

BELIEVE IN BETTER

A WORKING PAPER ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S INCLUSION IN NATIONAL FOLLOW UP, REVIEW AND ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESSES OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

APRIL 2020



Who is this working paper for?

This concise working paper is aimed at supporting governments, parliamentarians, UN and multi-lateral agency staff, civil society organizations, youth-led and youth serving organizations, networks, groups, and UN entities. It aims to:



Document promising case studies of young people's current participation in follow-up, review and accountability processes, especially at local and national levels based on principles of meaningful engagement.



Highlight how an intersectional analysis highlights differences in how young people's participation in monitoring and accountability is experienced.



Understand young people's demands and recommendations for meaningful inclusion in national follow-up, review and accountability processes of the SDGs.



Encourage national governments, multilateral organizations and civil society to take action to create participatory mechanisms, ensuring that young people can access and create relevant spaces (including translocal), and contribute to the formal follow-up and review processes of the SDGs.



Provide recommendations to work towards building social trust and inter-generational solidarity.

The process

The process to produce this working paper included: a desk review, a consultation at the High-Level Political Forum in July 2019 at the UN in New York, reviews and inputs from the office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, ActionAid, the Major Group for Children, and Youth, and Restless Development - based on their engagement in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda, and provision of case studies and inputs into a short online survey. Consequently, a limitation of a short and focused methodology has meant that the ability to include the most marginalized (via focus groups and outreach strategies) has not been possible. Annex 2 and Annex 3 provide overviews of the demographics of those who participated in the online survey and consultative meeting respectively. This working paper is intended to inform subsequent in-depth benchmarking papers, which will address in greater detail the structural issues and analytical framework that prevent young people's meaningful participation.

Foreword

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes young people as its ‘torchbearers’. Currently our world is the youngest it has ever been, with over 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24. The success or failure of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will directly affect the empowerment and opportunities of this generation of young people, the majority of whom call the global south their home.

Even though they are undoubtedly the generation most impacted by the delivery of the 2030 Agenda, young people are not passively waiting for change to happen. They are taking matters into their own hands; leading initiatives in their communities, countries and at the global level to advance and monitor the implementation of the SDGs.

In my work as the UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, I have the unique privilege of meeting young people on their home turf. In all the places I get to visit, from rural villages in The Gambia, to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, to fishing villages in the Maldivian Islands, to shelled buildings in the Gaza Strip; young people are mobilizing, innovating and finding local solutions to advance the SDGs. They are running advocacy campaigns, volunteering in community projects, starting sustainable businesses and developing tech-based solutions. Most importantly, they are holding duty bearers to account.

Climate marchers in Berlin, high schoolers demanding better road safety in Bangladesh, young people writing shadow reports in Nepal, teenagers writing letters to MPs in Britain, shadow theatre groups telling stories of revolution in Sudan, youth councils contributing to Voluntary National Reviews in the Netherlands: young people are finding creative ways to demand accountability from their leaders and institutions.

This paper provides a snapshot of some of those lived experiences of young people around the world, based on *their* stories and feedback. It provides concrete recommendations for governments, civil society and international organizations to better support, facilitate and scale-up youth-led accountability processes.



I sincerely hope this paper leaves all our readers with a strong conviction to put youth-led accountability front and center of the Decade of Action, and the 10 years left to deliver on the SDGs.

JAYATHMA WICKRAMANAYAKE
UN SECRETARY GENERAL’S ENVOY ON YOUTH

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Acronyms

2030 Agenda	The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
CCIC	Canadian Council for International Co-operation
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
LGBTQI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (or: queer), intersex
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VNRs	Voluntary National Reviews



Promoting civil participation
and awareness
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

Glossary

Accountability	Refers to the process of holding powerful stakeholders responsible for their commitments and actions. The OECD defines this as setting clear goals and targets, being responsible for delivering on them and accepting potential sanctions for lack of compliance with commitments. ¹
2030 agenda	Adopted by all UN member states in 2015 to provide a blueprint for people, planet and prosperity . ² It seeks to strengthen universal peace and larger freedoms. The UN recognizes that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge, and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, are mandated to implement this plan. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets demonstrate the scale and ambition of this universal Agenda.
Follow up and review processes	The High-level Political Forum (see below) has a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level, with inputs from regional, national and local levels, working coherently with the UN General Assembly, Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and other relevant forums. It facilitates sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, and provides political leadership, guidance and recommendations for follow-up. It promotes system-wide coherence and coordination of sustainable development policies. Civil society (including young people) are formally mandated through the High-level Political Forum to contribute to follow-up and review processes . ³
High-level political forum	The UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development was established in 2012 as an outcome of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) . ⁴ The Forum provides political leadership and guidance, including how to enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner, at all levels. The Forum meets annually under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council ⁵ for eight days, including a three-day ministerial segment, and every four years at the level of heads of state and government, under the auspices of the UN General Assembly . ⁶
Intergenerational approach	Young people and adults working together to address social problems is not new. Decades of work involving community and youth development have acknowledged the responsibility adults have towards improving young people's lives and, similarly, the responsibility of young people to contribute to their own and community development. This is often understood as an intergenerational approach , ⁷ which can include families, communities and other support systems to raise healthy young people, strong families and responsible communities. ⁸

Intersectionality According to the 2019 [UNDP Human Development Report](#), intersectionality is the complex, cumulative way the effects of different forms of discrimination combine, overlap or intersect – and are amplified when put together. “A sociological term, intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categories such as race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, ability and residence status, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. It emerges from the literature on civil legal rights. It recognizes that policies can exclude people who face overlapping discrimination unique to them. Overlapping identities must be considered in research and policy analysis because different social norms and stereotypes of exclusion can be associated with different identities.”⁹ The SDGs acknowledge that different identities face different and compounding barriers to access and provision of rights and services.

Leave No one Behind With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, UN member states pledged to ensure “no one will be left behind” and to “endeavor to reach the furthest behind first”. UNDP’s 2018 paper¹⁰ advances a framework that governments and stakeholders can use to act on their pledge in a way that enables and accelerates progress to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. It also seeks to inform the way UNDP works with countries to implement the 2030 Agenda. Five factors are proposed as key to understanding who is being left behind and why: discrimination; place of residence; socio-economic status; governance; and vulnerability to shocks. There is also a [civil society partnership group](#)¹¹ that works together to further this sub-agenda.

Sustainable Development The 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#)¹² and 169 targets are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. The 17 SDGs, also referred to as the Global Goals, are an urgent call for action by all countries in the global north and south for a global partnership.

Translocal A concept and approach that has growing significance for international development.¹³ It focuses attention on the socio-spatial dynamics and processes of identity formation that transcend boundaries (in particular the nation state), and instead examines the significance of networked places, whereby mobility and circulations of ideas, symbols and knowledge are created and re-created, often from one locality to another.¹⁴ In terms of youth development and identities, the work of [Rhize \(2016\)](#) shows that conventional boundaries between local, global and national are much more blurred now, and the transmission and re-shaping of knowledge and actions, via local-to-local connections of global issues, is generating new approaches, shaped by a *multiplicity* of local experiences.¹⁵

Transparency A characteristic of governments, companies, organizations and individuals of being open in the clear disclosure of information rules, plans, processes and actions.¹⁶

Voluntary National Reviews

As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to ensure regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are both country-led and driven. These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the High-Level Political Forum, meeting under the auspices of ECOSOC. Regular reviews by the High-Level Political Forum are to be voluntary, state-led and involve multiple stakeholders. The 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](#)¹⁷ also seek to strengthen government policies and institutions, and mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the SDGs.

Youth

For the purposes of this paper the terms ‘youth’ and ‘young person/people’ are used interchangeably. This term recognizes the diverse spectrum of young people (race, gender, class, caste, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity) across the age range of 18-35. This aims to avoid the problematic binary language of women and men, which excludes people who don’t identify as either, as well as to ensure that ‘youth’ is not only understood as young men. In addition, it is recognized that some UN agencies or member states may refer to a slightly different age range, such as 15-24.

Youth 2030

The [United Nations Youth Strategy](#),¹⁸ launched in 2018 to act as a guide for the UN system, to not only step up support for the empowerment of young people, but also to work with young people as equal partners. Its vision is: a world in which the human rights of every young person are realized; that ensures every young person is empowered to achieve their full potential; and that recognizes young people’s agency, resilience and their positive contributions as agents of change.





Executive summary

If we are to accept, understand and actively support young people's social, civic and political action in the world today, then we need to realize that many young people's lived experiences and actions cut across single issues and physical geographies. Many youth activists and advocates, including those who are quoted in this paper, have strongly expressed this point. It should be a **wake-up call** for us all, to be concerned with the intersectional, inter-related and compound nature of issues that confront all peoples and our planet.

Our world is faced with **unprecedented global challenges** – the climate crisis, shifting demographics, pandemics, rapidly advancing technologies, new conflicts and forms of violence, rising inequalities and increased marginalization of vulnerable communities. Human rights defenders are increasingly being targeted, and opportunities for dialogue and diverse views silenced. We have seen a breakdown in individual and social trust in institutions, prevalence of unchecked corruption, continued greed and a lack of diverse representation.¹⁹

The **impact of these developments on young people is stark**. Given the monumental 1.8 billion young people in the world today,²⁰ it is vital **that we tackle the root causes** of these challenges – and **involve young people** in all their diversity in doing so.

To that end it is important to accept, understand and actively support young people's engagement in the follow-up, review and accountability processes of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).²¹ This is one significant avenue – a practical and **visible entry point** – from which older generations can

and should demonstrate their commitment to intergenerational solidarity (in line with the ‘whole-of-society’ or ‘whole-of-government’ or ‘multi-stakeholder approach’) embedded in the 2030 Agenda.

Young people’s persistent calls to participate in accountability processes presents to us a sunbeam of hope; a trajectory in these turbulent times to be embraced. **Enabling the spaces** and building inclusive monitoring and accountability processes for young people to contribute to and engage in the 2030 Agenda processes is a significant action. It would demonstrate that largely adult-led institutions, from the local to global, acknowledge and accept that young people in all their diversity can and should be making decisions and offering solutions about our shared present and future.

Below is the summary of the findings and recommendations that have emerged from the process of producing this working paper, which includes recommendations from young people and youth-serving organizations. If the promise of the 2030 Agenda is to be realized, then the follow-up, review and accountability processes must be:

Embedded

The 2030 Agenda must be interwoven with national and sub-national political processes and bodies that meaningfully engage young people as part of legislation, planning and budgeting processes. This includes creating an enabling environment; strengthening the capacities of public officials to engage and respond to young people’s inputs and concerns; ensuring the 2030 Agenda is made less of a separate UN process;²² radically changing communication, outreach and engagement strategies to ensure the language, places of interaction and processes are fit for purpose; investing in youth delegations; integrating youth engagement in national people’s/citizens’ forums; and practicing participatory budgeting with young people in all their diversity as it relates to follow-up, review and accountability.

Localized (multiple localities to global)

The 2030 Agenda must do a much better job of bringing diverse voices, and not ‘leaving the furthest behind’ behind. This means that the VNR processes should be localized to include Voluntary Local Reviews at the municipal/city level, and officials should encourage and learn from shadow/spotlight/parallel reports, as well as informing and educating young people in all their diversity on both the SDGs and monitoring processes. Further research should also be commissioned to conduct root cause (structural drivers) analysis, and address systemic discrimination (structural barriers), as well as adequately collecting disaggregated data, both quantitative and qualitative, from diverse sources of knowledge, to help inform the current trends and future scenarios towards the 2030 Agenda.

