**Learning from the Past for Improved Action Going Forward: Unpacking the 2025 Voluntary National Reviews with a focus on Peace, Justice, Equality and Inclusive Institutions**

**Thursday, July 17, 2024 I 1:00 p.m. EST I United Nations Secretariat, 26th Floor**

**Lab Summary:**

Organized by the [Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies](https://www.sdg16.plus/) at NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC), this Voluntary National Review (VNR) Lab highlighted the centrality of SDG16 (in policy and principle) in VNRs cross-regionally and in a year where SDG16 is not under review. This included highlighting the importance of SDG16 in meeting national development priorities in the context of constrained budgets, and delivering results to build trust and strengthen the social contract while implementing multiple development frameworks (including the 2030 Agenda and AU 2063).This interactive multi-stakeholder dialogue included global perspectives and specific insights from Czechia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Indonesia, Sierra Leone and South Africa, UNDP and OHCHR, AU-APRM and Transparency International-Ghana.

**Overarching messages:**

* Across regions, SDG16 is increasingly reported in VNRs and VLRs, as both a **standalone goal and an enabler** of progressacross the SDGs (including through policy interlinkages), with a particular focus on SDGs under review this year, including SDG5 on gender, SDG8 on decent work, and SDG14 on oceans.
* VNR analysis shows that countries are increasingly **incorporating the SDGs in their NDPs**, including all 36 countries who reported in 2024. Access to justice, good governance, public administration and service delivery were all highlighted as key to varying countries’ national development.
* In a context of **ODA cuts and constrained budgets**, tangible progress on SDG16 is key to building international confidence through an enabling environment for foreign direct investment, highlighting the economic impetus for investing in peace, security, justice, equality and effective institutions.
* **Transparency and accountability in budgeting** is vital to addressing constrained budgets, as well as reducing corruption. **Civil society plays a critical role** in this, through front-line service delivery and holding governments and others accountable, and should be meaningfully included in the VNR process.
* **Strengthening public institutions and public administration** can support increased policy coherence and budget alignment, while a results-based framework can improve service delivery. This is fundamental to meeting daily needs, fostering trust and strengthening the social contract.
* **Inclusive consultations are key** to reflect the views of historically underrepresented groups. Examples include assemblies to promote participatory governance for indigenous communities, a youth needs survey that informs the VNR, and a LNOB mapping to understand the needs of different communities.
* Youth increasingly support SDG16 and democratic principles**,** but **growing disillusionment in electoral democracy is eroding trust.**
* SDG16 and human rights are applicable in **energy transitions and emerging markets**, including critical mineral, and support local communities and national development priorities, now and in the future.
* **Locally grounded data, cross-regional learning, and national statistics offices** are all key to reducing gaps between people and governments and humanizing data points.
* The complementarities between VNRs and the **African Peer Review Mechanism**, showcase the ways different development frameworks share objectives and support progress on good governance and inclusive, transparent and accountable institutions.

[**Margaret Williams, Associate Director, SDG16+, Pathfinders, CIC**](https://cic.nyu.edu/people/margaret-maggie-williams/)

