

GUIDANCE NOTE

PREPARATIONS FOR GENDER- RESPONSIVE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS FOR UN WOMEN COUNTRY AND REGIONAL OFFICES



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UN WOMEN

New York, June 2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
ACRONYMS	5
I. INTRODUCTION	6
II. KEY PRINCIPLES FOR CONDUCTING A VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW	9
III. ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES FOR NATIONAL LEVEL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS	11
IV. NATIONAL PRESENTATIONS AT THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM	17
V. FOLLOW-UP TO THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM	18
VI. TIMELINE, ROADMAP AND GUIDING QUESTIONS	19
VII. KEY RESOURCES	22

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The *Guidance Note on Preparations for Gender-Responsive Voluntary National Reviews for UN Women Country and Regional Offices* was developed in response to a need identified by members of the UN Women Sustainable Development Goals Community of Practice, operated under The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded-project “Acceleration of Gender-responsive Sustainable Development Goals Localization – UN Women Executive Secretariat Capacity Support Programme.”

The *Guidance Note* was produced by the UN System Coordination Division in collaboration with the Inter-Governmental Support Team at UN Women. The principal authors are Catarina Botto and Shivangi Shrivastava. The text was developed in close collaboration with Joann Lee and Sylvia Hordosch. Aparna Mehrotra and Sharon J. Taylor provided valuable guidance through the process of the development of the text. Many thanks to Ginette Azcona, Giuseppe Belsito, Hodan Addou, Hulda Atieno Ouma, Inas Margieh, Silja Rajander, Sophie Browne, Sunita Caminha and Usu Mallya for their valued inputs.

The UN Women Sustainable Development Goals Community of Practice was engaged in the development of the text. Several rounds of consultations on the *Guidance Note* were held with the members of this Community of Practice to garner feedback and input. Special thanks are due to all members of the Community of Practice for their comprehensive review and guidance: Alla Eddin Ayesh, Ana Pashalishvili, Ann-Mari Sundsten, Cyuma Mbayiha, David Saunders, Diana Louise Ofwona, Elaine Conkievich, Elisabeth Diaz, Engell Jaime, Erika Kvapilova, Estela Bulku, Fumie Nakamura, Gabrielle Henderson, Gerald Mora, Halyna Meshcheriakova, Irina Japharidze, Isiuwa Iyehen, Jack Abebe, Janekke Kukler, Josephine Moss, Lara Blanco, Laura Gonzalez Garces, Lorena Barba, Louise Nylin, Lucy Mathenge, Marta Gambarino, Maryse Rebecca Guimond, Michael Faraday, Miriam Bandes Zablah, Nargis Azizova, Rolando Crespo, Ryce Chanchai, Simon Beamish, Simone Ellis Oluoch-Olunya, Ulziisuren Jamsran, Vimbai Prisca Mukota, Yaindy Nuesi, and Zeliha Unaldi.

The *Guidance Note on Preparations for Gender-Responsive Voluntary National Reviews for UN Women Country and Regional Offices* was made possible through the generous support of The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CGEP(s)	Country Gender Equality Profile(s)
DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
MAPS	Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
UNCT(s)	United Nations Country Team(s)
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
UN Women	The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VNR(s)	Voluntary National Review(s)

INTRODUCTION

The [High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development \(HLPF\)](#) constitutes the main United Nations platform for follow-up and review of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) (2030 Agenda). The HLPF provides political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development. It reviews progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda with the aim to integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. As part of the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda¹, Member States are encouraged to conduct voluntary, regular and inclusive reviews at the national and sub-national levels and submit Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the HLPF.

The HLPF meets annually at the ministerial level under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and every four years under the auspices of the General Assembly at the level of heads of state and/or government.¹ Since its establishment, each year the HLPF has been organized along a specific theme and focused on a sub-set of SDGs for in-depth review.² Within the first HLPF cycle (2016-2019), each SDG was featured once with the exception of SDG 17 on Means of Implementation which was discussed at every HLPF session.

