

Voluntary
National
Reviews
Factsheet 2024

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

2024 VNR Countries from Asia and Pacific

[Armenia](#), [Azerbaijan](#), [Georgia](#), [Lao People's Democratic Republic](#), [Micronesia \(Federated States of\)](#), [Nepal](#), [Palau](#), [Samoa](#), [Solomon Islands](#), [Vanuatu](#)

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Introduction

The year 2023 marks the halfway point of the 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs. Yet instead of news of progress and good practices, the situation, according to the United Nations, is in “deep trouble”. Current estimates by the UN report indicate that only 12% of the SDG targets are on track. Only a third of the member-states are expected to halve their population that are living in extreme poverty by 2030. Worse, it is globally acknowledged that not only are we in trouble, but developing countries, marginalised groups, and the most vulnerable, are expected to be the ones to bear the brunt of negative impacts of multiple crises. With seven years on, the promise to Leave No One Behind remains aspirational and the hope to achieve this by the deadline is “in peril”¹

Now, across the diverse tapestry of Asia-Pacific, a flicker of hope shines through the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). The VNRs have provided a valuable avenue for civil society organizations (CSOs) in Asia Pacific to engage with governments on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation. Despite challenges like inconsistent reporting depth and limited inclusion of critical voices, the process has opened political space for CSO participation. The VNRs are not an end in themselves but a tool to continuously reflect on and improve the SDG implementation process itself. In the Asia Pacific region, over 50 VNRs have been submitted since 2016. The VNRs aim to facilitate knowledge exchange, peer learning, transparency, and stakeholder engagement on SDG progress. They allow countries to assess gaps, showcase best practices, and convene multi-stakeholder dialogues on sustainable development implementation tailored to national contexts. However, the process still lacks multi-stakeholder partnerships, including partnerships between governments, CSOs, and other stakeholders. Additionally, there is a need to address data gaps related to SDGs apart from strengthening of monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure that progress towards SDGs is tracked and reported effectively.

Common data issues include the lack of disaggregated data on vulnerable groups, incomplete coverage of all SDGs, heavy focus on positive achievements rather than critical analysis of gaps, and reliance on government sources over independent data. For example, the 2023 VNR Synthesis Report² highlights that 20 countries provided analysis on data availability and gaps in their VNRs, including Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Additionally, the report notes that only 23 countries presented disaggregated data in their VNRs, enabling a more precise understanding of inequalities and empowering countries to ensure that no one is left behind in the effort to monitor and report on the implementation of the SDGs. The lack of data has implications for the effective monitoring and reporting of progress on the SDGs, including SDG 16, and underscores the need for continued efforts to address these data challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. Data tends to be more robust when civil society is actively engaged in the VNR process. Weaknesses also persist in follow-up and review after VNR presentation to improve implementation. Moving forward, strengthening national statistical systems, ensuring multi-stakeholder participation, and building in systematic data gathering on all SDGs and targets could improve the quality and utility of VNRs from Asia Pacific countries.

¹ https://csopartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VNR-2023_ENGLISH.pdf

² https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/2023_VNR_Synthesis_Report.pdf

Development Justice Analysis - implications

The Asia-Pacific region grapples with deep-seated issues of inequality, both economic and social, as marginalised communities continue to face barriers in accessing essential services and opportunities. Governance challenges, including corruption and transparency issues, persistently hinder effective and accountable institutions. Gender inequality remains a pressing concern, requiring concerted efforts to ensure equal status, opportunities and rights for all genders. Environmental sustainability challenges persist, with the region facing complex issues related to climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. The VNR also highlights the need for inclusive access to quality education, healthcare, and justice, acknowledging the ongoing struggle to bridge gaps in these critical areas.

According to the Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (APRCM) Position Paper-2023, despite progress on some goals, some goals are stagnant, and some are even regressing, such as Goals 12, 13, and 16. Additionally, the Pacific region faced considerable challenges in monitoring targets in the areas of crime, governance, justice, and human rights, which are particularly relevant to SDG 16. The lack of data availability and quality remains a direct obstacle to implementing the 2030 Agenda, as it prevents countries from monitoring and reporting on SDG progress effectively. These challenges underscore the need for continued efforts to address data gaps and promote development justice in the Asia-Pacific region.