* Pathfinders has been working with countries reporting VNRs and partners for the last few years to **demonstrate the centrality of SDG16**, in policy, principle and approach to realize development, economic and security objectives.
* This includes highlighting the how and why of SDG16, how VNRs can **support implementation** at all levels, the foundational aspects of SDG16, its **interlinkages with the 2030 Agenda** and the **return on investment i**n the context of constrained budgets and intersecting crises.
* This is key to highlighting the importance of international cooperation in the context of strain to multilateralism and [falling ODA](https://www.devex.com/news/ffd4-special-edition-the-key-takeaways-from-four-days-in-sevilla-110448), as well as addressing growing distrust in governments.
* **SDG16 is widely acknowledged as an enabler of the 2030 Agenda**, with [access to justice correlating with improved economic growth, better education and health outcomes](https://worldjusticeproject.org/about-us/overview/what-rule-law#:~:text=Research%20shows%20that%20rule%20of,where%20rule%20of%20law%20prevails), and [lower levels of violence correlating to more productive societies](https://www.visionofhumanity.org/positive-peace-report-2022-analysing-the-factors-that-build-predict-and-sustain-peace/#:~:text=Published%20on%3A%20January%2030%2C%202022,deteriorated%20from%202009%20to%202020.). Equal societies also have better growth rates.
* The **cost-effectiveness and return on investment of SDG16 is key**. Closing the [gender gap could boost the global economy by 7 trillion-dollar](https://www.cnbc.com/2023/03/06/gender-pay-gap-could-cost-the-world-economy-7-trillion-moodys-says.html?msockid=3c13d9fbd16463c608edcbf0d00662f2)s, and [$1 spent on conflict prevention could yield $103 in savings](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=05c07c087b348c5ed0d515535d4889204e3ef0ef70ac34c49fe790bff9c8279fJmltdHM9MTc0ODk5NTIwMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=3c13d9fb-d164-63c6-08ed-cbf0d00662f2&psq=The+Urgency+of+Conflict+Prevention+%e2%80%93+A+Macroeconomic+Perspective+Hannes+Mueller%2c+Christopher+Rauh%2c+Benjamin+Seimon%2c+and+Raphael+Espinoza+WP%2f24%2f256&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuaW1mLm9yZy8tL21lZGlhL0ZpbGVzL1B1YmxpY2F0aW9ucy9XUC8yMDI0L0VuZ2xpc2gvd3BpZWEyMDI0MjU2LXByaW50LXBkZi5hc2h4&ntb=1). [New green industries could be worth over 10 trillion USD by 2050](https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/07/theres-10-1-trillion-in-nature-positive-transition-heres-how-we-unlock-it/), but must be a just transition that addresses inequalities.
* With 5 years left before 2030, we must use all the tools at our disposal and harness SDG16 to **strengthen social contracts and build trust between governments and people.**

[**Mr. Luis Madera, Vice-Minister of Monitoring and Government Coordination, Ministry of the Presidency, Government of the Dominican Republic**](https://periododesesiones.cepal.org/39/es/luis-madera)

* **SDG16** serves as the overarching framework guiding national policy, emphasizing peace, justice, and strong institutions.
* **Institutions are central to national development**, with efforts focused on evaluating institutional performance and linking it to measurable outcomes.
* A [**Presidential Dashboard**](https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/DOM) has been established to monitor progress across 10 national goals, including institutional performance.
* [A **results-oriented approach** to institutions and service delivery is being prioritized](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2017/06/better-service-delivery-for-inclusive-growth-in-the-dominican-republic_g1g6ea35/9789264264144-en.pdf), including in national budgets, with **96% of the budget aligned with the SDGs.**
* Positive results from this approach have led to **strong international confidence**, reflected in a rise in **direct foreign investment**, attributed to growing **institutional stability**.
* Key governance indicators are improving including in corruption, judicial independence and government effectiveness. **Sustained institutional reform efforts** are driving these positive developments.
* **The Dominican Republic has created intersectoral working groups** to promote **transparency at all levels of governance**.
* Despite progress, **challenges persist.** While there has been a drop in homicides, violence continues to be a challenge, especially for young men. There also continues to be high levels of unsentenced people in prisons.

**Dr Sheka Bangura, Director of Planning, Policy and Research at the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, Government of Sierra Leone**

