

Voluntary National Reviews

2023 Factsheet

Voluntary National Review (VNR) - Asia-Pacific Region- 2023

2016 VNR Countries from Asia and Pacific	
China, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Turkey	
2017 VNR Countries from Asia and Pacific	
Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Tajikistan, Thailand	
2018 VNR Countries from Asia and Pacific	
Bhutan, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Viet Nam	
2019 VNR Countries from Asia and Pacific	
Azerbaijan*, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia*, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Nauru, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palau, Philippines*, Timor-Leste, Turkey*, Turkmenistan, Vanuatu	
2020 VNR Countries from Asia and Pacific	
Bangladesh*, Brunei Darussalam, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, India*, Kyrgyz Republic, Micronesia, Nepal*, Papua New Guinea, Samoa*, Solomon Islands, Uzbekistan	

2021 VNR Countries from Asia and Pacific	
Bhutan* , China* , Lao People's Democratic Republic* , Marshall Islands , Thailand* , Burma ,	
2022 VNR Countries from Asia and Pacific	
Kazakhstan* , Pakistan* , Philippines** , Sri Lanka* , Tuvalu	
2023 VNR Countries from Asia and Pacific	
Brunei Darussalam , Cambodia , Fiji , Maldives , Mongolia , Singapore , Tajikistan , Timor-Leste , Turkmenistan , Uzbekistan , Viet Nam ,	

But the VNRs are not simply a report or a presentation at the HLPF. They are a national process of in-depth review and consultation on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda ... Ultimately, VNRs create space for governments and their partners to identify what is needed to keep the promise of the SDGs."

- Amina J. Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General at the 2021 HLPF

As stipulated in paragraph 84 of the 2030 Agenda, regular reviews by the HLPF are to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and involve multiple stakeholders. The voluntary national reviews (VNRs) aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The VNRs also seek to strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilise multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

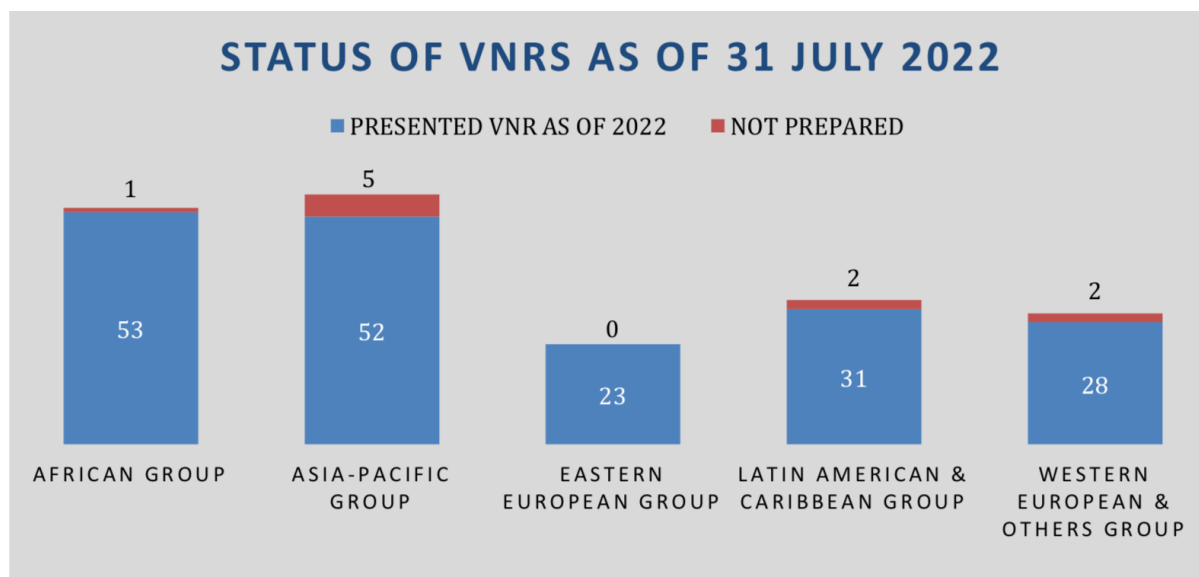
The VNRs are the cornerstones of the formal follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda and every year a group of countries present their review at the ministerial segment of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Our VNRs factsheets for the Asia-Pacific succeed as tools of learning from the experience of others in the implementation of the agenda. It provides points for consideration by governments and other stakeholders participating in the VNRs, with recommendations for how the role of the VNRs as an effective instrument in accelerating SDG implementation can be enhanced. In 2023, following countries from the Asia Pacific will present VNR : **Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Fiji, Maldives, Mongolia, Singapore, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam**. All the 11 VNR countries from the region are presenting for the second time in 2023.