Transparent

If young people and their movements and organizations are going to have a chance to organize and develop the social infrastructure around engaging in the process, it will have to be a more transparent, organized and regular process. This means: the VNRs and Voluntary Local Reviews must be at least bi-annual processes (ideally yearly); the creation, design and utilization of a simple youth inclusion recommendation and rating system; as well as commitments to ensure diverse youth inclusion in specific national planning, budgeting and review processes. Furthermore, it means ensuring open


access to information for young people on the SDGs and state-led reviews; facilitating youth data collection processes – both collecting data on youth i.e. age and gender disaggregated regarding the SDG targets, but also importantly enabling young people to do monitoring more broadly across the targets, as well as bringing information back to the national and sub-national levels from the High-Level Political Forum and ensuring the engagement of Major Groups and other Stakeholders at the High-Level Political Forum happens much earlier and more extensively. Finally, at the High-Level Political Forum there should be mandated spaces (online and during the regional sustainable development forums) for Major Groups and other Stakeholders to present shadow/spotlight/parallel reports.

The decade of accelerated action and transformational change needed to achieve the SDGs by 2030 will only be achieved through a decade of strengthened accountability – driven by young people in all their diversity.

Young partners with the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth during the European Development Days.
PHOTO: UNIC EUROPE



Section 1. Context: address structural barriers and recalibrate intergenerational solidarity



“No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death.”

KOFI ANNAN, [FORMER SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS](#).

Over the past four years, many young people in formal and informal networks have been contributing to the follow-up, review, monitoring and accountability of the SDGs in their communities. However, there remains an important question: **how meaningfully are young people in all their diversity actually included?** This working paper presents emerging promising practice, but also calls for more to be done. Not simply because of the moral imperative to do so, but because of the growing recognition that working with young people as equal partners produces more effective, informed outcomes that benefit the whole of society.²³

The pace of change is far too slow

It is surprising that 30 years on from the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#),²⁴ a catalyst for subsequent ‘youth’ focused agendas, this message still needs to be heard and acted upon. Key advances made since then include: the [Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development](#) (1994),²⁵ which saw strong attention to the need for young people to have a say in decision-making processes affecting their lives, including in relation to sexual and reproductive health; the [World Program of Action on Youth](#) (1995),²⁶ which provides a policy framework and practical guidelines for national action and international support regarding the situation of youth around the world; and the [Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies](#) (1998),²⁷ which last year saw its successor the [Lisbon+21 Declaration](#)²⁸ adopted by Ministers of Youth from across the world. The UN General Assembly’s third committee, as well as the Commission for Social Development, each seek to achieve the adoption of a resolution on youth policies and programs by member states annually. In addition at the regional level, key youth-related intergovernmental agreements including the [Ibero-American Youth Pact](#),²⁹ the [Ibero-American Convention on the Rights of Youth](#)³⁰ and the [African Youth Charter](#)³¹ are critical mechanisms for guiding regional advancements of the situation of youth.

While trust, solidarity and the political will to cultivate intergenerational actions has stalled, there are also **pockets of hope for action**: for example, the creation of the [UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth](#)³² role; the two UN Security Council Resolutions on Youth, Peace and Security – 2250 and 2419,³³ and several resolutions on Youth and Human Rights from the UN’s Human Rights Council

– it is important to recognize that youth development and empowerment has expanded beyond the more traditional social-economic multilateral spaces. Furthermore, in support of member states’ commitments to the global youth development agenda, the UN Secretary-General launched the first ever UN Youth Strategy, Youth2030, in 2018, which acts as an umbrella framework to guide the entire UN system as it steps up its work with and for young people. Among other objectives, the strategy aims to ensure the engagement and participation of young people in the implementation, review and follow-up of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#),³⁴ as well as other global agendas. Furthermore, youth issues are referenced in wider agendas, including the [Addis Ababa Agenda for Action](#) (2015),³⁵ and other outcomes, such as the Ministerial Declaration adopted at the High-Level Political Forum. The largest annual convening on youth at the UN, the ECOSOC Youth Forum, has played a key role in elevating the focus on youth empowerment and meaningful youth engagement in the implementation, follow-up and review of the SDGs, and other agendas relevant to youth.

Yet, despite numerous gains in terms of institutional commitments and intergovernmental agreements, resolutions and convenings, there remain fundamental shortfalls. The main **challenge remains implementation**, and translating these agreements and frameworks into concrete policies and programs on the ground in order to have a real and tangible impact on young people in their communities and societies.

Alongside many young hopes for the future, such as a quality education, adequate health care, personal safety and a decent and dignified job, many young people actively seek bigger ideals and work to promote [freedom, belonging and social and environmental justice](#).³⁶ These ideals, whilst not always explicitly articulated in the SDGs, are part of the history and narratives that inform them – but they are rarely communicated to young people in ways and places that resonate with them. The slow pace of change is partially due to the need to seek consensus, and to translate global agendas into tangible policies and programs in communities. However, governments, organizations and civil society supporting young people must do better to engage with young people’s advocacy ideals, and encourage open discussion and debate, as the Townhall roundtable discussions in Canada on the Green New Deal point towards [\(see Case Study 1\)](#).

A young advocate demanding accountability from duty bearers.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID



Structural inequalities

As much as young people are included in SDG processes, duty bearers and adult-run institutions must acknowledge and **tackle head on the structural inequalities infused in identity politics**, in every society. There are systemic structural barriers in many young people's lives across the globe, such as profit-driven economic models, apathy towards the climate crisis, age-based discrimination and poor public services. Much has been written about these from academics, NGOs, journalists – and importantly, by young storytellers themselves.³⁷ And whilst of course there are localized contextualized nuances, there are also many common threads.

Philip Alston, Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, highlights the **compounded and multidimensional aspects of extreme poverty**, which he rightly argues is 'a political choice' of governments and their backers. Young people often lack access to education, health services or safe drinking water and basic sanitation due to failures from governments and service providers who put short-term profit ahead of the wellbeing of people and planet.³⁸ Severe deprivation can be a cause or consequence of human rights violations, e.g. limited access to decent education or jobs. In addition, freedoms (of assembly, free speech and so on) are being eroded, as the [work of CIVICUS](#) shows.³⁹ As [Just Associates and the Fund for Global Human Rights](#) aptly state; "rather than a contest over civic space or even human rights, this is a struggle between **competing narratives and values**: those on one hand rooted in respect for human life, indigenous worldviews and communities, protecting the environment and deepening democracy, inclusivity, equity and justice; versus those on the other hand that promote unfettered development, free market, authoritarianism, fundamentalisms and nationalism that privilege dominant discriminatory structures, norms and groups at the expense of others".⁴⁰ Young people often find themselves at the interface of this struggle, as they **represent both the hopes and fears of many societies**.⁴¹

Historically, 'youth' has also been taken for granted in many northern cultures and normalized as a period in a person's life that primarily concerns time alone; especially with regards to personal and social development.⁴² This has frequently blindsided the '**relationality**' of **young people's lives**, which is often overlooked. Youth studies have long privileged passages of time over spatiality (how places and people interact to define each other). Farrugia and Wood (2017) suggest there has been a "shift from youth as an experience of progress through time (timespace), to **youth as a ...process that unfolds relationally** as part of the material and symbolic production of space," (lived spaces).⁴³ They argue that understanding youth only via passages of time is in fact misleading, and does not reflect the lived experiences that our young people negotiate. It can also prove exclusionary in terms of policy, if it is only based on age.

Young people in all their diversity must have their freedoms and rights honored to express, review and debate; including asking duty bearers questions, as the broader work of [Clement Voule on freedom of expression](#) espouses.⁴⁴ They must also be supported to be a part of their many local and global communities; as well as seeking social justice where it has been blotted out. **The SDGs cannot simply be reduced to a list of goals, targets and indicators**. Indeed 'business as usual' is insufficient. It will only perpetuate systems that continue to further entrench inequalities with impunity. A question duty bearers must confront, and act upon, is: will improving accountability mechanisms alone change the structural issues facing young people?



Students from Al Hadj Ibrahima Thiaw School in Dakar raising awareness about the need to prevent child marriage and avoid teenage pregnancies with the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth.

PHOTO: SARAH KENYI / UNFPA

Strengthening the role of young people in monitoring and accountability processes

In 2014, almost 10 million people from 194 countries voted in the first UN MyWorld survey, helping to define the SDGs.⁴⁵ Seventy-four percent of voters who prioritized having honest (non-corrupt and transparent) governments (Goal 16), were young people aged 16-30 (over 340,000 votes). Therefore, there is civic will amongst many young people to hold their duty bearers to account. [The UN's Global Youth Call](#)⁴⁶ built on the MyWorld survey results, engaging young people across the globe on a crowdsourcing platform with key global youth organizations, networks and UN entities. It sought to collectively define proposals for youth-relevant targets in the post-2015 agenda, and was endorsed by thousands of youth organizations and networks around the world. It was also welcomed as a key input by member states in the process that culminated in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Global Youth Call prioritized governance and young people's meaningful participation and access to decision-making processes.

The Interagency Working Group on Youth and the 2030 Agenda, co-chaired by the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth and UNDP, brings together UN agencies, youth organizations, networks and delegates. It has over the past years coordinated efforts to keep momentum and focus on the importance of meaningful youth engagement in the follow-up and review processes of the SDGs. It for instance established a channel for youth inputs into the preparations and organization of the ECOSOC Youth Fora, resulting eventually in the ECOSOC Youth Forum organizers formalizing that role and engaging directly through the Major Group for Children and Youth and the International Coordination Mechanism for Youth Organizations. It also was key to hosting various side events during the High-Level Political Forum, to call attention to the importance of involving youth in follow-up and review of SDG implementation at all levels and highlighting good practices on the ground.

Furthermore, the SDG Accountability Toolkit by the TAP Network (2019), as well as the Global Alliance report⁴⁷ (prepared for the High-Level Political Forum in July 2019), draw together a set of key recommendations. They acknowledge that young people's capabilities and inputs still remain largely ignored: "Governments and UN agencies need to support the participation of ordinary people in the implementation and monitoring of SDG 16+, especially women, youth and those population groups without citizenship status who are currently largely absent from SDG 16+ action."⁴⁸ Whilst 'youth' are often referenced alongside women as a marginalized group, understanding which youth is less evidenced.

Notably, in emergency and crisis settings, young people are uniquely placed to drive citizen-led accountability initiatives. Their meaningful inclusion in program design, implementation, follow-up and review improves humanitarian effectiveness and efficiency, and strengthens the resilience of communities.⁴⁹ Interviewees in the ActionAid and Restless Development (2019) report⁵⁰ said that young people often have higher levels of education than previous generations, as well as networks within the community, eagerness to question the status quo, and innovative approaches e.g. using social media and technology to campaign and raise awareness. This means young people may have attributes, thanks to their life circumstances, that are particularly effective.

According to the ActionAid and Restless Development report, young people are often politically active and engaged, but may be learning about politics and decision-making in a vacuum. Therefore, continuous capacity building and **education** is needed so that young people of every generation continue to understand the geopolitics and root causes of any crisis. Education can also support young people to better understand how to navigate their political context, undertake power analysis and build influencing networks. Technical training in other areas such as data collection, analysis and utilization, network building, advocacy and communications continue to be required as important foundational skills for young people to be effective in holding decision-makers to account.⁵¹

Further to this, ‘smart collective ways’ of working should be considered, which enable young people to speak freely without putting them at risk, and align to **do no harm standards**.⁵² Working with youth coalitions, rather than individuals, means that young people feel more protected to use their **voice collectively** and avoid being singled out. This mirrors many youth engagement principles, which often favor collective inputs and transformation processes, above and beyond individual goals.

