

Global Forum learning note: VNR country peer review processes and the experiences of Global Forum members

The VNR peer review process

Voluntary National Review (VNR) is a process by which countries take stock and assess progress and challenges in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. The VNR process aims to facilitate sharing experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda¹.

As part of the 3rd generation VNRs, countries are increasingly inviting one or more other countries to conduct a peer review of the VNR before it is finalised.

Benefits of a peer review to the requesting country

Improving VNR quality. The process can lead to more comprehensive, useful, and engaging VNRs.

Facilitating honest self-reflection. External perspectives can encourage more candid internal assessments of progress and challenges.

Broadening perspectives. Reviews from countries at different stages of development or with different approaches can provide fresh insights.

Identification of blind spots. External perspectives can highlight areas that might be overlooked internally.

Learning from others. Countries share best practices and innovative approaches. The process can also lead to practical suggestions for better SDG implementation based on peers' experiences.

Building trust and relationships between countries. This is especially the case when the process facilitates personal connections between country representatives, creating informal settings that allow for more open and honest discussions. Peer reviews, especially within regional groups, can strengthen regional ties and collaborative efforts on sustainable development.

Providing external motivation for continued work on sustainable development. The international expectations generated by these reviews can serve as a powerful impetus

¹ <https://www.unescap.org/2030-agenda/voluntary-national-reviews>

for domestic action. Openness to peer review can also increase the credibility of a country's sustainable development efforts internationally.

Challenges that countries have with peer reviews

Time constraints. Countries often have only a short window between completing their draft VNR and presenting it.

Balancing honesty and diplomacy. While building trust is essential to move beyond diplomatic language, providing constructive criticism without damaging relationships requires careful navigation.

Resource disparities between countries. The differing capacities of reviewing partners can impact the depth and quality of the review. Some nations lack the resources for extensive peer review processes altogether.

Internal openness to constructive criticism. Concerns exist about how welcoming political systems are to external input and the challenge of translating review comments into meaningful change in policy and practice.

Global Forum example:

Global Forum member the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development assesses that a peer review of its country's 2025 VNR will have the following benefits but also face some challenges:

Potential benefits:

Political buy-in and continuity. Sustainable development strategies and plans may not have consistent levels of political commitment as the political landscape changes. A peer review process can provide a longer-term and wider perspective that helps to maintain the support needed from successive governments.

Blind spots and internal biases. Even though Finland conducts its own internal evaluation and monitoring, there are still blind spots and biases that an external peer review can help identify. It can be easier to accept feedback that comes from a peer country than from commentators within the VNR country itself.

Presentation vs. substance. A peer review can mitigate the risk of the VNR process becoming too focused on producing an impressive presentation rather than substantive progress on sustainable development.

Transparency. A peer review can increase a VNR's legitimacy and acceptance across society and thereby grow their commitment to engage in the country's transformation to sustainability.

Challenges foreseen:

Timing and resources. The tight timelines and resource constraints around the VNR process can be challenging, especially when trying to incorporate external peer feedback.

Balancing national and international priorities. It can be difficult to ensure that VNR process and outputs are useful both for domestic stakeholders and for satisfying international reporting requirements.

Maintaining independence. Ensuring the peer review process and feedback remain independent and constructive can be a difficult balance as relationships between participating countries grow closer.

Hints and tips for countries undertaking a peer review

Use peer reviews in VNRs that are "fit for purpose" for national development:

Countries planning a peer review can consider shifting the focus from simply producing a report to using the VNR as a learning and improvement process, with peer sharing and support as part of that process.

Use peer reviews as opportunities for mutual learning, not just one-way

evaluation. This approach can be supported by having an ongoing community of practice between countries to share good practices in VNRs that could also be a source of partners for peer review (see Global Forum example below).

Draw on support from international organisations and networks to support peer reviews. UN regional commissions provide support and facilitation for peer reviews, organising communities of practice and twinning programmes. Networks and forums such as the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies offer platforms for sharing experiences and best practices across countries, thus supporting the peer review process.

Use peer reviews to provide continuity across political cycles. Some countries are timing their reviews to coincide with transitions between governments, using external reviews as a tool to encourage continuity in sustainable development efforts across different administrations.

Build trust and personal relationships between peer review partners. This allows for more honest and constructive feedback.

Consider pairing countries at similar stages of development or with similar challenges. This can make reviews more relevant and also avoid overloading partner countries with burdensome processes.

Start the peer review process as early a possible. This should ideally be when countries are still drafting their VNRs, not just reviewing final versions. This should

particularly take account of contexts where the process for reaching internal agreement before sharing with a partner country is likely to take time.

The following are useful points to consider when developing a process for peer review:

- Start a peer learning and review process from the VNR design stage to ensure that there is alignment with the VNR process. This will inform the allocation of resources to the peer learning exercise as well as ensuring that the input can be received in a timely manner and incorporated in a meaningful way.
- Use guiding questions or frameworks to structure the peer review feedback.
- Have peer reviewers look at both the VNR content and the process of creating it.
- Focus on identifying blind spots and areas for improvement that countries may not see themselves.
- Frame feedback constructively to help advance SDG implementation, not just criticise.
- Ask the countries providing the peer review what they'd like to learn about or see covered in a VNR before drafting.
- Balance diplomatic language with substantive, honest feedback by building trust first.

Global Forum example:

Global Forum member the Planning Institute of Jamaica's (PIOJ) Internal Regional Collaboration participates in the community of practice hosted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). This provides a regional platform for countries to share experiences, best practices, and innovations related to VNR preparation.

Peer learning: The community of practice aligns its agenda with the key benchmarks for VNR preparation. This allows countries, both those that have presented and those preparing to present, to learn from each other's approaches.

Informal sharing: The community of practice provides an informal space for countries to openly share their challenges, successes, and ideas without the formality of the official VNR presentations.

Tailored support: The peer learning within the community of practice helps countries like Jamaica customise and improve their VNR processes to make them more useful for domestic stakeholders, not just for international reporting.

Evolving formats: Jamaica notes that the community of practice has encouraged countries to explore innovative formats for the VNR beyond the traditional report, such as using interviews, infographics, and audio-visual materials.

Trusted relationships: The repeated interactions and collaborations within the community of practice help build trust and relationships between the participating countries, enabling more open and honest exchanges.

About this document:

The Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies, represented by network member the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, co-hosted a side event at the 2024 High Level Political Forum (HLPF) with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

The title was: how does a country-to-country VNR peer assessment process work - what are the benefits and challenges for the countries involved.

The document captures learning from the event relevant to the national advisory bodies that have come together in the Global Forum.