Progress and Major Challenges - Systemic Barrier

2023 marks the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, providing us an opportune moment to reflect on progress in the Asia-Pacific region towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the significant work that remains to be done. While there are impressive national accomplishments across the 17 Goals, none of the countries in the region are on track to reach them and overall achievement is much lower than anticipated for the midpoint. One of the critical impediments to success is gaps in available data and despite the countries making critical advances in improving data availability; persistent data gaps remain a challenge both in developed and developing countries¹.

The purpose of VNRs is to present a snapshot of where the country stands in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, with a view to help accelerate progress through experience sharing, peer-learning, identifying gaps and good practices, and mobilising partnerships. VNRs are a soft accountability and progress monitoring mechanism of the 2030 Agenda, and as the Agenda is grounded in human rights, important links can be made between the implementation of the country's human rights obligations and assessing progress in achieving a just and transformative sustainable development that leaves no one behind²

Preparation of a VNR is also a policy window in which to “strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilise multi-stakeholder support and partnerships³”. By the end of the 2022 VNR cycle, 187 of 197 member states had submitted at least one review⁴ 52 out of 57 countries have presented VNRs in the past 7 years in the Asia - Pacific region, as highlighted in the graph below.



Source - <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/VNR%202022%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf>

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¹ file:///Users/jyotsnamohansingh/Downloads/ESCAP-2023-FS-SDG-Progress-Report.pdf

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/sdgs/voluntary-national-reviews>

³ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

⁴ VNR 2022 Synthesis Report (UN.org) p6

For each of the past seven years, civil society organisations have reviewed the Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports presented by governments to the United Nations' High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The VNR reports submitted by governments as part of the follow-up and review processes of the 2030 Agenda are designed to provide an overview of the status of 2030 Agenda implementation at the national level. These reports are meant to be prepared through inclusive and participatory processes, serve as a source of information on good practices, lessons learned and challenges in implementation, and provide a basis for peer learning and accountability at the global level.

Institutional Mechanism

While the majority of the countries in Asia-Pacific reported that their governments have established specific SDG strategies, and a specific government agency in their country has been assigned to spearhead the implementation of SDGs, for example, The government of **Uzbekistan** adopted 16 national SDGs, 125 related targets, and 206 indicators to facilitate monitoring the implementation of the SDGs. <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/4013358> . Coordination Council, headed by the Deputy Prime Minister, to oversee the implementation of the national SDGs across 21 government agencies, with the Ministry of Economy and Finance serving as the Secretariat. In **Timor Leste**, the National Agency for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (ANAPMA) under the Prime Minister office is overseeing the domestic SDGs implementation in the country. In **Mongolia**, the Ministry of Economy and Development is the main ministry to be responsible for the SDGs implementation, whereas in **Maldives**, the National Ministerial Coordination Committee was established to oversee the implementation of SDGs in the country since July 2016. In Cambodia, the Ministry of Planning (MoP) leads the implementation of the CSDGs. **Cambodia has also localised the SDGs framework which is called the Cambodian SDGs (CSDGs). In Vietnam**, the National Action Plan to implement the 2030 Agenda for SDGs (SDG NAP) was promulgated as per Decision 633/QD-TTg dated 10 May 2017 of the Prime Minister, in which 17 SDGs towards 2030 was set up including 115 specific targets. There have been the issues of the said institution being weak in playing the role even if most of the countries were able to set up the agency supervising the implementation of SDGs in their country. A deeper study on the effectiveness and strength of said agencies in playing the role to oversee implementation will be very crucial , especially when we are halfway through the SDGs implementation and the SDGs are backsliding with regressive progress in most of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Policy Coherence

A smaller percentage of countries in the region have reported on integrating the SDGs into their policies in 2021-2022, although the trend continues to be positive. Their government's lack of political will in considering and implementing CSO outputs in national policy frameworks – One respondent noted that their “government doesn't have a specific and clear vision on SDG and do not involve other development participants.” Another respondent noted that “political will to take radical decisions is necessary.