Principles laying the ground for youth inclusion

There are a number of common [beliefs and principles behind the SDGs](#) that focus on people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership.⁵³ Three in particular have resonance for youth engagement in monitoring and accountability processes of the 2030 Agenda:

1

“The Agenda is guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, including full respect for international law. It is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties, the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document. It is informed by other instruments such as the Declaration on the Right to Development.”

2

“The responsibilities of all states [are] to respect, protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability or other status.”

3

“Member states will work to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts in order to better implement the SDGs, and improve the accessibility to this data to monitor the implantation of the SDGs.”⁵⁴

At a programmatic (implementation) level, the notable 2014 report [by ODI](#)⁵⁵ maps out the importance of key principles for formal and informal SDG accountability mechanisms at the local, national and international levels. So too does UNDP's 2013 report on [youth political participation in electoral cycles](#).⁵⁶ Principles in both focus on being: "participatory, inclusive, accessible, collaborative, and responsive to young people and other marginalized and excluded groups".⁵⁷ Similar principles are echoed by the Major Group for Children and Youth's more generic youth engagement principles,⁵⁸ which draw legitimacy from rights already granted to young people while engaging with the UN. These Principles include:

SELF-ORGANISED:

In the context of engagement, this implies autonomy and being free from outside control or pressure. Each group of young people can and will decide the best structure and working style for them, based on their interests and capacities.

LEGALLY MANDATED RIGHTS-BASED:

In the context of the UN, the imperative to engage in any initiative/avenue should be formally enshrined as a requirement in its rules of procedure or modalities through wording that makes it clear that the 'youth' in the conversation have an equal say in any decision. This is critical to prevent an ad hoc approach and/or be entirely dependent on the prerogative of the engaging party.

DESIGNATED:

Young people should not be made to compete with other stakeholders, parties or groups for physical space when they engage. Specific designated/reserved seats must be made available in the mechanisms through which they engage.

WELL RESOURCED:

Engagement is a right, and young people should not have to spend out-of-pocket for the realization of this right. Arranging budget for the engagement of young people should be the obligation of the engaging entity/entities.

ACCOUNTABLE:

To ensure far-reaching engagement, the respective engagement structures should have built in accountability, reporting and feedback mechanisms towards a constituency of young people.

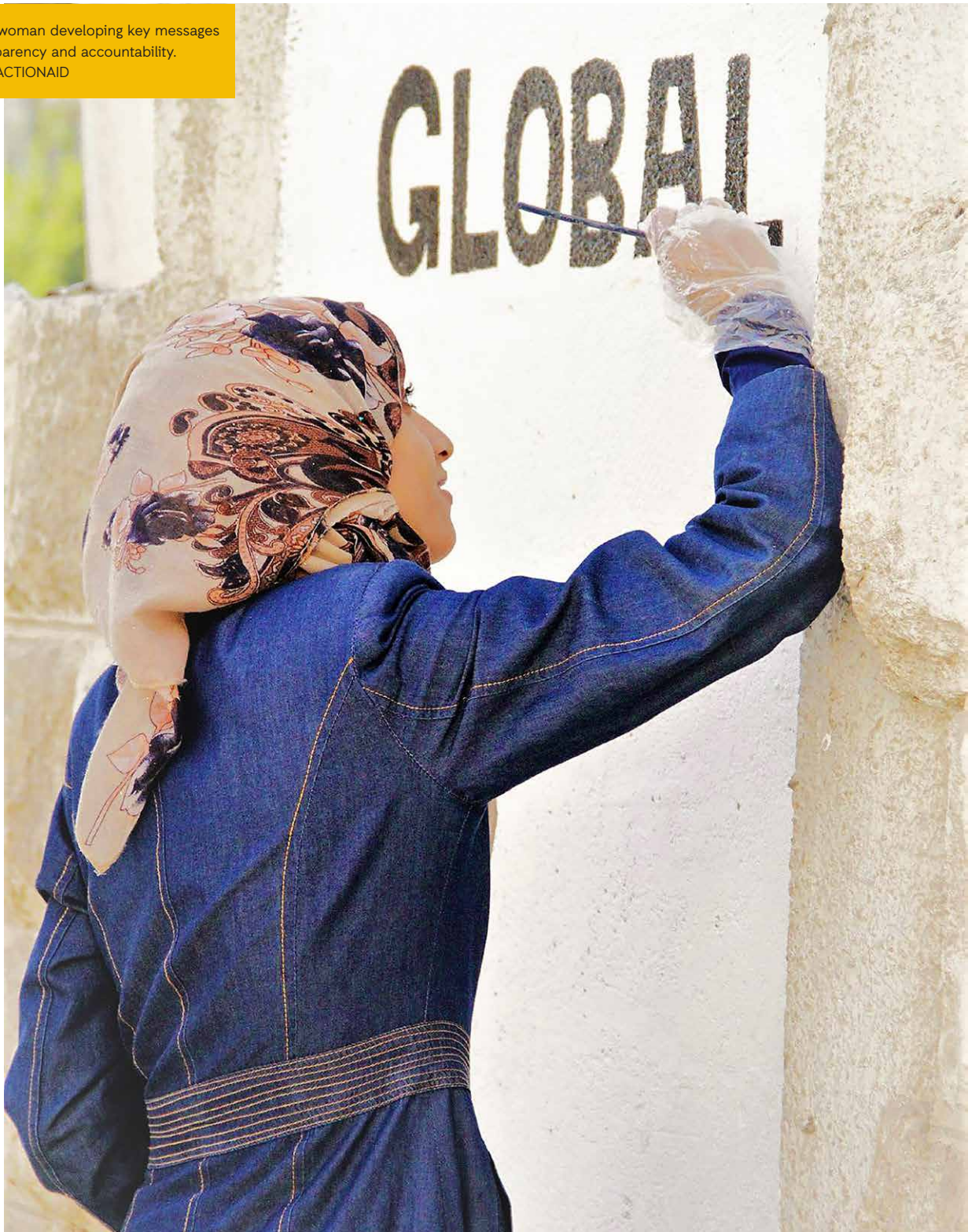
Whilst these are by no means the only principles for engagement, they provide a useful starting point. How therefore, can the grassroots 'living and breathing' of the monitoring and accountability of SDGs happen with and by young people?

Enabling conditions

Social action, including monitoring and accountability actions (such as citizens' reports, score cards, citizen/youth forums) present one way – a significant pathway for young people to seek to tackle many of the interrelated issues of our times. As already mentioned, these include climate change, unemployment, gender-based violence, lack of public services, etc.⁵⁹ This however requires **a deep institutional re-awakening and transitioning**. The ODI states that, "social accountability is less likely to be effective if institutions are not transparent and willing to share information to facilitate social audits, community report cards and citizens' score cards. Key enabling conditions include the right to freedom of assembly, meaningful political participation, freedom of the media, the right to information and protection of civil society space; as well as a legal framework and rule of law to uphold these rights."⁶⁰ Enabling conditions are essential.

This **re-calibrating of intergenerational solidarity** needs to be more forthcoming from adult-led **institutions**, if the 'social trust' construct that many governments talk about is to be secured. Such a process should begin with youth led/ driven monitoring and accountability of the SDGs. Young people being able to collect, analyze, provide recommendations and act on these – on the important issues in their lives – must be further enabled and actively sought. There is a real sense of urgency now.⁶¹

A young woman developing key messages on transparency and accountability.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID



Section 2. Updating inclusion: who is still not being listened to?

"I would tell people in power to listen to our ideas and take us seriously! Stop ignoring us! Appreciate the young people, we know more than you think we do."

STELLA MWANGI, [YOUTH ACTIVIST IN NAIROBI](#).

This section explores the roles of young people from marginalized groups in monitoring and accountability processes for the 2030 Agenda. They are not to be underestimated or ignored.

Approaches and narratives that shape how formal institutions interact with young people should be aligned with the 'leave no one behind' agenda of the SDGs.⁶² The 2017 [ODI report](#) states that: "to meet the 'leave no one behind' agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals – and to reach the furthest behind first – governments must commit to prioritizing outcomes for marginalized groups, and look beyond population averages to identify who and where they are and what they need." In terms of identity analysis, this means **reaching out to those with "multiple, overlapping inequalities** – such as being female, living in a rural area and belonging to a marginalized ethnic group – [this] can amplify the experience of being 'left behind' further still."⁶³ Other social identities that suffer huge stigmatization and discrimination around the world include young people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, refugees and young mothers.⁶⁴

>> Watch: [Believe in Better at the SDG Action Zone, September 2019](#)



Whilst much of the inclusion literature⁶⁵ has done much to further and influence the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda, it is also now drawing increasingly from intersectional analysis.⁶⁶ This not only looks at *how* different marginalization identities (starting with gender, race, ethnicity) act as barriers that ‘keep’ specific groups behind, but it is *also* cognizant of **embedded macro-structural drivers that reinforce power inequalities in societies, i.e. patriarchy,⁶⁷ militarization, ageism and complex histories.** To be young, female and a child bride for example⁶⁸ is to be especially disadvantaged in society. According to the ODI, “in Ethiopia, 15% of rural Somali women are likely to have completed primary school compared with 77% of urban women from other ethnic groups”. From an intersectional perspective, one might ask about a rural Somali woman who is also a young mother – the percentage is likely to be even less, and based on historical social norms.

Any analysis must provide **a nuanced understanding of the extent to which age may compound societal/political/economic disadvantage.** Intersectionality analysis can provide one way of doing this, as it seeks to address the broader societal transformation that needs to happen if our societies are to become more equal, open and rights respecting. Governments, international organizations and civil society should work towards such an approach in their national development (and SDG) agendas.

Many young people are acutely aware of how overlapping and compounded identities can either restrict or advance their agendas/livelihoods. As part of producing this paper, we asked young people via an open online survey:⁶⁹ “Which young people are especially excluded from monitoring and accountability processes?” The top three responses were:

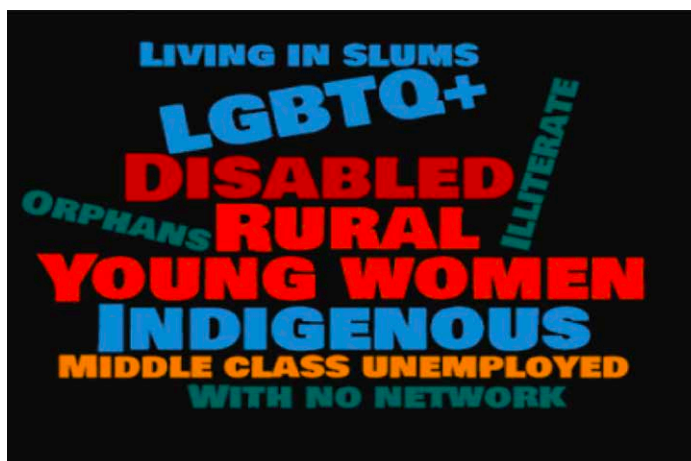
- young people living in remote or rural areas
- young people with a disability or special need (including albinism and HIV positive)
- young women.