Blind Spots in Statistics

There is clearly a lack of disaggregated data by gender, ethnicity, and location that hides the struggles of marginalised communities facing unequal access to justice and resources. In addition, there is a lack of comprehensive and systematic data available to monitor the progress of the SDGs. In 2023 VNRs, even most countries stressed that the availability and quality of data, especially those that are timely and disaggregated are fundamental to shaping policies that can drive meaningful development progress. These data gaps hinder the comprehensive assessment of progress and the identification of vulnerable populations, which in turn impede effective policy making. Several VNRs identified a lack of funding, inadequate institutional capacity, challenges in manual data collection, and missing metadata/methodologies as the main causes of limited data availability. Goals where data seem most limited are those on gender equality, sustainable cities, and climate.

As the President of the National Institute of Statistics of Timor-Leste's Ministry of Finance explained: "Statistical capacity and a quality evidence base is becoming increasingly important, and our systems should meet the changing data needs of the Government, civil society, and development organisations, especially given the recent COVID-19 pandemic and our efforts to accelerate our progress towards meeting the SDGs."³

National Statistical Offices played a leading role in coordinating with ministries and other government agencies to collect SDG data, as well as to evaluate data for inclusion in VNRs. All 39 of 2023 reports also highlighted the importance of complimenting official data with views from diverse stakeholders gained from an inclusive VNR consultation process. At the regional level, The National Sustainable Development Goal Tracker⁴ established by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) has improved data monitoring and reporting for countries in the region.

³ <https://hlpf.un.org/countries/timor-leste/voluntary-national-reviews-2023>

⁴ <https://www.unescap.org/stat/data>

SDG interlinkages/integrated analysis

The 2023 Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports were presented in the UN's High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) by governments. Bangladesh highlighted the link between access to justice (SDG 16) and poverty reduction (SDG 1), showcasing how legal aid programs empower women to claim land rights and improve livelihoods. Indonesia discussed the connection between environmental protection (SDG 13) and peacebuilding (SDG 16), citing efforts to resolve land conflicts over resources in conflict-prone areas. Nepal recognized the link between corruption (SDG 16) and access to education (SDG 4), emphasising anti-corruption efforts to ensure transparent allocation of resources for education services. Fiji's VNR analysed the connections between upgrading infrastructure (SDG 9) and building resilience against climate change impacts (SDG 13). However, there is scope for further improving integrated analysis in future VNRs to better understand synergies and tradeoffs between economic, social and environmental SDGs.

Qualitative data:

In several VNRs, qualitative research was used in conjunction with quantitative data to contextualize the challenges and opportunities in achieving the Goals from the perspectives of different stakeholders. Mongolia, for example, conducted a focus group with 40 representatives from at-risk population groups to understand their specific needs and interests. Apart from this, there's a need to recognize

Storytelling and case studies

Powerful narratives from individuals impacted by policies or injustices resonated with audiences, showcasing the human cost of development gaps.

Alternative reports and shadow VNRs

CSOs compiled their own reports using both quantitative and qualitative data such as Civil Society Spotlight Reports on the SDG progress,⁵ Peoples' Scorecards,⁶ and Citizens' Scorecards⁷ as well as voluntary local reviews (VLR)⁸, highlighting areas overlooked by official documents and advocating for alternative visions of development. So far, there's no official space to put the CSOs report in the UN DESA website, however, the SDG Helpdesk⁹ of the UN ESCAP works as a gateway to resources, including the CSOs reports and services by linking users to other platforms focusing in areas related to the implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

Financing the SDGs:

Despite existing policies and frameworks on the SDGs, the low level of commitment and limited understanding of the 2030 Agenda may hinder progress towards the achievement of the Goals. This is manifested in insufficient financing of the SDG implementation, which is a challenge that many countries discussed. They highlighted needing to improve domestic resource mobilization through more progressive taxation, reducing illicit financial flows, and attracting private investment. Opportunities mentioned include leveraging ODA in catalysing other flows and increasing investments in sustainable infrastructure through public-private partnerships.

