Secretariat after the 2021 HLPF, highlighting good practices and lessons learned from the VNR countries as was done in previous years. The factual summary of the discussions at the HLPF, prepared by the President of ECOSOC in consultation with the Bureau, will also reflect key points from the presentation of the VNRs and will provide some recommendations [[See President's summary from 2020 HLPF](#)].