Through the VNRs Member States report on their progress on the SDGs and share experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned in SDG implementation. To this end, VNRs are expected to be based on robust follow-up and review processes at the national and local levels. As of 2019, 158 VNRs have been conducted (22 in 2016, 43 in 2017, 46 in 2018 and 47 in 2019) by 142 countries, with 15 countries having conducted more than one VNR.³ As of 19 May 2020, 48 countries have indicated their intention to conduct VNRs for the 2020 HLPF (and 11 for 2021).⁴

To support the development of VNRs, the UN Secretary-General has developed voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at HLPF which provide a framework for common elements within VNRs while allowing for flexibility so countries can adapt to their own circumstances.⁵ In addition, the United Nations

Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) [Handbook for the Preparation of VNRs](#), updated every year, supplements the guidelines by providing basic, practical information on the steps that countries may take when preparing VNRs.⁶

Several regional and global mechanisms also provide support and peer learning opportunities for countries in the VNR cycle. Preparatory global workshops are held by DESA for all Member States preparing VNRs. These workshops provide an opportunity for participating countries to learn from one another's experiences, as well as from countries that presented in previous years. In addition, UN agencies and civil society present knowledge products, tools and other resources that can assist countries in preparing for the reviews. At the regional level, the Regional Fora for Sustainable Development, convened by the five [Regional Commissions](#), are the primary platforms to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in line with regional priorities, including its follow-up and review process, and provide regional inputs to the HLPF. These are resources that may be utilized by national governments with the facilitation of UN Women Country and Regional Offices.

Within this context, *the Guidance Note on Preparations for Gender-Responsive Voluntary National Reviews for UN Women Country and Regional Offices* aims to support UN Women Country and Regional Offices on strategic

¹ The HLPF meets for eight days, of which five are dedicated to the thematic review and three days at the ministerial level.

² HLPF 2019, Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality (SDGs under review: 4, 8, 10, 13, 16, 17); HLPF 2018, Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies (SDGs under review: 6, 7, 11, 12, 15, 17); HLPF 2017, Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world (SDGs under review: 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14, 17)

³ The VNRs, and the Main Messages, are available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>

⁴ See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

⁵ Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF). Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17346Updated_Voluntary_Guidelines.pdf

⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2020). Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: the 2020 Edition.

engagement with the VNR process at the national level to ensure that gender issues are considered and integrated throughout the VNR cycle and subsequently through the implementation, monitoring and reporting of the 2030 Agenda. To this end, in alignment with UN Women's coordination mandate, the *Guidance Note* aims to leverage the VNR process to strengthen the integration of gender perspectives in key frameworks, policy dialogues and advocacy efforts for the gender-responsive implementation of the SDGs.

The *Guidance Note* presents ideas and tools to facilitate UN Women's country-level engagement and strategic dialogue with UN entities, UN Country Teams (UNCTs), governments and civil society to promote coordinated action for gender equality and the empowerment of women throughout the VNR process. This strengthened engagement aims to ensure that the UN system addresses gender considerations coherently and systematically through a participatory and consultative approach in its efforts to support Member States in the VNR process and with the ultimate aim to drive the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for all women and girls.

Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women through the Voluntary National Reviews Cycle

Efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda must be accelerated to bring about the deep transformative change required by 2030. At the time of writing this guidance note, the COVID-19 pandemic is unleashing a human development crisis.⁷ While in 2019 world leaders called for a [Decade of Action](#) to accelerate sustainable solutions to the world's biggest challenges and reaffirmed the crucial need for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls to make progress across all the goals and targets,⁸ the spread

of the pandemic has devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls.⁹ Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls.¹⁰ Not only should women's and girls' voices, needs and priorities be prioritized in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, but their experiences during the pandemic must also guide the future implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The VNRs present a strategic opportunity to advocate for gender perspectives to be meaningfully integrated into national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Accordingly, the inclusion of gender perspectives in VNRs at the HLPF is an indicator under Outcome 1 of UN Women's Strategic Plan 2018-2021: "Particular attention to gender equality and women's empowerment will be paid in the context of the following thematic areas/processes; the follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including by the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development."¹¹ In 2019, seventy-four per cent of national reports integrated a gender perspective.¹²