⁵ https://www.aspbae.org/resource-centre/?_categories=hlpf-spotlight-reports-voluntary-national-reviews

⁶ <https://www.pda.net.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CSOs-Spotlight-Report-2022.pdf>

⁷ <https://sdgscitizenscorecard.pda.net.pk/>

⁸ <https://www.pda.net.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/VLR-Report-2022.pdf>

⁹ <https://sdghelpdesk.unescap.org/>

Aligning Vision and Budgets:

Countries emphasized the importance of policy coherence and systematically aligning national development plans, economic policies, budgets and institutional structures with the SDGs to maximize efficiency. Fiji emphasized the importance of rationalizing inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies by addressing market distortions through tax restructuring. Moreover, Uzbekistan put forward reforms to its state-owned enterprises, with a focus on SDG-aligned results and combatting illegal financial flows, which erode tax revenues.

However, challenges remain in translating SDG targets into implementable policies and programs within budget constraints. Multi-stakeholder dialogues can assist in balancing and prioritizing the allocation of resources.

Overall, mobilizing sufficient funding, deploying technologies effectively, strengthening human capacities, and ensuring policy coherence remain essential priorities but pose difficulties that require both domestic initiatives and international cooperation to address.

Shrinking Civic Space

The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of 2023 were meant to be a stage for self-reflection on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, a crucial thread remained conspicuously absent from the official narratives – the alarmingly shrinking civic space across the region. This deafening silence, despite significant data and independent reports highlighting the issue, raises serious concerns about transparency, accountability, and ultimately, the path towards inclusive development.

Data Paints a Stark Picture:

Civicus' 2023 "People Power Under Attack"¹⁰ report: 58% of countries in Asia-Pacific experienced a decline in civic space, with restrictions on NGOs, protests, and freedom of expression on the rise. The VNRs focus on presenting state-sanctioned accomplishments rather than critically examining deficits in civic freedoms, participation, and accountable governance. This shrinking space has tangible consequences, silencing critical voices and perspectives:

Unseen injustices: Laws restricting CSOs, protests, and freedom of expression limit the voices of citizens and hinder critical discussions on development challenges. Land grabs impacting indigenous communities or environmental degradation affecting rural populations may go unreported and unaddressed due to stifling dissent.

Weakened accountability: Limited space for scrutiny hinders checks and balances on government power, increasing vulnerability to corruption and abuse of authority.

Stunted progress: Excluded perspectives hinder inclusive development policies, jeopardizing progress on social and environmental justice goals enshrined in SDG 16.

A Glaring Omission: Despite the stark data and reports, VNRs remained largely silent on the issue. This raises questions about:

Government transparency: Are official narratives intentionally overlooking a critical challenge to democratic values and citizen participation?

Commitment to inclusivity: Can progress on SDGs truly be claimed without acknowledging the silencing of marginalized voices and perspectives? IN 2023, The Asia-Pacific countries reported

¹⁰ https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2023/

tailoring engagement strategies for different stakeholder sectors, for example, Cambodia collaborated with networks of civil society organizations, and had also mentioned the roles and contributions of the volunteers.¹¹ Many civil society organisations in the region have noted the lack of meaningful CSO participation in the VNR processes. Another concern is that the data presenting the realities of marginalised groups are not recognised, or at worst, dismissed by governments. In some cases, the participation of marginalized communities in stakeholder consultations is limited, even more so when they are held virtually.

Meaningful accountability and ensuring ownership and engaging stakeholders: How can citizens hold governments accountable if their concerns are systematically silenced or ignored, as the processes involve minimal consultation with civil society, excluding independent voices and grassroots experiences of injustice. Very few countries in the Asia Pacific region, like Fiji and Timor-Leste¹² have had stakeholder engagement plans for their VNRs.