* **SDG16 has been a national priority of Sierra Leone even prior to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda**, and has been central to post-civil war recovery, as reflected in all five [National Development Plans](https://moped.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Final_Sierra-Leone-MTNDP-2024-2030-1.pdf).
* **Achieving SDG16 is considered self-fulfilling**, as it is essential for the tangible delivery of public goods and services through effective and capable institutions.
* **SDG16 and SDG4 (Quality Education)** are recognized as **accelerators of Sierra Leone’s national development**, driving broader progress across sectors. SDG16 is interlinked with all SDGs by creating an enabling environment through the rule of law, transparency and institutional accountability.
* All **Sierra Leone’s VNRs** have consistently highlighted the centrality of SDG16 to the country’s development approach with **reporting on legal aid services, fighting corruption, access to information and modernization of the justice sector.**
* **The monitoring of the LNOB principle has been consistent in VNRs, particularly socioeconomic participation, inclusion of women and children, addressing food insecurity, welfare of island and coastal communities, managing natural resources, ensuring justice for future generations and addressing data disaggregation.**
* To address budget constraints, Sierra Leone has **promoted transparency and accountability in budget processes** with sustainable participation of civil society, as well as prioritizing waste reduction.
* There is continued **difficulty in quantifying SDG16** which then hinders data collection. To address this, in [2022, Sierra Leone developed a monitoring and evaluation framework](https://named.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/FinalDoc_ResultFramework_Final_NoColor_Complete13.pdf) for SDG16 drawing from the UN Guidelines for reporting on SDG16.

[**Ms. Alexandra Wilde, Global Policy Centre for Governance, UNDP**](https://www.undp.org/policy-centre/governance/our-team)

* **UNDP has a key integrator role** within the development system to connect, coordinate and accelerate progress on the SDGs through **policy coherence**, **systems thinking**, **institutional coordination**, and **Inclusive engagement of a broad range of stakeholders.**
* While the SDGs are being questioned, UNDP has [yearly VNR analysis](https://www.undp.org/publications/2024-voluntary-national-reviews-through-lens-peaceful-just-and-strong-institutions) that shows the SDGs remain relevant, with all 36 countries that reported a VNR in 2024 having integrated the SDGs into national development plans and financing frameworks. 177 countries have reported since 2016.
* There is a growing emphasis on **VLRs,** with a **third of VNRs** in 2024 referencing VLRs. These references highlight efforts to empower local governments and localize the SDGs with context-specific policies, budgets and community actions. Local governments are vital to these outcomes.
* **UNDP has analyzed SDG16 in VNRs since 2016**, with trends showing:
  + a **steady increase in SDG16 reporting.**
  + **Target 16.6 (effective, accountable institutions)** highlighted in 94% of VNRs in 2024.
  + **Target 16.b (non-discrimination)** explicitly addressed by 33 out of 36 countries in 2024, though this target is regressing.
* **The evidence base is growing** on interlinkages between [SDG16 and **SDG14 (Life Below Water**](https://www.undp.org/publications/connections-matter-how-does-quality-governance-institutions-help-protect-our-ocean)**)**:
  + UNDP has a dedicated **SDG16 interlinkages series which began as a database of academic research**, with the most recent report analyzing interlinkages between SDG16 and SDG14.
  + **Findings highlight that inclusion and stakeholder engagement, including acknowledging local identities and expertise,** significantly enhances the effectiveness of policies linked to SDG14.
* Data collection has also improved, including more inclusive and innovative data systems, expanded indicators, digital tools and citizen-generated data, but many countries (especially fragile states) struggle with limited disaggregated data.
* There is growing advocacy for **annual SDG16 reporting** due to its foundational role in sustainable development.