UN Women can influence the VNRs at various milestones of the VNR Cycle (see Section VI for timeline and roadmap providing further detail on possible entry points for UN Women Country and Regional Offices). At present, UN Women supports national governments and other stakeholders with policy advice, technical assistance, capacity building and opportunities for dialogue on the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including actions in support of SDG 5 and gender-related aspects of all other goals. In preparation for the HLPF, UN Women has also offered a range of support to key stakeholders including the provision of technical support to governments to prepare VNRs at the country level, the presentation of evidence and data in regional forums, and the development of knowledge products.¹³

⁷ UNDP. (2020). Human Development Perspectives. COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery.

⁸ Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly, 9 September 2019.

⁹ See:

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-sg-put-women-and-girls-at-the-centre-of-efforts-to-recover-from-covid19>

¹⁰ United Nations. (2020). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. Available at:

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>

¹¹ See: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/executive-board/strategic-plan/outcome-area-1>

¹² UN Women. (2020). Report of the Under-Secretary-General/Executive

Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women on progress made on the Strategic Plan 2018-2021, including the midterm review of the Strategic Plan. Available at:

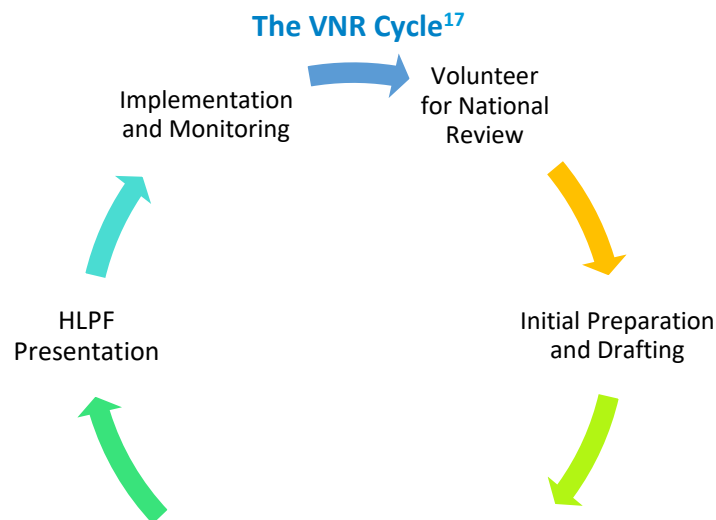
<https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/executive%20board/2020/annual%20session/docs/dgacm%20temporary/unw2020%20edar%20incl%20mtr%20clean.pdf?la=en&vs=3421>

¹³ Annual Report of the Under-Secretary-General/Executive Director on the implementation of the Strategic Plan 2018-2021, UNW/2019/2

Analysis of the VNRs from 2016-2019 indicates that nearly all include general references to gender equality and women and girls in some way, while most also have some integration of a gender perspective (i.e. assesses the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels). A 2018 civil society analysis of the VNRs revealed that references to gender equality in the VNR reports centred on legal instruments (31 of 46 reporting countries), specific policies and strategies (25 of 46 reporting countries), and projects and other benefits that support women (24 of 46 reporting countries).¹⁴ However, less than a quarter of the reviews mentioned collaboration with UN Women in implementation of the 2030 Agenda.¹⁵ In addition, an analysis of the 46 VNRs presented in 2018 found that VNR reporting has not incorporated evaluative and gender-responsive evidence.¹⁶

Accordingly, the systematic incorporation of gender perspectives in the VNRs requires comprehensive engagement of UN Women Country and Regional Offices, including through technical assistance and guidance to national gender equality mechanisms and relevant

stakeholders to integrate a gender perspective in their national reviews. Country Offices of those countries that have not conducted a VNR should encourage countries to volunteer for reviews.



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