The implementation of the SDGs in **Uzbekistan** is fully consistent with the large-scale reforms that have been implemented in the framework of the "Strategy for Action in the Five Priority Areas of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021". In order to consistently continue the course of reforms, the Strategy of New Uzbekistan Development for 2022-2026 was developed and approved based on the results of a broad public discussion. The essence of this Strategy is to strengthen the role of civil society institutions, protect human rights, reduce poverty, provide everyone with a guaranteed source of income, and achieve sustainable environmental development. The SDGs are included in national and regional development strategies and programs, including the Concept of Socioeconomic Development of Uzbekistan until 2030. There is no specific policy or plan for SDGs in **Mongolia**. However, efforts have been made to mainstream SDGs in the

development policies and long, medium, and short term plans by using the national SDG targets and indicators which have been developed but not approved. Still there is no clarity on how to balance the concerns of the three pillars (environmental, social and economic), no mechanism for this. Therefore, there is still risk of conflicting interests between sectors, and local and national development policies. In **Maldives**, the Government has a policy framework on SDG implementation, which relates well to existing policy frameworks such as the SAP (Systems, Applications & Products in Data Processing) of the government. **RGC of Cambodia** integrated SDGs within the below national policies: National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2019-2023, Sectoral Strategic Development Plans, Sub-National Development Plan, Cambodia Digital Government Policy 2022-2035. However, it is observed that there are some gaps regarding the understanding of sub-national authorities about the SDGs and the three pillars are not well incorporated into the development projects, particularly the social & environmental pillars.

Policy coherence is an essential element for achieving sustainable development. There are many international agreements and frameworks that support implementation of the 2030 Agenda, such as the [Paris Agreement](#), [the Addis Ababa Action Agenda](#), [the Convention on Biological Diversity](#), [the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) and [the global aid/development effectiveness agenda](#). In addition to those, the review of 2021 and 2022 VNR reports examined whether countries referred to international commitments related to responding. Review findings⁶ show that more VNR reports referred to outward-facing responses to the pandemic, a positive change in relation to 2020, when reporting countries tended to focus on domestic responses. While no countries explicitly referred to global commitments in this area in 2020, 11 out of the 42 countries reporting in 2021 (or 26%) mentioned adapting their approaches to foreign assistance or commitments to global initiatives, including the ACT Accelerator, CEPI, COVAX, and GAVI. Countries in Asia-Pacific referring to one or more of those commitments include **China, Indonesia and Japan**. Given the significant impacts of the pandemic at the global level, countries should report their global actions alongside their domestic ones

Country implementation and CSOs engagement - Whole of Society Approach

In terms of a whole-of-society approach, fewer countries reported on the inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements for implementation than in previous years. Although more countries referred to formal processes for stakeholder engagement, there have been backslides in reporting on non-state actors' engagement in the VNR process, consultations to define national priorities, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement. For example, in **Mongolia**, there has not been any improvement in terms of better engagement of the CSOs in partnerships with other stakeholders, with the government, even during the second term of reporting. The government has been inviting representatives of CSOs and the private sector in different committees, councils and working groups. But this type of partnership has not been very effective so far as there was not much discussions on implementation of the SDGs including planning or evaluation of the implementations. In **Timor Leste**, the national CSO Platform FONGTIL was invited by the government to be part of the VNR committee, however, the level of engagement with the CSOs are . Nearly 50% of surveyed SOs are still not aware of the 2030 Agenda (UN SDGs) and the National Agenda for the Implementation of the SDGs of **Vietnam**.