**Mr. Hugo Allan García, Undersecretary of Strategic Analysis for Sustainable Development, Government of Guatemala**

* **SDG16 is a national priority**, reflected in the [General Government Policy 2024-2028](https://portal.segeplan.gob.gt/segeplan/?page_id=10202), which builds a plural, equitable, prosperous and peaceful nation with legitimate and effective institutions. SDG16 is seen as a pillar of the **new social contract,** founded on social justice, democracy, and respect for human rights.
* Guatemala has strengthened **digital platforms** to modernize planning, improve traceability of public investment and **strengthen accountability**.
* Approximately **40% of the population is Indigenous**, and has historically lacked access to public services and institutional support.
* The **President has prioritized institutional reform** to ensure **better service delivery for Indigenous communities**.
* [**Eleven assemblies** were held between the government and Indigenous communities to promote participatory governance](https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/guatemala-rewriting-rules-inclusive-development), territorialize development and restore rights to historically vulnerable populations with the aim of addressing prolonged **exclusion from formal systems**.
* The country’s VNR includes the **perspectives of Indigenous peoples**, as well as **women, youth, and persons with disabilities**, to promote comprehensive and inclusive development.
* Guatemala has also prioritized strengthening legal frameworks to **prevent violence against women**, created specialized units within the judicial system and promoted national awareness-raising campaigns, in line with the Beijing Platform for Action.
* **Challenges persist** including violence, unequal access to justice in remote areas, insufficient inter-institutional coordination, limited capacity for disaggregated data and low participation of women and youth in decision-making spaces.

[**Mr. Arifin Rudiyanto, Experts Coordinator, SDGs National Secretariat, Ministry of National Development Planning/Bappenas, Government of Indonesia**](https://www.linkedin.com/in/arifin-rudiyanto-83701a36/?originalSubdomain=id)

* Thoughnot the primary focus of this year’s VNR, **SDG16 serves as the critical backbone** of Indonesia’s national development approach as **both a goal and an enabler** of sustainable development.
* There is clear recognition that **without good governance and strong institutions**, the goals of the **2030 Agenda cannot be fully realized**.
* A dedicated chapter of the VNR is on **enabling environments,** which highlights how institutions have been **strengthened to support policy implementation**. This ensures that policies are translated into **action at all levels of governance**.
* Interlinkages between **SDG16 and other key goals**—specifically SDG5 (Gender Equality), SDG8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals)—have been analyzed to strengthen coherence.
* A [**Leave No One Behind (LNOB) mapping exercise**](https://www.unescap.org/events/2025/technical-workshop-leaving-no-one-behind-lnob-platform-and-SPOT-Indonesia) using the **ESCAP framework** helps identify **vulnerabilities among different communities**.
* The **VNR process** included **oversight** through an **Independent Audit Board**, which reviews SDG implementation and provides recommendations.
* To localize the SDGs,[**all 32 provinces** have established **formal SDG governance structures**](https://www.thejakartapost.com/front-row/2023/07/20/bappenas-reports-on-the-localization-of-sdg-targets-mandate-across-indonesia.html), institutionalizing the agenda at subnational levels.
* There is a strong belief that **SDG16 must be reflected not only in reporting** but also in **real governance policies and outcome**.

[**Ms. Anna Pasková, Director of Environmental Policy and Sustainable Development of the Ministry of the Environment, Government of Czechia**](https://www.linkedin.com/in/anna-paskov%C3%A1-66110445/?originalSubdomain=cz)

* **SDG16 is essential,** especially when peace and democratic institutions are under threat. Democratic institutions and transparent governance are not only crucial to sustainable development, but to the **quality of life of citizens** and are the foundation of the **social contract**.
* Good governance is included in 1 of the 6 strategic areas of [Czech Republic 2030](https://www.cr2030.cz/en), including participatory and transparent governance and the **development of competencies of public administration**, **policy coherence** and evidence-informed policy, supported by alignment with national budgets.
* In the Czech VNR, there is a strong focus on the **resilience of society**, including through combatting misinformation.
* To **strengthen public administration**, it is important to mainstream sustainability into **regulatory impact assessments**, with a focus on efficient and coherent policy-making.
* A **comprehensive implementation guide** was developed with tools such as participation, long-term perspective, the analysis on the costs of action and inaction, and is being implemented through trainings of analytical units. [A pilot regulatory impact assessment is being developed in partnership with OECD on the topic of securing affordable electricity in Czechia.](https://one.oecd.org/document/GOV/RPC(2022)9/ANN1/en/pdf)
* SDG16 has clear interlinkages to other SDGs including on climate, gender equality and inequalities.
  + Czechia has conducted analytical work on macro models of the effect of **decarbonizatio**n on vulnerable groups to understand the effect of just transitions on poverty.
  + While **gender inequality persists** (including in management and representative positions and the pay gap), legislation to improve the situation of victims of gender-based violence through the civil code.
  + To **combat inequalities**, Czechia has worked to integrate Ukrainian refugees through humanitarian benefits, access to education and the labor market. 80% of Ukrainian refugees are economically active.