Enabling spaces for youth led dialogues.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID



The word cloud below presents an overview of the identities that the young survey respondents believe ‘get left behind the most’. Importantly, the responses acknowledged compounded barriers, but also that young people embody several different identities at the same time. The bigger the font size, the greater the number of responses/weighting. The five social markers of social exclusion cited by the young respondents were: LGBTQ+, disabled, rural, young women and indigenous. The survey, although by no means extensive, provides an indication that young people are highly aware of their diverse identities, and how social norms and systemic barriers are already impacting on their lives.

Respondents who described themselves as from rural settings noted their daily struggles (livelihoods, healthcare, education, etc), coupled with limited/lack of support from local government institutions, as reasons for limited engagement in accountability processes. It is perhaps surprising to see that a few respondents noted that educated (and/or middle class) young people also feel disenfranchised with accountability processes. This is a worrying indictment of the disconnect that is still expressed by some ‘better off’ young people. Whilst they are certainly by no means ‘the furthest left behind’, there remains a fundamental barrier in being identified as simply ‘young’, and a long way to go for most!



In the survey, remoteness both geographically (physically), but also in terms of social networks was the biggest issue, as this quote expresses: “Young people who are not a part of an established youth organization, and who live outside the major cities [are often left out, and only] about 2/3 of the municipalities have local youth councils. In some cases the city council will include the local youth council in SDG implementation processes, but to the extent of my knowledge, this is the exception rather than the rule.” Many of these marginalization factors, such as geographical location, intersect with other social markers. This is not to be underestimated.

In addition to asking who might be the most excluded, a group of 45 young people at the UN High-Level Political Forum discussions in New York in July 2019⁷⁰ were asked: **“How can SDG follow-up and review processes be made more inclusive for particular groups of young people?”** With fervor they acknowledged that much more needs to be done for diverse and marginalized young people from different backgrounds. Below we present a summary of their voices from the consultation:

1. **At the local level, the language and framing of the SDGs should be made more accessible, especially for young people:**
 - “Instead of coming up with the formal narrative/jargon on the SDGs – we can reframe it to acknowledge the problems/issues people are facing. It should *relate to their everyday life experiences*, rather than something that is out of this world.”
 - “*Localize our language* and make it relevant to their everyday lives.”
 - “A lot of young people don’t know what the SDGs are... *so more appropriate information should be provided.*”

2. **At a national level, there is a greater role for National Youth Councils⁷¹ and young SDG ‘champions’** to play in terms of inclusion of young people with diverse identities in the **follow-up**, review and accountability processes:
 - Young people from different backgrounds should have “roles on a continuous rolling basis; supporting officials at local, district and national levels.”
 - “Participating in international spaces will always be less inclusive than having meaningful engagement at the national level. This is where ensuring that accountability implementation is including young people. Countries like to bring young people to international spaces, but they are not actually walking the talk back home.”

3. **At a local to national level, more can be done to understand who are the furthest ‘left behind’ groups** – the young people with compounded disadvantaged identities:
 - “Groups to focus on include young women; people living with disability; people living with albinism; and LGBTQI.” This, of course, could also include many other groups such as religious and ethnic minorities and indigenous youth.

4. **At the global level, bringing the voices of youth into discussions can be strengthened further:**
 - At the High-level Political Forum, “children and youth are left out e.g. the Major Group for Children and Youth is only part of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders’ 3-minute statement;⁷² there is limited space. But each country gets a 20-minute presentation. An improvement would be to make more space, and more time for major groups.” See the final recommendations for specific suggestions.

Creating space for intergenerational dialogue on social inequalities and access to public services.
PHOTO: CASA FLUMINESE



Section 3. Learning how: formal and informal processes and promising practice

“With the inclusion of youth perspectives in these reviews, the VNR process presents a leverage point for youth engagement at the national level in the follow-up and review of 2030 Agenda implementation.”

UN WORLD YOUTH REPORT, 2018⁷³

This section presents six promising practice examples that demonstrate meaningful youth engagement in follow-up, review and accountability of local or national SDG monitoring processes. These should be embedded in national development strategies and processes, and not remain as standalone initiatives.

It is by no means an exhaustive list, but rather intended to provoke reflection, inspiration and adaptation. The examples have been chosen based on their attempts (not always deliberately) of using **intergenerational, intersectional and/or translocal**⁷⁴ analytical approaches. As well as putting into practice the youth engagement principles mentioned in Section 1.

What are the main 2030 Agenda follow-up, review and accountability formal processes?

The **High-Level Political Forum** on Sustainable Development, a mechanism established at the 2012 Rio+20 Conference that replaced the Commission on Sustainable Development, is the main forum for monitoring and review of progress made in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Forum meets annually at the ministerial level, and once every four years at the heads of state level. The first four-year (2016-19) review was held in September 2019. It provided space to share experiences, successes, challenges and lessons learned, including through Voluntary National Review, as well as to better understand the megatrends and localizing agenda. The High-Level Political Forum is further informed by UN Regional Commissions, which convene Regional Forums for Sustainable Development in their five respective regions, as well as various commissions and fora (e.g. the Youth Forum, Commission on the Status of Women, and Financing for Development follow-up forum) of the Economic and Social Council of the UN. They support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including its follow-up and review process, and provide regional perspectives to the High-Level Political Forum.



Young women convening at a safe space for women and girls to develop plans for community awareness.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

The diagram below shows the thematic/SDG focus areas of the High-Level Political Forum since 2016.

HLPF Timeline

2020 Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the need for sustainable development

2019 HLPF under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality



2018 Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies



2017 Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world



2016 Ensuring that no one is left behind

The below presents six promising examples that are divided into two categories, the first being the formal SDG VNR reporting process, and the second representing the period between VNR and formal reporting. These are the ongoing, often more informal mechanisms that provide further opportunities for young people's engagement in SDG monitoring and accountability processes.

I. Formal VNR reporting processes that engage youth

"Civil society must keep demanding meaningful participation. It's positive that many countries mentioned youth and women, but more stakeholder groups need to be included and more detail provided regarding efforts to ensure the process is inclusive and engagement is meaningful."

TOGETHER2030 REPORT⁷⁵

Outlined below are three promising practice case studies reflecting the main means of engaging young people in formal VNR processes.



Case Study 1: Consultations – Jordan

In July 2017 only five countries reported any form of youth engagement in the review and follow-up processes. These were Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Netherlands and Slovenia. Notably **Jordan**, according to the [Together2030 \(2017\)](#) report, undertook a: "particularly inclusive process, with extensive consultations engaging organizations focused on human rights, women's rights and community development; organizations working with youth and volunteers; the private sector; workers' unions; local councils and committees; academia and science and technology communities." Jordan reports that "special attention was dedicated to ensuring the inclusion of women, youth, children and people with disabilities," as well as refugees. Furthermore, the SDG targets and processes have been integrated into the country's three-year executive development plan.⁷⁶

Whilst much has been written on how to carry out respectful consultations with young people,⁷⁷ let's turn our attention to one young contributor to this working paper, Andrea Byfuglien. Andrea suggests that a way to engage young people and their wider communities in SDG follow-up and review is via: **"a roundtable/town hall setting**, similar to what has been happening in Canada regarding how the Green New Deal should be localized and made relevant to different communities. The town hall I participated in was put on by a group of students in my program at the University of British Columbia, and gives priority to young people's voices in the university community. Staff, faculty, residents and everyone else in the university community were invited...[it consists of] breakout groups that discuss and record ideas for what must be included, and what cannot be included in a Green New Deal for Canada. We will use this information to understand the University of British Columbia community's vision and priorities for a Canadian version of the Green New Deal." This is a promising example of intergenerational consultative processes in action.



Case Study 2: Youth delegate representation – Hungary

In 2018, out of 46 VNRs, 26 countries explicitly mentioned that young people were consulted in preparation for the VNRs. Worth noting is the work of **Hungary**, which had an entire chapter in their VNR dedicated to youth delegates called *Fresh Perspectives on the Hungarian VNR: a Section of the Youth Delegates of Hungary to the UN*. In 2016, to further amplify the voices of young people, Hungary joined a growing movement of member states sending youth delegates to the various meetings of the United Nations. These representatives serve as spokespeople for their generation and do not attend based on their individual interests, but instead draw attention to the interests and innovative ideas of the young people they represent, both at home and abroad. Hungarian youth delegates have participated in the work of various UN bodies, including the ECOSOC and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. In the report, Hungary presents the findings of their youth delegates, combined with data provided by the comprehensive Hungarian Youth Research of the New Generation Program conducted in 2016, and the Youth Progress Index produced by European Youth Forum in 2017.⁷⁸

Young people's participation in Voluntary National Reviews: a long way to go!

-
- 2016** > 21 of 23 countries that presented their VNR in 2016 referred to youth in their reports.
> 0 countries included young people in the national follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda.
> 1 country had a youth delegate in the High-Level Political Forum.
-
- 2017** > 37 out of 43 countries that presented their VNR referred to youth in their reports.
> 8 countries included young people in the national follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda.
> 3 countries had a youth delegate in the High-Level Political Forum.
> 2 countries included a young person in the presentation of their VNR.
-
- 2018** > 26 out of 46 countries that presented their VNR explicitly mentioned that young people were consulted in its preparation.
-
- 2019** > 27 of 47 countries that presented their VNR referred to young people in their reports.
> 4 countries referred to the establishment and/or use of National Youth Councils to support the VNR.
> 9 countries mentioned that young people were included in the technical working groups, and in the case of 1 country, inclusion at the highest level of governance mechanisms in developing the VNRs.
-



Case Study 3: National Youth Council contributions – Slovenia

The preparation of the Slovenian VNR (2017) was conducted under the Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy, which functions as a focal point for the Agenda among all the ministries and other state institutions. They developed a unique form of involvement of the National Youth Council of Slovenia in the preparation of the review. After consultations about the process, the National Youth Council and the UN Youth Delegate were invited to prepare a special report divided into two parts. In the first, they summarized a reflection of the government's work in the field of sustainable development from the youth perspective. In the second, a commitment of the Slovenian youth sector to the fulfilment of the goals was presented through details regarding youth sector projects and proposals for future work. During the VNR presentation at the High-Level Political Forum, the UN Youth Delegate of Slovenia addressed the plenary session in the name of the youth sector of Slovenia.

The special report not only put a spotlight on the numerous challenges faced by young people in Slovenia, such as structural unemployment, unstable employment and lack of skills for the future of work. It also highlighted positive aspects and strengths of Slovenian youth, including their awareness of global citizenship, the well-recognized youth sector, state support, participation in decision-making, the highly educated population and high level of gender equality.⁷⁹

II. What happens *in between* the formal SDG-monitoring High-Level Political Forum and VNR processes?

“Young people are more likely to be consulted in the early stages of governance initiatives in order to ‘tick boxes’ on inclusiveness, but young people’s involvement in ongoing reviews is limited, with few chances to provide critical inputs.”⁸⁰

ODI REPORT, (2014)

The formal mechanisms already outlined are crucial, but equally important are the ongoing spaces and ways in which young people can contribute to the ‘everyday’ review and follow-up of the SDGs, social justice and claiming their rights. Civil society can play a much bigger role in supporting young people to engage at the local and national levels, building on their own struggles. This speaks to the youth voices in this review that urge adult-led organizations to: “make the SDGs more accessible, and in a language that connects.” This point is also echoed in SDG16+ reports.⁸¹ Outlined below are three case studies of ways in which young people engage in accountability processes outside the formal VNRs.

