ENGAGING ACADEMIA, RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS, THE MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS

WHAT IS IT?

ACADEMIA AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

Most 2019 VNRs referenced some sort of engagement by **academia**, with the role of academia and research institutions in VNR processes being generally technical and advisory in nature.

Primary channels of engagement and support include:
*   Multi-stakeholder consultations,
*   National SDG Councils or Committees, and
*   Analytical reports and research to support VNR development and statistical annexes, on SDG 16 or other SDGs.

Academia has also been involved in awareness-raising, entering into partnerships with government actors to create SDGs-focused sustainability centers or research portfolios.

To this end, Pakistan reported on the establishment of 'SDG Centers of Excellence' that aim to spearhead research on different SDGs.

MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS

In addition to academia, members of the media and journalists have been engaged in VNR preparation and validation through National SDG Committees/Councils or Working Groups.

Media has also engaged more broadly, disseminating the VNR and key findings, raising awareness and supporting accountability.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Academia and research institutions bring analysis, critical thinking, complex data assessment, and problem-solving to the VNR process, contributing to "open, inclusive, participatory and transparent" monitoring and review processes.

Media, with its most fundamental task being to inform without fear or favor,[1] has an inherent role to play around the VNR in terms of accountability, awareness, and access to information, demonstrating clear links to SDG 16.

> As highlighted by UNDP and UNESCO, a **free, independent and pluralist media** sector is a prerequisite to functioning democracies and the creation of more peaceful, just and inclusive societies. However, while "independent media play an essential role in societies [...] journalism is under increased threat as a result of public and private sector influence that endangers editorial independence."

ARTICLE 19's 2018-2019 Global Expression Report notes that global freedom of expression in 2018 had been at its lowest point since 2008, jeopardizing the media's role in supporting SDG 16 and the larger 2030 Agenda.

In 2019, 30 of the 47 countries providing a VNR had adopted legal frameworks on access to information or the right to information. However, while 127 countries had adopted right to information or freedom of information laws, with at least 27 adopting relevant guarantees since 2014, significant challenges persist in terms of implementation.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests should provide citizens with the right to access public information relevant to the SDGs.

> 💡 **Bottom Line:** As we reflect upon the role of media for SDG 16 and in upholding FOIAs, thought should also be given to the multiplier effects of media development for SDG 16, including as related to the responsiveness and quality of services, and the need for media protection.

Freedom of Expression and COVID-19

Restrictions and threats to freedom of expression and access to reliable and independent journalism are often compounded during times of crisis. A 'COVID-19 Tracker', created by the Centre for Law and Democracy, keeps track of legal measures taken by countries to temporarily alter or suspend right-to-information obligations due to COVID-19. Media are an important user group of the right to information and the right to information plays an important role in open and inclusive societies generally. Public access to reliable, credible, user-friendly, and free data and information is key to holding governments to account, to evaluating public officials in implementing and monitoring the SDGs, and to facilitating effective participation.

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1   While explicitly political media exists, formal and informal, the media's primary role is information dissemination.

HOW IS IT APPROACHED?

NATIONAL SDGS COUNCILS AND COMMITTEES, TECHNICAL WORKING GROUPS, AND NDPS

As mentioned, channels of engagement and consultation for academia and media include national SDG Councils and Committees, as well as technical working groups focused on SDG 16 and other SDGs. This engagement can translate directly into national development planning.

Ghana's medium-term national development policy framework (2018-2021) was prepared mainly through the engagement of cross-sectoral planning groups comprising representatives of the public sector, private sector, civil society, academia, journalists, think-tanks, faith-based organizations, and other groups.

SURVEYS AND WORKSHOPS

Other means of engagement include surveys, workshops, and other events. According to the 2019 VNRs, 12 countries had representatives from academia in the national SDG council or in technical or advisory groups, while 24 countries included members of academia in surveys, consultations, workshops and/or other events.

PARTNERSHIPS AND RESEARCH

Academic centers may provide for more systematic engagement in post-VNR processes and implementation, lending themselves to more regular contributions to NDPs in terms of research, analysis, monitoring, etc.

Additional attention may be directed to increasing south-north, south-south, as well as north-south partnerships among universities and research institutions to share research and expertise and to support capacity-building.

Case Study: Partnering on the VNR and SDG Country Reports, South African SDG Hub

The South African SDG Hub is a think tank at the University of Pretoria designed to connect South African policymakers with the relevant South African research related to the SDGs. In 2018, the Hub released a report on the challenges and opportunities related to SDG implementation in the country,including SDG 16. In 2019, the Hub released another report on aligning the SDGs, the African Union's Agenda 2063, and South Africa's NDP, again including analysis of the role of SDG 16. In 2019, the Hub played a leading role in drafting South Africa's first extensive SDG Country Report, which in turn fed into South Africa's VNR. It continues in its partnership with the Presidency of South Africa today, supporting policy development and analysis around national priority issues. In supporting one of South Africa's 2019 VNR Main Messages, focused on ensuring that South African citizens have access to government information, the Hub created and supports an online portal of open-access peer-review articles, tagged by SDG. Going forward, it will continue to make this platform more user-friendly and aims to invite researchers from South Africa's 26 public universities to draft briefing notes and articles related to the SDGs.

* This case study draws from 2019 interviews with the South African SDG Hub.

AWARENESS RAISING, DISSEMINATION AND THE MEDIA

Media can also be instrumental in disseminating VNRs and reporting on where SDG recommendations or commitments are, or are not being met, including in terms of legislation and policy related to media freedoms and access to information.
To this end, several VNR reports expressed a need for strong communication and awareness-raising efforts around the VNR, with media as a critical actor in this space.
More capacity-building for media actors may prove critical, not just to disseminate VNR information as linked to a country's NDP and SDG 16, but also as related to the 2030 Agenda generally and at all levels.