[**Ms. Sara Hamouda, Senior Continental Governance Officer, African-Union-APRM**](https://www.linkedin.com/in/sara-hamouda-068a6052/?originalSubdomain=za)

* Good governance is anchored in the African Union Agenda 2063 through Moonshot 3 which prioritizes good governance, rule of law and respect for human rights.
* During the formulation of the **2030 Agenda**, **Africa strongly advocated for SDG16**, recognizing the critical nexus between **governance, peace, and development**.
* There is growing **reporting fatigue for African countries**, as countries are required to report separately on **Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063**.
* AU-APRM also serves as Secretariat to address a holistic approach to build resilient institutions in Africa and provides support on tracking both agendas, with a focus on governance outcomes. It [**produces biennial reports on governance**](https://aprm.au.int/en/documents/2023-07-12/africa-governance-report-2023-unconstitutional-change-government-africa), with countries like **Sierra Leone** featured as case studies.
* Efforts are underway (in partnership with UNDP and DESA) to **align more indicators from** [**Moonshot 3**](https://www.nepad.org/agenda2063-moonshots/moonshot-3) **with SDG16**, as the SDGs provides more **comprehensive and overarching indicators.**
* **54 countries in Africa have reported a VNR**, and reporting on Moonshot 3 have slightly improved over the past five years due to the VNR process. Despite this improvement, Moonshot **3 reporting remains weak** compared to SDG16 reporting.
* **Lack of adequate data** still remains a challenge in achieving overlapping governance goals from both Agendas.
* More focus should be put on **sharing good practices and knowledge sharing** across the continent, as well as increased financial and political will.
* Some countries have introduced **governance scorecards**, and have integrated governance into **national budgets, as well as SDG localization efforts**, to support implementation efforts.
* There are also recognized links between **SDG5 (Gender Equality)** and **SDG16 as legal identification and access to information can help decrease violence against women.**

**Ms. Katherine Liao, Equality, Development and Rule of Law, OHCHR**

* **OHCHR views SDG16 as a human rights goal**, with its principles of transparency, accountability, equality and participation essential to development.
* The [2024 SDG16 Survey](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-07/undp-unhcr-unodc-global-progress-report-on-sdg16-indicators-v2.pdf) highlights the importance of trust and effective institutions but implementation is lacking.
  + Perception data reveals that **1 in 5 people experience discrimination**.
  + 45% of people say **they lack confidence in their public institutions.**
* OHCHR works to support the concept of a **“human rights economy”** which prioritizes social protection, equality and sustainability, with public budgets that prioritize human rights and reducing inequality.
* Links between [**SDG16 and critical minerals**](https://www.sendwestafrica.org/nu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Citizens-perseptives-on-SDGs-delivery-machanism-in-Ghana-2022.pdf) are apparent. The extraction of minerals is often in fragile environments where land rights and participation are contested or ignored. **A just transition should have human rights-based regulation**, transparency and community participation.
* SDG16 implementation requires structural change and reforms to power and accountability, including through financial investment. The recent civil society-led [**SDG16 Rome Declaration**](https://tapnetwork2030.org/romedeclaration/) includes reference to **international financial architecture reform** such as fair taxation and accountability in financial flows.
* The SDG16 Data Initiative shows **links between SDG16 and SDG1 on poverty and SDG10 on inequalities.** Lack of access to justice and information disproportionally affect the poorest, and a lack of transparency hinders communities’ ability to hold institutions accountable. The climate transition carries the **risk of entrenching existing inequalities**, especially where governance is weak.