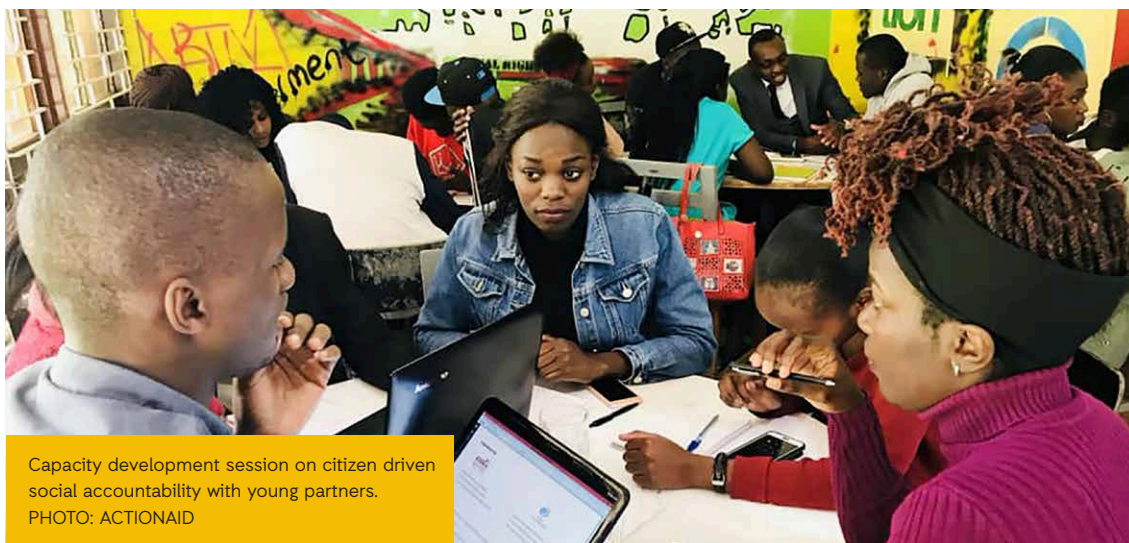


Case Study 4: Citizens' report cards, score cards and citizens' charters of demand – Kenya⁸²

In 2016, the government of Kenya launched a road map for the implementation of the SDGs; 14 counties committing to embed the SDGs into county and national development plans, engage stakeholders and build capacity to implement the SDGs at local level. This roadmap required **county-level governments to integrate SDGs into their local plans**. However, most community members – particularly young people – had little awareness of these commitments, or whether their county governments were implementing them.

To address this issue, during 2017 and 2018 communities in three counties: Baringo, Kilifi and Migori, monitored public service delivery and implementation of selected targets under SDGs 5 (gender equality), 8 (decent work and economic growth) and 16 (peace, justice and democratic institutions). Communities employed an accountability methodology known as the **Six Steps Methodology** to build skills and understanding – especially of women and young people – on citizens' roles in monitoring delivery of the SDGs. Citizens then used different social accountability tools such as citizens' report cards, score cards and citizens' charters of demand to assess public services and deliver demands to government.

In Migori County, the [Activista \(youth\) network](#) and the Kuria Social Accountability Network (KUSAN) conducted sensitization sessions in 27 locations, and surveyed women and young people on their experiences of service delivery and their participation in public affairs. The surveys found gaps in public participation – for example, of those who had participated in the development of the County Integrated Development Plan, only 35% were women and 20% young people. Young people also reported **lower levels of access to services and interaction with their leaders than older people**. Activista and KUSAN convened the Migori County government, civil society organisations and wider stakeholders and shared these findings – which were acknowledged as useful by government representatives. The county government has since activated its website and increased its use of community radio stations, notice boards and service charters to pass information to a broader demographic of citizens.



Capacity development session on citizen driven social accountability with young partners.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID



Case Study 5: Shadow/parallel reporting – Nepal and UK⁸³

Amit Timilsina, President of YUWA⁸⁴ Nepal, engaged in shadow reporting for Nepal's 2017 VNR. According to Amit: "at YUWA, we have held the government in Nepal accountable for the SDGs by engaging in consultation processes for the 2017 Voluntary National Review. Together with LOOM Nepal and the Asia Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, YUWA prepared an alternative SDG report to assess progress through a youth lens, identifying gaps and making practical recommendations."⁸⁵

Shadow reporting by the UK Youth Accountability Advocates team, affiliated with Restless Development, included more than 100 partners who were involved in producing [Measuring Up](#), a civil society shadow report on the UK's progress towards the SDGs.⁸⁶ The UK government coordinated a youth consultation towards their VNR, however a lesson learnt was that they did not provide any funding to cover costs for the young people who attended, which led to a very small section of youth civil society engaging, mostly based in London. The government also gave very short notice for the consultation, and as many young people were either completing exams or in employment at the time, many experienced further barriers to contributing. Whilst it can be a useful process, it does require adequate planning and funds to deliver.



Case Study 6: Youth champions, catalysts and monitors – Malawi

Youth SDGs Corps Malawi is an organization started in October 2018. Their nine-member executive committee consists of **young professionals**⁸⁷ working towards the promotion of youth involvement in the implementation and monitoring of SDGs in Malawi. They are currently implementing an 11-month Youth Arise 2030 and Beyond project in partnership with UNDP, which aims to bring together young people working with their communities on the SDGs. They received training from African Monitor⁸⁸ on project management, teamwork, SDG advocacy and data collection. They also received training from the American Council of Pittsburgh, which is teaching the SDGs in Malawi. They have facilitated events on SDG awareness; teaching SDGs to 100 students at local secondary schools, involving 50 college students from across Malawi in their networks, and a program called 17 women for 17 SDGs, where 17 young women run various initiatives once trained to spread SDG messages to their groups and networks.

Examples of national platforms for civil society on SDGs: spaces that can align intergenerational solidarity...

Citizens' Platform on SDGs – Bangladesh

The Citizens' Platform was launched in 2016, with activities planned until 2021. Apart from the core group of individual members, the Platform also includes 104+ partner organisations from across the country working on SDGs. Overall guidance is provided by an advisory group, with a secretariat hosted by the Center for Policy Dialogue. The Platform provides an opportunity to track the progress of SDG delivery; sensitizes policymakers towards challenges in implementation; brings transparency in the implementation process; and facilitates exchange of information and coordination among all those working on the SDGs in Bangladesh. The Platform also facilitates stakeholders to work for poor and marginalized communities, e.g. ethnic groups, physically challenged etc., particularly in achieving SDG 16.

The Ghana Civil Society Platform on SDGs

Was established in October 2015 to ensure more coordinated civil society efforts in achieving the SDGs in Ghana. The Platform was institutionalized in May 2016 and includes more than 150 member organisations, consisting of coalitions, associations, unions, community-based organisations, local, national and international non-governmental organisations, and religious groups. Membership cuts across the 216 districts of Ghana, and is divided into 17 SDG sub-platforms, one for each of the 17 goals.



Young partners conducting a social audit in a rural community.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

III. Lessons learnt: how have young people in all their diversity been included in the examples? What more could be done?

This working paper now turns to discuss and analyze insightful lessons learnt, practical tips and resources to consider, in order to move forward youth engagement and diverse inclusion in the follow-up, review and accountability processes.

Case Study 4 above demonstrates how young people were a crucial part of an **intergenerational** citizen reporting initiative. The initiative consciously worked with young people in rural areas of Kenya, identifying the structural barriers to their marginalization and trying to understand the root causes of these. In doing so, it identified that some participants experienced compounded barriers that prevented them from being able to both engage in SDG processes, and see their rights to education, health and access public services fulfilled. Furthermore, from a **translocal** perspective, the bringing together of young people from different places enabled a richer discussion of the commonalities and differences in access to services that they face, as well as **enriching strategies for action** based on the findings from the citizen reporting.

Another key aspect towards ensuring effective follow-up and review processes is the potential for youth-led and partnered data gathering. Restless Development's [Youth Accountability Advocates in India](#) will be trained and mentored between September 2019 and August 2020 to undertake advocacy and policy mapping, and to create action plans with a broader **intersectional** pool of young people to support the work they are doing in their communities. They will provide their accountability network (other young changemakers) with step-down training to support the roll-out of their accountability plans, particularly during the data collection and community outreach phase. This method of **'step-down' training** can be a successful way of reaching a greater diversity of young people.

According to the survey respondents, this is what more could be done with regard to inclusion:

- "By [holding]...hearings related to SDG accountability, the distance between the local grassroots initiatives and national reporting can be reduced."
- "By holding local meetings, (as the slams⁸⁹ are), and listening to youth songs and poetry and using the internet...and celebrating youth inputs (prizes). What is clear is that 'outreach' needs to catch up with the creativity and aspirations of many young people."

It remains clear that many young people still continue to experience on a daily basis a 'violence of exclusion', which is also echoed in the UNFPA's seminal report.⁹⁰ Indeed, engaging young people in accountability processes presents one pathway towards fostering a greater cohesion between the generations.

Types of accountability: what more could be done?

The table overleaf provides a summary of the main types of accountability between governments, civil society and youth groups, networks and youth-serving organizations, in relation to the monitoring of the SDGs, but also more broadly in terms of claiming their rights. It provides a useful starting point to think through how **'social trust'** – based on 'good governance' (transparency, participation and accountability coming together) can be cultivated.

Types of accountability

Horizontal accountability The capacity of state institutions to hold other public agencies and branches of government to account e.g. through parliamentary inquiries. Citizens voice is mostly absent in these processes.

Vertical accountability The means through which citizens, mass media and civil society seek to enforce standards of good performance on officials e.g. through elections and formalised advocacy and lobbying efforts.

Diagonal or social accountability Mechanisms whereby ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations participate directly or indirectly in demanding accountability.

Youth-led accountability The enabling of young people to hold decision-makers accountable for the commitments they have made toward sustainable development, through increased capacity, access and agency. (The Big Idea programme is pioneering this approach).

Mutual accountability A mechanism comprising social accountability mechanisms led by citizens and formal or institutional accountability processes, where all stakeholders share responsibility for achieving shared aims. This is the recommended approach for the SDGs.

Source: Restless Development et al. (2016), *Accountability in Action – A Practical guide for Young People Tracking the Sustainable Development Goals*.

It's important to note that all types of accountability have a role to play – no context is exactly the same. However, the important aspect of mutual accountability is that it calls for **both formal and informal** mechanisms. In terms of youth-led accountability, it's important a '**do no harm**' principle is put in place for the young people we work with. What is clear from the desk review is that 'accountability back' to young people, i.e. informing young monitors or reviewers how their data has been used, and whether something is a one-off or part of a process, is rarely done.⁹¹ This is where there is a role for **intergenerational SDG champions**/catalyzers and youth delegates to reach out to both their own and wider communities in between the formal processes: to maintain momentum and keep the SDGs relevant to everyday lives. Furthermore, as we are reminded by one survey participant, local government also requires 'capacity building': "Local government should be given adequate knowledge on SDGs and their benefits, so that they can facilitate discussions, and make governments accountable." Adults too, are lifelong learners!

In 2019, the city of Bristol in the southwest of England conducted a **Voluntary Local Review**.⁹² These present a promising way to bring young people into their design and implementation, and whilst the Bristol example does reflect a strong local commitment to highlighting several youth focused groups, it did not include them as partners or leaders in the review process itself. How Voluntary Local Reviews are encouraged and developed may well be a crucial factor in how effective follow-up and review processes actually are.