Prioritizing growth over equity

VNRs tended to trumpet GDP growth statistics rather than assess how economic gains are redistributed and reduce poverty. With focus on macro growth trends, analysis and data on inequality, poverty reduction, and redistribution of gains to poorer groups is often limited in VNRs. This is the pitfall of neglecting equity: a region may boast impressive GDP figures, but entrenched inequalities persist, with poverty reduction lagging behind. By focusing solely on growth rather than how wealth is distributed, VNRs miss the crucial goal of ensuring everyone benefits from development, leaving a vast swathe of the population trapped in the shadows of economic prosperity. Experiences of vulnerable populations including rural communities, informal workers, ethnic/religious minorities are obscured when VNRs do not assess equity impacts of economic policies and growth, apart from missing links between economic policies, wage policies, and labor rights, and heavy reliability on GDP rather than multi-dimensional metrics of progress such as the Human Development Index overlooks equity dimensions.

Peoples' Solutions/CSO Initiatives and Citizen's led Data

Citizens-led data, gathered independently by civil society, grassroots communities and rights groups, is crucial for providing a robust evidence base for Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in Asia Pacific. For instance, research by miners' associations in the Philippines provides localized data on child labor in small-scale mines that is overlooked in official statistics, helping give a more comprehensive picture for the VNR¹³. In Indonesia, data collected by youth groups showing 70% lack access to environmental education in resource-rich areas exposes gaps in environmental justice initiatives¹⁴. A community survey in Cambodia revealing 80% of women experiencing discrimination in court challenges official narratives and fuels demands for legal reforms¹⁵. A study conducted by AwazCDS in Pakistan on the plight of women agricultural workers (WAWs) reveals that WAWs are not only paid half than men but also susceptible to malnutrition, discrimination, violence and ill treatment, including exploitation and sexual harassment¹⁶. Additionally, the United Nations Statistics

¹¹ https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/2023_VNR_Synthesis_Report.pdf

¹² Ibid

¹³ Alliance of Progressive Labor (2019). Our Lives Are Not for Sale!

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<https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/75997/9780429674754.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹⁵ <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/32228/cga-cambodia.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://awazcds.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-Hands-That-Fed-Us-Struggles-of-Women-Agricultural-Workers-Rights-in-Pakistan.pdf>

Division has organized an expert group meeting on citizens' contribution to data¹⁷, which allowed participants to review and discuss a draft conceptual framework on citizen data. Citizens-led data sources on issues like discrimination, land rights, labor conditions, and environmental damage give on-the-ground insights into development justice gaps that can strengthen VNR reporting. But space for civil society to input such data is limited. Governments in Asia Pacific should systematically incorporate citizens-led data into VNRs to complement official sources for more inclusive, accurate and transparent SDG monitoring.

Voluntary Local Review (VLR)

VLRs hold immense potential to accelerate progress towards the SDGs in Asia-Pacific. By strengthening local ownership, ensuring inclusivity, and fostering collaboration, VLRs can weave a future where development benefits all, from bustling metropolises to remote villages, paving the way for a more just and sustainable region. The Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs)¹⁸ were launched in 2020 by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) to support Asian and Pacific cities willing to conduct a VLR report or produce an online SDG portal. The VLR process allows cities to rethink their planning process and involve local communities in understanding their needs and involve them in recovery strategies based on risk-informed and sustainable financing policies in accordance with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. The VLRs have proven useful for cities and regions to foster SDG localization and demonstrate local governments' contributions to accelerating progress.

Civil society actors have also actively engaged in the process to monitor and report on the status of the SDG implementation and to hold governments accountable for their global commitments. They also contribute through different initiatives to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Cooperatives are notably working to implement SDGs focusing on poverty reduction (SDG1), hunger eradication (SDG2), gender equality (SDG5), decent work and economic growth (SDG8) and climate action (SDG13). For instance, the International Co-operative Alliance has set up a website dedicated to sharing good practices on 2030 Agenda implementation

The Voluntary Local Review (VLR) process undertaken by the City of Alor Gajah in Malaysia provides an interesting example of using an interactive ranking activity to gather stakeholder perspectives on SDG progress¹⁹. Participants were requested to rank each SDG and its associated targets by using the traffic light system (green, yellow, and red). This interactive traffic light exercise enabled stakeholders involved in the VLR process, likely including local government officials, civil society, business leaders and citizens, to provide their inputs on the ecosystem and current status of SDG achievement in Alor Gaja.