However, in general, there has been an upward trend in terms of engaging the CSOs, there's no information

⁵ The Secretary-General's voluntary common reporting guidelines for 2021 had encouraged countries to make specific reference to these agreements (and others) in the introductory section of the VNR reports. Same goes for the revised guidelines for 2022.

⁶

https://www.forus-international.org/en/extra/hub/resources-publications?modal_page=pdf-detail&modal_detail_id=84898-policy-brief-on-leave-no-one-behind-progressing-national-sdgs-implementation-report-6th-edition&tab=list

presented in VNR reports does not assess the quality of formal processes for multi-stakeholder engagement. Countries should develop indicators to measure the extent of non-state stakeholder engagement at the national level. The practice of directly including non-state actors in drafting VNR reports or providing written inputs has not been frequent and it was quite absent in the Asia-Pacific countries, and even information on consultations around the VNR preparation has dropped over the past couple of years.

Shrinking Civic Space

The level of openness of civic space/ the public space in any country is a key determinant of the degree to which civil society -and non-state actors in general- are able to voice their views in the public sphere. In practice, this determines the extent to which civil society and other actors can exert influence within policy-making processes and political processes in general – programs, policies, laws, procedures, budgets, political party platforms, and, in the context of sustainable development, the right to actively participate in development processes and to exercise influence over their outcomes. As political authoritarianism, illiberalism and the weakening of democracy become more evident in countries across the world, there are growing trends towards the shrinkage and closure of civic space in many countries.

The 2022 VNR reports presented to the UN's HLPF by governments around the world continue to be largely silent on issues of shrinking civic space globally, and on the ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists. There has been a slight increase in the number of countries addressing developments linked to civic space at the national level. 12 of 44 VNR reports presented in 2022⁷ included insights into the state of national civic spaces, mainly by describing constitutional, regulatory, or policy-based reforms that have been adopted in order to enhance freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, access to information, as well as general levels of democratic participation.

A prerequisite to effective engagement is an enabling environment⁸ for non-state actors to participate in implementation, follow up and review of the SDGs. Some countries reporting in 2022 noted efforts to create an enabling environment through policies that support multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation, at least to some extent. These include **Kazakhstan, and the Philippines** from Asia-Pacific.

Citizens/Civil Society Report

Several civil society shadow or parallel reports produced in 2022 highlight how shrinking civic space remains a serious problem in their national contexts. They provide information on government actions that hinder freedom of expression, assembly, association, and access to information – which in some cases contradicts the information contained in the official VNRs. It is a matter of serious concern that much of the information linked to the increasing trend of shrinking civic space shared by civil society parallel and shadow reports is being ignored, or only partially dealt with by official VNR reports

Other barrier to participation

Funding- Unfortunately, not many CSOs can plan on SDGs as there is no funding opportunity for local CSOs. Even the Network can't plan much to do without funding except issuing some policy demands, statements, and policy papers based on voluntary initiatives.

Lack of understanding and actions on SDGs awareness at the sub-national level - in most of the Asia-Pacific countries even when we are halfway through the SDGs implementation

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63dbcc9c5fb5b254975651c2/t/63f514efbacc6f278de5eaa0/1677006065772/Progressing+National+SDGs+Implementation+Report+2022.pdf>

8

Issues of Shrinking civic space not addressed or ignored in most of the VNRs including **criminalization of civic dissent**. For example, in **Sri Lanka**, The open shooting of protestors in Rambukkana, the 09th of May attack on ‘Gota-Go-Gama’, arbitrary arrests and detention of frontliners of the civic struggle, and militarization of the governance was witnessed. In **Kazakhstan**, the adopted law on peaceful assembly does not meet the international standards, and the civic space for civil society to freely associate has narrowed significantly. In Pakistan, a CSO could be suspended or dissolved if the government feels their activities were inadequate or ‘suspicious’.