The 2030 Agenda is an endeavor to reflect both local and global dynamics, or ‘translocal’. Whilst this is not a new concept, there is growing evidence that spaces and places need to be examined both through their situatedness and their connectedness to a variety of other locales. This is especially important for young people growing up into today’s modern world, where not only social media brings the ‘global’ or ‘regional’ into shaping a young person’s lived experience (and vice versa), but the sheer number of ‘youth on the move’⁹³ (including migrants, refugees etc) is the largest it has been in modern history. Young lives are shaped and **shaping their communities through filters of different physical and intellectual geographies**, and this is as yet underexplored with regard to follow-up, review and accountability of the SDGs. Many questions remain about how young people share, advocate and influence the work on accountability.

How are young people networking and advocating across different follow-up and review spaces simultaneously? Is this achieving impact and how?

The summary below outlines the main thematic suggestions put forward by young survey respondents, which are supported by direct quotes. These indicate ways in which translocal practices may be generated.

Areas put forward	Direct quote
1 Organizing youth dialogues (at local/national levels)	“Organizing youth dialogues around the SDGs, educating young people about the importance of the SDGs and creating follow-up mechanisms to monitor youth engagement.” “Facebook groups, meetings of youth on SDGs, festivals with specific animations.”
2 Alliances with different groups	“Creating alliances with international agencies and bodies, national government, local government, academia, other CSOs etc.” “Hosting round tables to get decision-makers and SDG champions in the same room to brainstorm, different academic, NGO, business, government representatives; working collaboratively with the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and State Building, the TAP Network and other national support networks.”
3 Using social media (e.g. Facebook, whatsapp, SDG app)	“We use social media only through outreach programs and open dialogues, and Twitter/Facebook chats.” “I have created a separate Instagram and Twitter (Change for the Good) for my own personal education on global affairs and to engage audiences on how to change the world.”
4 Peer education in communities	“Youth centered local sensitization program and media publication (including social media) with reporting to the local SDGs office.”
5 School/college engagement	“Youth groups with focus on SDGs in college and high school.”
6 Co-management⁹⁴	“1. Develop co-management structures for national and local accountability platforms. 2. Implement regular dialogues and action planning with young constituents. 3. Create official roles for youth at the national levels.”
7 Disrupt/campaign	“Embarrass politicians to keep their promises using media and the streets.”
8 Connect academic groups to grassroots practice	“As part of some work experience I connected the academic sphere with an effective grassroots initiative and compared their actions and impact to the SDGs to raise awareness and connect different levels of policy implementation.”

Of the respondents, 70% said ‘yes’, their strategies are achieving impact on those in positions of power i.e. local government, community leaders etc. Whilst this is a non-rigorous snapshot of youth voice, it does still provide useful material for further exploration. Below is a selection of reasons given as to why they believed their strategies are achieving impact:

“We have quantitative and qualitative measures on how many people get engaged, get trained, participated in a survey, etc.”

“We measure through physical turn up, as numbers have increased [new members have joined] from one program to another. Media responses also have risen as topics have grown into more complex situations.”

“Cooperation by community leaders to give data.”


“The youth delegates to COP put pressure (using media) on the Climate Minister to agree to have a formal platform for youth input on SDG13. In the Youth Climate Council, in partnership with researchers, we publicly hold the government accountable.”

“I measure this in the messages of support I have received, in the number of views and interactions, and in the knowledge that I can make a difference.”



Youth activists learning and sharing advocacy tips and plans.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

Section 4. Enabling and doing it: how can inclusive and meaningful youth engagement follow-up, review and accountability processes be strengthened?



“There is an increased denial of public spaces and mass engagement [which] has led to fear of community members to come together and review the SDGs.”

YOUNG RESPONDENT TO THE ONLINE SURVEY

This section now turns to presenting the ideas from both youth representatives and youth-serving organizations at the meeting in July 2019, as well as from the online survey. Whilst this is by no means an extensive and fully inclusive process it provides a starting point – with initial ideas for member states, parliamentarians, civil society and youth networks to reflect upon and engage with.

There are many strategies and mechanisms to be taken in order to realize the civic engagement of young people in all their diversity, fully, in all the 2030 Agenda follow-up, review and accountability processes in every country. This requires a **fundamental shift** in enabling and doing accountability. The ‘enabling’ requires active support by governments to stop the closing of civic space. According to CIVICUS, “Without an active and vibrant civil society, we will not achieve the SDGs. The work of CSOs, human rights defenders, journalists, climate activists and others are essential, if we want sustainable change for everyone all over the world. Unfortunately, **only 3% of the world’s population live in countries where freedom of association, assembly and expression are respected**, and without being subjected to arbitrary imprisonment, torture, murder and persecution.”⁹⁵ Civil society confirmed this in April 2019 via [The Belgrade Call to Action](#) – A Civil Society Call to Stand Together to Defend People’s Voices for a Just and Sustainable World,⁹⁶ as well as the [#StandTogetherNow](#) movement of civil society groups, who “call for urgent commitment to action by governments at the UN in September 2019 and implementation to be tracked annually through to 2030.”⁹⁷

Yet there is hope in the student climate strikes, among other actions, and the impetus this is giving to intergenerational momentum and mobilization around pressing sustainable development issues such as climate change. **How can we bring a cross fertilization** of these planetary and social justice issues (in the 2030 Agenda and beyond) to maintain government/citizen engagement and momentum? In this working paper it is suggested that building social trust lies at the heart of this endeavor. Furthermore, a good place to start is with ensuring meaningful engagement of young people in the accountability processes of the 2030 Agenda via improving intergenerational solidarity, intersectional analysis and actions, and engaging in a way that facilitates translocal engagement and initiatives. But no doubt, these are not the only ways!

In addition, **‘the doing’ of accountability is a process** that goes way beyond pinnacle reports or election days: it is instead a **fundamental process of building social trust** between a duty bearer and a citizen. As the 2013 UNDP report acknowledges: “The ability of citizens to hold their elected representatives accountable is a fundamental characteristic of a democratic society. Accountability cannot be limited solely to election day. Before and after, elected representatives need to be responsive to citizens’ demands. Avenues for communication and advocacy have to be open to all – including youth. In some countries, members of parliament and government officials may not be used to answering questions from citizens and media, but could develop capacities to do so. This helps embed the values of transparency, accountability and responsiveness in the political culture, and foster inclusive participation”.⁹⁸ Building a culture of trust is paramount. Local and national actions do not happen in a social and political vacuum – as any young activist, journalist or politician will attest to.

The Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) has been analyzing the VNRs since 2015 in the form of an annual report, [Progressing National SDGs Implementation](#).⁹⁹ Whilst the fourth edition of the report¹⁰⁰ finds that VNRs presented to the 2019 meeting of the High-Level Political Forum placed a greater emphasis on ‘leaving no one behind’ than those presented during the previous three years, there is still a long way to go in terms of meaningful inclusion of youth in all their diversity.



Producing and promoting
youth led radio programmes.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

This paper has suggested that three conceptual approaches are likely to generate a greater quality and reach (effectiveness) of meaningful youth inclusion in follow-up, review and accountability processes. Each analytical concept can be related to practices and narratives of inclusion that resonate with and for youth. How they may interrelate has not been the focus or the research approach of this paper, but it is important to note that these three concepts are for the first time being brought together to further the youth accountability agenda (and potentially the broader sector of youth engagement in development). These analytical concepts are underexplored and have potential to further the youth accountability agenda, if they are used in processes of co-creation with young people.

How can processes and mechanisms (at local and national levels) be improved to increase effective youth engagement in follow-up, review and accountability?

Presented below are key suggestions from the consultative meeting with youth-led and youth-serving organizations. In addition, associated questions are shown beneath, using the three analytical concepts, to provoke further consideration towards effective practices.

From a provision perspective...

- **Openness and transparency in reporting and sharing** of information on public platforms is important: so young people can access the data produced by governments.
From a translocal perspective: how can young people not only ensure 'local' accountability processes are reported, but go further and share with other youth groups/civil society (a multiplicity of localities), the lessons learnt and strategies to increase government transparency and reporting?
- Young people **can't always 'volunteer'** their time. This is especially true for marginalized young people, whose participation in accountability processes **requires funds**, especially if it takes them away from their daily jobs and sources of income to participate in these processes.¹⁰¹ One strategy could be to organize an SDG innovation challenge at the national level.
From an intersectional perspective: how can practices of volunteering in follow-up and review processes ensure they are accessible and relevant for young people who experience compounded social barriers?
- **Support and engage local government/administration** to include young people in all their diversity in planning and financing. This includes capacity building of sub-national officials on the SDGs, and related monitoring processes, and how to work with young people.
From an intergenerational perspective: what assumptions are made about young people by local government officials, and how can they be challenged?
- **Safeguard rights** – including freedom of expression and association (including the provision of safe spaces).
From a translocal perspective: how can the exchange of local experiences of safeguarding issues and strategies be shared at different levels and places in order to hold those with power to account?

From the uptake perspective...

- Youth groups and non-networked young people should be supported and encouraged to work together (and intergenerationally) to **build solidarity and alliances**. This includes supporting 'spaces for young people and how they like to communicate and express their opinions.'
From an intergenerational perspective: what intergenerational spaces or platforms are there for young people in all their diversity to be (more) involved in follow-up and review processes? Is there a need to create new spaces?
- **'Personalize' the SDGs** 'to build the confidence of young people' to contribute and find personal resonance. This includes reaching into more rural and remote areas and using local languages.
From an intersectional perspective: are outreach strategies working with and recruiting young

people from varied backgrounds in their own communities in rural areas? How are resources ensuring local language translation and dissemination?

- **Scale-up and improve outreach, including ‘the discussion in high (secondary) schools’** to engage students in SDG accountability processes.

From a translocal perspective: what opportunities are there for schools to be places of sharing and learning on the SDGs, and potentially involved in follow-up and review processes?

[Annex 4](#) provides further examples from the online survey that reinforce the ideas above. It is important that questions are asked: this is an important indicator of transparency and accountability processes working!



Young delegates at the CSW63 Youth Dialogue in New York (USA).
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

Section 5. Believe in better: future directions

“Without thinking of the rights of every individual as the central driver of policy reform, we will not end poverty or reduce inequalities.”

UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS MICHELLE BACHELET, JULY 2019.¹⁰²

Macro follow-up, review and accountability trends for the 2030 Agenda

The macro trends that relate to the follow-up, review and accountability of the 2030 Agenda are captured in third edition of CCIC’s [Progressing National SDGs Implementation](#) report (focused on 2018 processes),¹⁰³ and more recently via the [fourth edition](#) (focused on 2019 processes).¹⁰⁴ In order to put the piecemeal inclusion of young people in many of the formal monitoring and accountability processes into perspective, it is worth noting a couple of points which show that there is a palpable sense of urgency across follow-up and review processes more broadly:

1 With regard to formal processes (i.e. the VNRs), the third edition CCIC report states there has been little engagement in the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda: this means working on all six principles of Agenda 2030. For example, only 35% of countries referred to the universality of the goals, 13% to human rights-based approaches and 7% to planetary boundaries. **Very few countries reported actively engaging in the more transformative elements** of the 2030 Agenda, such as integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development into implementation, nationalizing implementation in line with local needs, and establishing effective mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and partnership. So whilst effective mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and partnership are not exclusively a barrier for young people, they are acutely felt.