Overarching Recommendations

1. **Prioritizing Equity and Justice:** We urge VNRs to move beyond GDP growth narratives and focus on how economic gains translate into poverty reduction, addressing systemic inequalities within and between countries. Imagine a tapestry where marginalized communities are not overshadowed by glittering statistics.
2. **Creating rightful civic spaces** we urge the governments to ensure rightful civic spaces and policy environment for CSOs so as they can operate freely by following the human rights based approaches to ensure accelerated and coordinated efforts towards the achievement of SDGs

¹⁷ <https://www.unescap.org/events/2023/asia-pacific-stats-cafe-series-citizen-data-conceptual-framework-practical-experiences>

¹⁸ <https://vlr.unescap.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Asia-Pacific-Regional-Guidelines-on-VLRs.pdf>

¹⁹ https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/vlrs/2023-08/alor_gajah_vlr.pdf

3. **Embracing Data Democracy:** We call for greater transparency and access to data used in VNRs, emphasizing the need for disaggregated data by gender, ethnicity, location, and income to expose disparities and ensure no one is left behind. Recognise citizen's led data , by incorporating more qualitative data from surveys, focus groups, interviews and site visits to add richness and capture ground realities apart from developing comprehensive statistical capacity building programs to strengthen data availability and quality at national and local levels
4. **Ensure the Localisation of SDGs** we demand the localisation of SDGs not only at national but also at subnational and district, and local level to ensure the systemic and meaningful integration of SDGs at various governance and structural levels. The SDGs should be integrated into national strategies, aligned with plans, and localised into the national context. Governments and relevant stakeholders must use available resources, including existing data and previous Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports, to reflect on experiences, challenges, lessons learned, and failures, and identify gaps and ways forward.
5. **Establish mechanism of MGOS** like system inclusive of all major groups at local, provincial and national level as a mandatory system throughout the implementation.
6. **Amplifying Marginalized Voices:** We demand deeper engagement with diverse stakeholders, including women, children and youth, indigenous communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, older people ensuring their concerns and aspirations are woven into the fabric of development.
7. **Strengthening Civil Society Participation:** National-level processes for stakeholder engagement and feedback in the preparation of the VNR should be in place, with open and meaningful spaces for civil society to participate. We advocate for meaningful participation in all stages of the VNR process, from planning and data collection to analysis and implementation, fostering genuine collaboration and shared ownership. Promote enabling environments for civil society through rights protections, dialogue channels and responsible fiscal policies.
8. **Ensuring Accountability and Action:** We emphasize the need for VNRs to go beyond reporting progress and translate into concrete action plans with measurable targets and resources allocated. Hence, take steps to improve accountability, participation and transparency across governance institutions and public service delivery
9. **Prioritizing policy coherence and integrated approaches :** National development plans, economic policies, annual budgets, and institutional structures must be aligned to local plans and priorities to maximize efficiency and impact. This requires reliance on locally developed SDG targets based on provincial and city contexts, mandating government agencies at both local and national levels to incorporate the SDGs into their programs, and introducing SDG-responsive budgeting that links financing to sustainable development priorities across departments. Effective coordination mechanisms between national and local bodies, capacity building of local officials, multi-stakeholder participation, and integrated monitoring systems tying local data to national progress tracking can also facilitate improved vertical integration
10. **To measure the progress towards equality and leaving no one behind,** SDGs- 5 and 10 need to be part of annual reporting at the HLPF. System to track and public allocation SDG 5 c1 which is also the indicator of GPEDC 8 should be reported by all countries in all VNRS.