

VNRS AT THE CROSSROADS FROM SYMBOLISM TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

- **A Global Civil Society Call to Action: Reclaiming Accountability in the Decade of Delivery**

” Are Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) advancing the 2030 Agenda—or preserving the illusion of progress?

As the world enters the final five-year stretch toward the SDG deadline, the time for rhetorical commitment has expired. This comprehensive review—anchored in eight years of civil society monitoring through the Progressing National SDGs Implementation series and reinforced by other published analyses—draws on findings from 366 VNRs submitted by 191 countries. It offers the most robust, independent assessment of the VNR mechanism to date.

The evidence is unequivocal: while VNRs have created new spaces for dialogue and policy alignment in some contexts, they remain, in most cases, underperforming instruments—plagued by weak accountability, selective reporting, and minimal civil society engagement. Without urgent, structural reform, the VNR process risks becoming the emblem of global inaction rather than transformation.

WHERE VNRS HAVE ADDED VALUE

- ✓ • **Elevated Awareness & Dialogue:** In countries like Brazil, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic, VNRs have surfaced critical issues—poverty, climate vulnerability, inequality—and created space for public conversation.
- ✓ • **Policy Alignment in Select Cases:** From Indonesia to Colombia and Botswana, VNRs have supported alignment of national strategies with SDG frameworks, though often inconsistently and without budgetary backing.
- ✓ • **Multistakeholder Engagement—When Enabled:** Nepal and Uganda demonstrated meaningful engagement processes involving civil society, academia, and subnational actors. However, these remain the exception.

- ✓ • **Peer Learning Through Regional Mechanisms:** UN ESCAP's VNR Twinning Program (e.g., Sri Lanka 2022) facilitated exchange of methodologies, stakeholder strategies, and institutional lessons.
- ✓ • **Rise of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs):** With over 300 VLRs globally by 2024, local governments and civil society are pioneering bottom-up accountability where national governments fall short.

WHERE THE VNR SYSTEM IS FALLING SHORT—SEVERELY

Despite early momentum, the global VNR mechanism has failed to evolve into the robust accountability platform the SDGs demand:

- ✗ • **Voluntary and Uneven:** Some countries have opted out altogether (e.g., the U.S., Haiti, Myanmar), while others engage only symbolically. The absence of reporting obligations or minimum standards undermines the legitimacy of the entire system.
- ✗ • **Narrative Control and Selective Reporting:** Governments routinely sanitize their VNRs, omitting controversial areas. Colombia's 2024 plan to review only SDG 2 exemplifies this narrowing of scope and intentional exclusion of difficult truths.
- ✗ • **Civil Society: Marginalized, Ignored, or Silenced:** In Pakistan and Brazil, CSO contributions were excluded or dismissed. In Mexico, civic dialogue was legally suspended ahead of the 2024 VNR. In too many countries, consultations are a checkbox exercise—not a space for genuine influence.
- ✗ • **No Independent Monitoring or Public Feedback:** VNRs lack peer review, oversight, or independent validation. Follow-up is weak or nonexistent. Shadow reports produced by civil society remain structurally excluded from official UN spaces.
- ✗ • **Data Gaps and Exclusion of Marginalized Groups:** Disaggregated data by gender, disability, income, ethnicity, and geography is missing in most VNRs. Migrants, Indigenous Peoples, and informal workers are invisible in reporting—even when most at risk of being left behind.
- ✗ • **Policy Coherence Superficial at Best:** While many VNRs claim alignment, true coherence across government policy, budget, and implementation is rare. Political transitions often derail even minimal progress.

WHAT MUST BE DONE—IMMEDIATELY

With just five years remaining, VNRs must be retooled into rigorous, inclusive, and transparent accountability mechanisms. This requires decisive action from governments, the UN system, donors, and civil society.

Institutionalize Accountability

- Require each country to submit at least two full VNRs before 2030.
- Introduce independent peer reviews and national “commitment trackers.”
- Mandate reporting on SDG trade-offs and implementation obstacles.

Elevate Civil Society from Observer to Equal Partner

- Formally recognize CSO shadow/spotlight reports and citizen-generated data.
- Establish feedback loops showing how civil society input influences final reports.
- Fund CSO participation through flexible, core financing—especially in the Global South.

Invest in Data Justice and Inclusion

- Close data gaps through investment in statistical systems, digital tools, and participatory data models.
- Prioritize disaggregated data to reflect realities of Indigenous communities, displaced people, and those in informal economies.
- Institutionalize VLRs and VSRs as integral complements to national reporting.

Ensure Policy Coherence and Whole-of-Government Implementation

- Align budgets, legislation, and planning cycles with Agenda 2030 across all ministries.
- Monitor SDG trade-offs and synergies across sectors.
- Embed SDG accountability in parliaments, subnational authorities, and courts.

CONCLUSION: THIS IS THE FINAL WARNING

This civil society-driven review is clear: **without urgent reform, the VNR process will fail in its core purpose—to hold power to account for delivering on the promise of sustainable development for all.**

The next five years are not just the last mile—they are the moment of truth. Governments, UN agencies, donors, and civil society must collectively seize this chance to rescue both the SDGs and the credibility of global multilateralism.

» Will the VNRs remain reports to read—or will they become blueprints for action?

The world cannot afford to wait for the answer.

DOWNLOAD OUR ANALYSIS OF THE VRNS