The fourth edition CCIC report continues to show limited reference to transformative elements, including ‘intergenerational responsibility’, with only 18 out of 47 reports acknowledging this (compared with 17 the year before). Both reports acknowledge that the principle of ‘intergenerational responsibility’ is referred to in different ways, such as the rights of future generations or responsibility towards future generations. Therefore, some harmonization and clarification on what is meant would be useful going forward, but it is an important step that this principle (although widely interpreted) underpins Agenda 2030.

2 The fourth edition CCIC report shows that only 36% of countries highlighted embedding leaving no one behind, or efforts to address inequality and social exclusion as part of overarching development plans. Whilst this is an improvement on 2018 when 22% of countries reported the same, there is a need for more countries to demonstrate how the principle of leaving no one behind is informing overall plans and approaches. This paper argues that inclusion approaches need to draw on intersectional analysis and practice if this is to be realized, as well as directly seeking out ways to foster intergenerational solidarity.

Young people's inclusion – reaffirm, recommit and address structural issues

Whilst there has been some limited progress for young people in accountability processes – as evidenced in the examples in Section 1 (Youth2030 and the Lisbon commitment), it's simply **not enough**. Even though the SDGs are not legally binding, all member states (193 countries) have adopted them, and many countries have also begun to see the linkages between the SDGs and their national development priorities (CCIC, fourth edition). The implementation of the SDGs is very much enshrined in the national development priorities of countries, whereby governments are accountable for the delivery of services – especially ensuring the voices and demands of the most vulnerable, including young people, are addressed. Their execution and potential for global transformational change depends on the political will of each member state, but also that of their citizens, including young people's belief that they support their hopes and aspirations in a way that maintains their dignity and integrity. There is an urgency – for member states to **reaffirm, re-commit and address structural issues, to do better and demonstrate that there is a place, a role, a vision – and fundamentally a political will** to include young people.



Creating advocacy plans to address the needs of the most vulnerable communities
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

What can we learn from this working paper?

In Section 1 we learnt that, in 2019, out of 47 VNRs, 27 countries explicitly mentioned that young people were consulted in preparation for the VNRs. There is much more still to be done. In Section 2, we learnt that the language and framing of the SDGs should be made much more accessible, to acknowledge the problems and issues people are facing at the local level. We are reminded by a young voice from the online survey: "It should relate to their *everyday life experiences*, rather than something that is out of this world." And at a national level, there is a greater role for National Youth Councils (where they exist) and/or young and older SDG 'champions' to directly engage with follow-up,

review and accountability processes, especially in between the formal High-Level Political Forum and VNR processes (and also at a regional level). There is much more to be done regarding reaching the furthest behind, especially in rural and remote areas, as well as with localizing VNRs and encouraging more parallel reporting. Sections 3 and 4 begin to show us that the ways to get us there include: a stronger focus and **exploration of intergenerational programming**, drawing upon **intersectionality** analysis, and a **translocal awareness**.

Discussed below is a summary of recommendations that synthesize the desk review, our organizational learnings, recommendations from the July youth consultative meeting, and the online survey. This will include specific questions that aim to prompt practice towards greater intergenerational solidarity. These are by no means the only provocations, rather the ones that had resonance, and were emphasized several times across the range of sources.

If the transformative power of the 2030 Agenda is to be realized then the follow-up, review and accountability processes for young people must be:

Embedded

The 2030 Agenda must be interwoven with national and sub-national political processes and bodies that meaningfully engage young people in all their diversity as part of legislation, planning and budgeting processes. This means...

- **Creating an enabling environment**¹⁰⁵ “that facilitates open, inclusive, participatory and accountable governance. A key element of this is ensuring that governments uphold fundamental rights and freedoms at national and local levels, and are open and proactive to listen to and engage with young people....[that] also requires fostering a culture of youth participation and ensuring that political actors and public officials are willing to listen and respond, e.g. offering explanations of the steps taken towards fulfilling their commitments, or giving reasons for and acting on those that are not fulfilled.”¹⁰⁶ Young survey respondents remarked: “Be prepared to change” and “work with young parliamentarians” to achieve this.

- **Strengthening the capacities of public officials to engage and respond** to young people’s inputs and concerns. This also includes focusing on the transformative agenda in the (formal) VNR processes, so that the connection to young people’s everyday lives is not lost, nor buried in number crunching.

- **Ensuring that the 2030 Agenda is made less of a separate UN process**¹⁰⁷ and instead connected directly to existing national and sub-national political processes (including national development plans and the SDGs) and bodies. Otherwise there is a risk that the discussions of issues facing young people, such as quality education, decent and dignified jobs and tackling corruption, remain divorced from where decisions are made.

- **Radically changing communication, outreach and engagement strategies** to ensure the language, places of interaction and processes are fit for purpose: as one young respondent from the online survey suggested; “prepare outreach programs that focus on youth to understand the SDGs.”

- > **Investing in youth delegations** and funding these – especially in the global south – and incorporating them into policy development processes on SDG themes at the national level.¹⁰⁸ This would mean the inclusion of young people in government delegations to regional and global forums. Young people’s voices from the online survey remind us: “Create formal platforms in the ministries where youth can give direct content-specific inputs; not just talk about ‘youth issues’.” “We are knowledgeable about for example climate change and we are capable of giving concrete meaningful inputs.” “Do not reduce youth to ‘youth issues’.” “We want to overthrow capitalism, monetary systems and patriarchy!”

- > **Integrating youth engagement in national citizens’ forums** i.e. national and sub-national processes such as in Bangladesh. The steps for engagement in such spaces are outlined in the [Accountability Model and Cycle](#).¹⁰⁹

- > **Practicing participatory budgeting with diverse groups of young people that relates to follow-up and review and accountability** (as well as more broadly in the implementation of the SDGs) as shown in the graph in Annex 5, from the online survey directed at governments. “Commit funds to youth-centered initiatives by establishing youth development funds.”

>> Localized (multiple localities to global)

The 2030 Agenda must do a much better job of bringing diverse voices and not ‘leaving the furthest behind’ behind. This means...

- > **The VNR processes should be localized to include Voluntary Local Reviews** at the municipal/city level, as these are much more accessible for a diverse range of youth (compared to international, regional or national platforms). Examples of Voluntary Local Reviews include Bristol in the UK and Buenos Areas in Argentina.¹¹⁰ These should be scaled up, as well as the scaling up of inclusive national citizens’ forums (and other less formalized platforms) that are open to civil society inputs.

- > **Encourage and learn from shadow/spotlight/parallel reports** (see Annex 5). Stakeholder reports are becoming increasingly popular as national stakeholders learn from one another. This paper goes further and calls for the inclusion and acknowledgment (including referencing) of shadow report findings within official VNRs.

- > **Adequately collect disaggregated data**, both quantitative and qualitative, **from diverse sources of knowledge** (including citizens’ reporting) to help inform the current state, trends, future scenarios and pathways towards the 2030 Agenda.

- > **Inform and educate young people in all their diversity on both the SDGs and monitoring processes** (see Annex 5). This includes conducting SDG awareness-raising activities, including translating the SDGs into local dialects and symbols, and rolling out media campaigns.

- > **Conduct root cause (structural) analysis and address systemic discrimination (structural barriers).** Our young online survey respondents challenged readers to: “make sure that aid is

not a representation for colonialism”; “stop being passive with human rights abuses” and “let young people represent you.... around integration and representation. Often the ‘youth’ and ‘CSO’ communities identify so differently, and yet at the same time CSOs often have lots of socially and politically active young people working for them that should be clearly acknowledged and supported.” “Stop gate-keeping our networks, jobs and advocacy messaging and what we cannot do.” “Focus on serving young people: ask what are you providing beyond opportunity to engage?” As Restless Development’s 2015 the [Case for Space](#) report outlines: young people are less likely to engage if the end goal is to participate in and of itself alone.

Transparent

If young people and their movements and organizations are going to have a greater chance to organize and develop the social infrastructure around engaging in the process, it will have to be a more transparent, organized and regular process. This means...

- **The VNR and Voluntary Local Reviews must be at least bi-annual processes (ideally yearly).** The fourth edition [CCIC report on VNRs](#) reveals that 70% of reporting countries noted inclusion of non-state actors. This is an increase from just over 30% in the third edition CCIC report. However, this increase was largely attributed to engagement through technical working groups rather than lead councils or committees, as was the case in 2018. Local and national governments could go further, and adopt an approach to stakeholder engagement around SDG implementation that is timely, open, transparent, informed and iterative. [Annex 6](#) provides a checklist for how to engage young people in VNRs.

- **Design and utilize a simple youth inclusion recommendation and rating system.** This could consist of the top five ways to open up youth engagement in follow-up, review and accountability for the 2030 Agenda. It would require an inclusive and robust process to do this, but the recommendations in this review would provide a useful starting point. It should also build upon the fourth CCIC report, and could involve evaluating country reports/VNRs against those benchmarks via open source.

- **Commitments to ensure the inclusion of youth in all their diversity in specific national planning, budgeting and review processes,** which align national development priorities and plans per ministry/government with the SDGs. So, one question for us all, is what should be reviewed and when? The 2016 [OECD report](#)¹¹¹ offers some preliminary guidance, and has practical suggestions and guidance, including how to involve young people in the allocation of public expenditure, e.g. in Brazil. Participatory budgeting is an example of “supporting and listening to young people” as requested by young participants in the online survey (see Annex 5). Further accountability tools can be accessed from the [Network Toolbox](#).¹¹²

- **Ensuring open access to information for young people** on the SDGs and state-led reviews. This comes from a [Commonwealth and Restless Development report \(2016\)](#).¹¹³ This includes the call for youth ministries to take the lead on behalf of national governments in convening the youth sector and ensuring that government is communicating information on national policy and review processes to the local youth sector. The report also recommends, “Embedding review in everyday life and popular culture” using appropriate communication strategies. This echoes the sentiments of many of the young people who contributed towards both the consultation meeting and the online survey.

-
- **Facilitating youth data collection processes** – both collecting data on youth in all their diversity, i.e. age and gender in relation to the SDG targets, but also importantly enabling young people to do monitoring more broadly across the targets, even ones that might not appear to directly affect them.¹¹⁴ The disaggregated data collected would not only provide information on who the most marginalized are by identity markers (i.e. ethnicity, gender etc.), but should also when analyzed explicitly state what has been achieved and present the remaining challenges.
-
- **Bringing information back to the national and sub-national levels.** Debriefing is a key pillar of accountability – and the process and outcomes of the VNRs should be shared in an appropriate and digestible manner with stakeholders.¹¹⁵ This can be achieved via youth champions.
-
- **At the High-Level Political Forum, the engagement of Major Groups and other Stakeholders should happen much earlier and more extensively:** in the design, consultation and writing of the VNR reports. Guidance and a checklist from the [2017 ECOSOC Youth Forum](#)¹¹⁶ outlines promising practices for governments and UN agencies to better engage young people in consultations. Member states should seek to upload their reports weeks in advance, otherwise it is very challenging for Major Groups and other Stakeholders to review and comment.
-
- **At the High-Level Political Forum, there should be dedicated space (online and during regional sustainable development forums) for Major Groups and other Stakeholders to present shadow/spotlight/parallel reports,** which often shed light on important issues from civil society perspectives that are left out of government reports. In addition, more time during the VNR presentations should be made for interaction, dialogue and learning, and the Major Groups and other Stakeholders should be engaged in the drafting of the Co-Chair's (president of ECOSOC) outcome of the High-Level Political Forum. This echoes wider calls from civil society at the High-Level Political Forum in July 2019, which called for VNRs to include civil society more concretely by explicitly acknowledging the challenges ahead in order to seek collective strategies.
-



Young people meeting the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth at the cultural center in Tingbjerg (Denmark).
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

“In four years, I would hope to see that my government has [insert idea] in order to include more young people in the follow-up, review, monitoring and accountability of national development processes”. Survey responses to this question included:

“Created a safe space”.