[**Mr. Solly Molayi, Acting Director-General for Population and Social Statistics, Statistics South Africa, Government of South Africa**](https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/Pages/2025/10-06-2025_P20_Youth_Parliament/bio/Solly_Molayi.pdf)

* Data collection should be grounded in the **lived realities** of the people the data represents.
* With 5 years left in achieving the SDGs, we should consider a person who was a youth when the SDGs were adopted. Now an adult, we should keep in mind **tangible outcomes** that have impacted their life.
* In considering young people we continue to **center people in sustainable development**, and their priorities and hopes for the future.

[**Mrs. Mary Addah, Executive Director, Transparency International Ghana/Co-chair, CSO Platform**](https://www.linkedin.com/in/mary-a-addah-68990434/?originalSubdomain=gh)

* **Corruption remains a persistent challenge** across the African continent, which **diverts resources from the poor to the rich**, undermining trust and democratic governance. [Public perception of corruption continues to be high in Ghana](https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/ghana), especially in the police, judiciary and political sectors.
* Growing **disillusionment with democratic institutions** has led to **youth increasingly losing interest in electoral democracy**, signaling a concerning trend.
* **Ghana has an active SDG platform**, serving as a key mechanism for coordination, monitoring, and stakeholder engagement.
* Through the [Ghana Civil Society Platform on the SDGs](https://sdgglobalforum.org/members/detail/ghana-civil-society-organisations-platform-on-the-sustainable-development-goals), civil society has been included in all three VNRS presented by Ghana.
  + **Civil society is engaged from start to finish**, contributing to **data collection**, **validation and the presentation of the report**.
  + **CSOs** are recognized as **critical stakeholders** in governance and policy processes.
  + Civil society also engages in citizen monitoring, evidence-based advocacy and policy dialogues in the **follow-up and implementation** of the VNR.
* The **CSO platform includes over 500 groups**, serving as a hub for data gathering and stakeholder dialogue. This includes contributing to the **official government report**, but also **producing three** [**independent alternative reports**](https://www.sendwestafrica.org/nu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Citizens-perseptives-on-SDGs-delivery-machanism-in-Ghana-2022.pdf) that were presented with complementary or critical perspectives.
* Findings from civil society reports find that **corruption continues to be a systemic barrier**, especially through weak enforcement of anti-corruption laws in public procurement, inadequate transparency in budgeting, limited access to justice and beneficial ownership.
* Corruption and a lack of transparency put the achievement of all the SDGs at risk, and institutionalized participation of **civil society is critical** to addressing these issues.

[**Ms. Terezie Hiclová, Czech UN Youth Delegate**](https://www.linkedin.com/in/terezie-hiclova/?originalSubdomain=fr)

* **SDG16 was identified as a top priority for Czech youth** in the 2025 VNR, as democratic governance is associated with security, predictability and the ability to shape their future.
* As we see **democratic backsliding** in the Central and Eastern European region, as well as foreign interference driven by disinformation campaigns, democracy becomes increasingly important.
* Protecting democracy is viewed by youth as essential for ensuring **stability, security, and personal agency.** The war in Ukraine has reinforced the importance of free elections, freedom of speech, and democratic governance.
* **Inclusive institutions** are necessary not only for trust and stability, but also to advance any sustainable development agenda.
* **Young people remain structurally underrepresented** in formal decision-making processes. However, when young people are included, they often advocate for inclusion, justice, and anti-corruption, reflecting the core pillars of SDG16.
* [Youth engagement in the Czech VNR](https://www.cr2030.cz/system/files/2025-05/1%20Youth%20Perspective%20for%20the%20Purposes%20of%20the%20Voluntary%20National%20Review%202025.docx.pdf) process is an example of good practice including four in-person focus groups and a nationwide quantitative youth survey.
* **Youth inclusion is an investment in societal resilience and social cohesion**. To build long-term resilience, we must invest in civic education and digital literacy to support young people in navigating access to information and democratic participation.