Recommendations

1. Inclusive and Participatory VNRs: Establish an enabling legal and regulatory environment that supports all civil society actors to contribute to sustainable development through inclusive and regular multi-stakeholder engagement, including inputs through public consultations from the most marginalized and vulnerable groups such as women, LGBTIQ, children, youth, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples, among others.
2. National assessment of SDGs: Ensure inclusivity and integration of 2030 Agenda priorities into national policies and frameworks, assess policies and data to inform prioritization, and create national targets and indicators that cover all three pillars of sustainable development.
3. Data and evidence: Assess policies, data availability and baselines to inform prioritization and nationalization of the 2030 Agenda and ensure an evidence-based approach to implementation.
4. Leaving No One Behind: Prepare a dedicated chapter on leaving no one behind in VNR reports that details country-wide approaches and specific efforts to reach marginalized groups, highlighting policies, processes, and results.
5. Agency Coordination: Evaluate the level of coordination between ministries and agencies, as well as the spatial dimension, and involve National Audit Institutions and National Human Rights institutions for identifying process-related and right-based gaps.
6. Reporting and Accountability: Provide an account of national level reporting and accountability processes for 2030 Agenda implementation in VNR reports, demonstrate progress made between reports, and link the 2030 Agenda to relevant international agreements.
7. CSO Reports: Advocate for civil society reports to be recognized in the UN ESCAP and the UN's High-level Political Forum processes. People Scorecard by Action for Sustainable Development, Voluntary peoples Review

VNRs as politics – critical themes

- VNRs are moments for CSOs to:
 - Stress your contributions to realising the SDGs
 - Represent vulnerable and marginalised groups and their interests
 - Regulate government action: as watchdogs, noting (limited) accountability
- Only a subsection of VNRs address challenges seriously – CSOs can highlight these. Data the most commonly identified problem
- CSOs can help cement understandings of key terms in ways that raise ambition
- “windows” for all these roles - during preparation; at the UN and regional events; national parliament before and after

Summary

VNRs are not an end in themselves, but rather an assessment and stocktaking exercise to assist in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. VNRs aim to assess the status of implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level, achieving just and equitable sustainable development for all will be impossible without also fulfilling human rights. In 2023, following countries from the Asia Pacific will present VNR : **Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Fiji, Maldives, Mongolia, Singapore, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam**. All these 11 VNR countries from the region are presenting for the second time in 2023.

While the majority of the countries in the region reported that their governments have established specific SDG strategies, and a specific government agency in their country has been assigned to spearhead the implementation of SDGs. There have been the issues of the said institution being weak in playing the role even if most of the countries were able to set up the agency supervising the implementation of SDGs in their country and hence a deeper study on the effectiveness and strength of said agencies in playing the role to oversee implementation will be very crucial , especially when we are halfway through the SDGs implementation and the SDGs are backsliding with regressive progress.

Under the **systemic barrier** we have witnessed that policy incoherence, **shrinking civic space, criminalisation of the civic dissent, lack of funding opportunities** for the CSOs and **Lack of understanding and actions on SDGs awareness at the sub-national level**. It is a matter of serious concern that much of the information linked to the increasing trend of shrinking civic space shared by civil society parallel and shadow reports is being ignored, or only partially dealt with by official VNR reports. In terms of a whole-of-society approach, **fewer countries reported on the inclusion of non- state actors in governance arrangements for implementation than in previous years**. Although more countries referred to formal processes for stakeholder engagement, **there have been backslides in reporting on non-state actors' engagement in the VNR process**, consultations to define national priorities, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on stakeholder engagement

Recommendations

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2. **National assessment of SDGs:** Ensure inclusivity and integration of 2030 Agenda priorities into national policies and frameworks, assess policies and data to inform prioritization, and create national targets and indicators that cover all three pillars of sustainable development.
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4. **Leaving No One Behind:** Prepare a dedicated chapter on leaving no one behind in VNR reports that details country-wide approaches and specific efforts to reach marginalized groups, highlighting policies, processes, and results.

5. **Agency Coordination:** Evaluate the level of coordination between ministries and agencies, as well as the spatial dimension, and involve National Audit Institutions and National Human Rights institutions for identifying process-related and right-based gaps.
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7. **CSO Reports:** Advocate for civil society reports to be recognized in the UN ESCAP and the UN's High-level Political Forum processes.