“Included more youth in the localization of the SDGs and deploy more resources was well as support youth organizations and networks involved in the SDGs.”

“More transparent information on how to engage and contribute, as well as to inform youth more widely about SDG (not only publications).”

“Used reliable data to strengthen nonpartisan engagement mechanisms”.

“A concrete engagement strategy with clear indicators of how it intends to leave no one behind by ensuring youth voices as well as concerns are well captured.”

“Pushed the civil society to reach out far villages to support young people who have no idea about what is going on outside their homes.”

“Included SDG education in curriculums.”

Given the above, we still need to ask questions of all those we have recommendations for: how included are young people really? Which young people are you still not listening to? What’s stopping you? Be bold. Be brave. If the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda is to be realized, then there needs to be a fundamental shift in structural barriers for young people’s engagement. Believe in better – in strengthening intergenerational solidarity. A decade of accelerated action will ONLY be achieved through a decade of accountability – with young people in all their diversity.

In 2017, Wu Hongbo, former UN Under-Secretary-General for Social and Economic Affairs, stressed that going forward, the SDGs had to be owned by all of society, not just the government. For this to happen, social trust must be built between citizens and governments – and engaging young people in all their diversity in the follow-up, review and accountability of the SDGs is a practical entry point to do just this. If we don’t, our democratic liberal institutions will continue to erode, rather than evolve. Young people can **show us how**.

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Annex 1: Five common approaches

The table below, adapted from the Commonwealth's (2017) Youth Mainstreaming in Development Planning Handbook outlines five common approaches that inform youth policy/programs and narratives. The first three are limited and counterproductive, and policy makers and practitioners alike are encouraged to work towards the 'equity and welfare/wellbeing' and 'capability and assets' approaches that are both informed by a human rights perspective. They are not mutually exclusive.

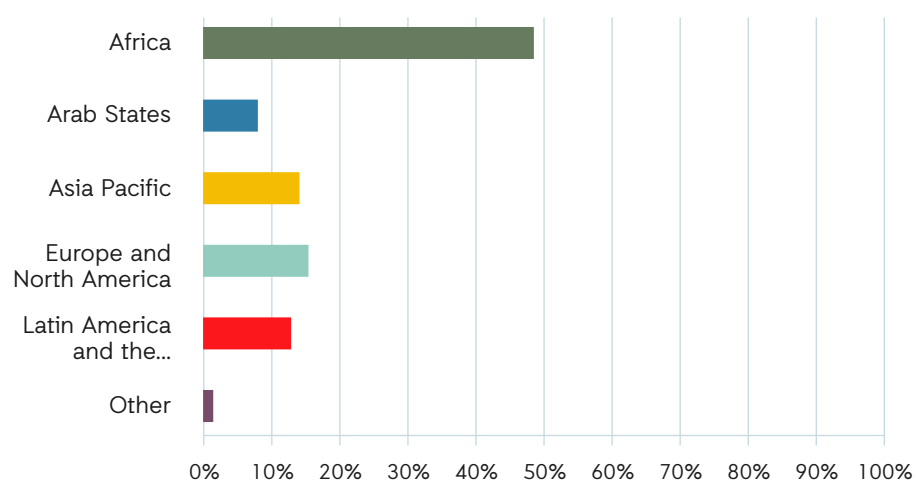
Approach	Overview
Deficit (threat)	Narratives posit youth as a 'problem' and focus on social problems that young people face such as drug abuse, crime and illiteracy. This approach tends to neglect structural factors and instead personalizes failures (bad vs good choices). It underplays structural barriers and young people's own agency.
Instrumentalist	Sees young people as 'human resources' for growth (or cost saving) and often fails to foreground young people's own need for sustainable livelihoods, self-empowerment and building connectedness. Prioritizes absorption into micro-structures (training or employability initiatives) at the expense of macro ones (broader economic/social empowerment). This approach may posit young people as assets – but not as fully fledged citizens for whom assets are mobilized.
Consumer	Narratives situate young people as consumers of youth services. Can be a response to perceived quality gaps, but risks quality assurance and accountability. The language of customer 'demand' may also conflate needs/demands from different stakeholder groups.
Welfare, wellbeing and equity	An equity and welfare approach focuses on basic human needs (welfare) and socio-economic rights of young people. It is often transversal; seeking a cross-sectoral approach that does not solely focus on attainment in formal education or employment. Proponents may examine equity and inequity for young people, such as youth poverty, social safety nets and holistic categories of wellbeing, i.e. mental health.
Capability and assets¹¹⁷	These approaches emphasize that entitlements to services are often not delivered upon unless young people are active in transforming their own circumstances ('youth voice'; co-creation; attention to civil, political, collective and cultural rights). Young people's agency means that how equity and welfare are understood is subject to change. "Young people have the capacity to create, contribute and make a difference; young people are the present and not just the future; they are to be celebrated; they are part of the solution; young people have agency – the means or power to take action." ¹¹⁸

Annex 2. Demographics of the young people who participated in the online survey

Answer choices	Responses	
15-24	32.05%	25
25-34	64.10%	50
None of the mentioned	3.85%	3
TOTAL		78

What region do you come from?

Answered: 78 Skipped:0

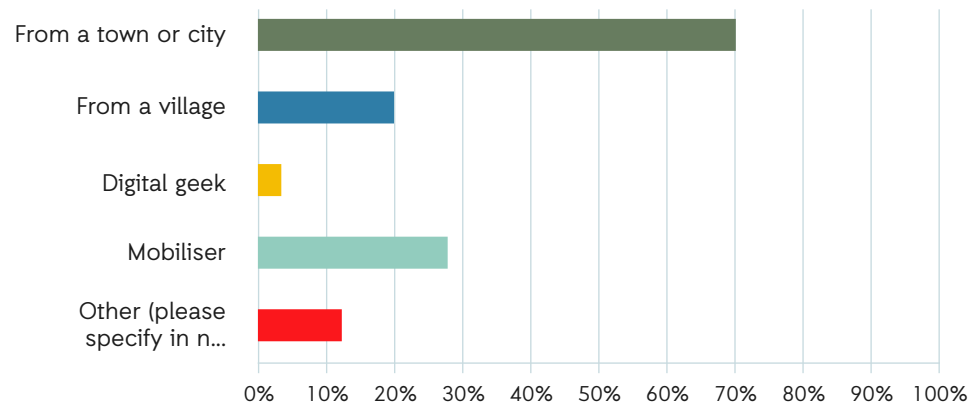


Answer choices	Responses	
Female	41.03%	32
Male	57.69%	45
LGBTI+	1.28%	1
Other	0.00%	0
Prefer not to pay	0.00%	0
TOTAL		78

85% of those who participated are already a member of a youth group/network/movement/youth-led organization.

Which two of these best describes you?

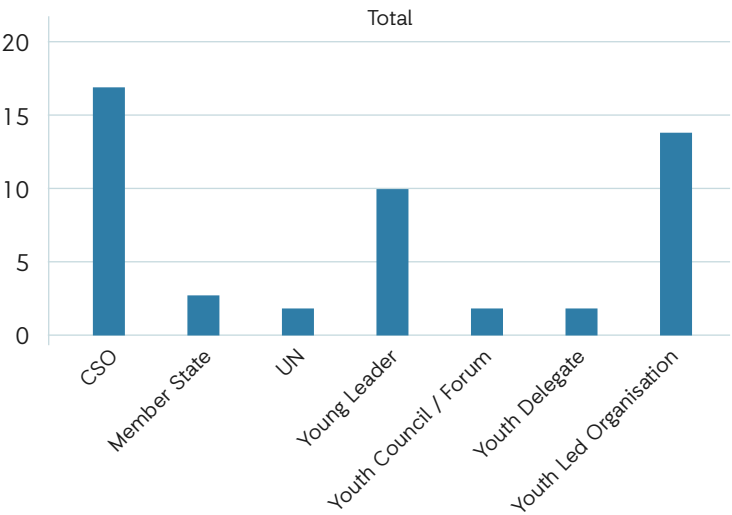
Answered: 78 Skipped:0



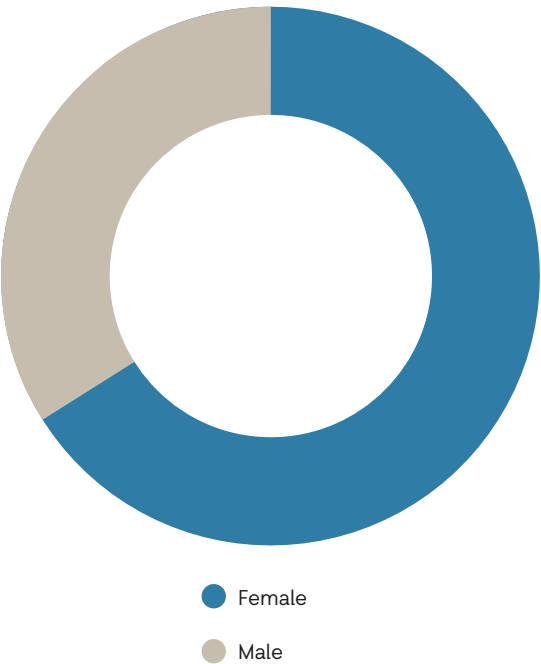
Some young people further described themselves as 'an eco-warrior', 'traveller', 'social entrepreneur' or as an 'organiser'.

Annex 3. Summary of participant profiles in the consultative meeting in July 2019

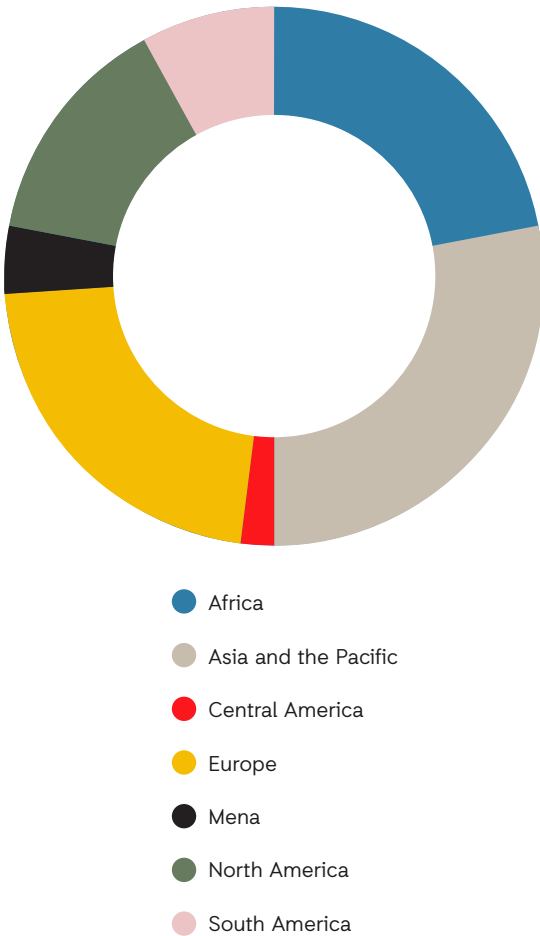
Organisational type/profiles



Gender disaggregation



Regional representaion

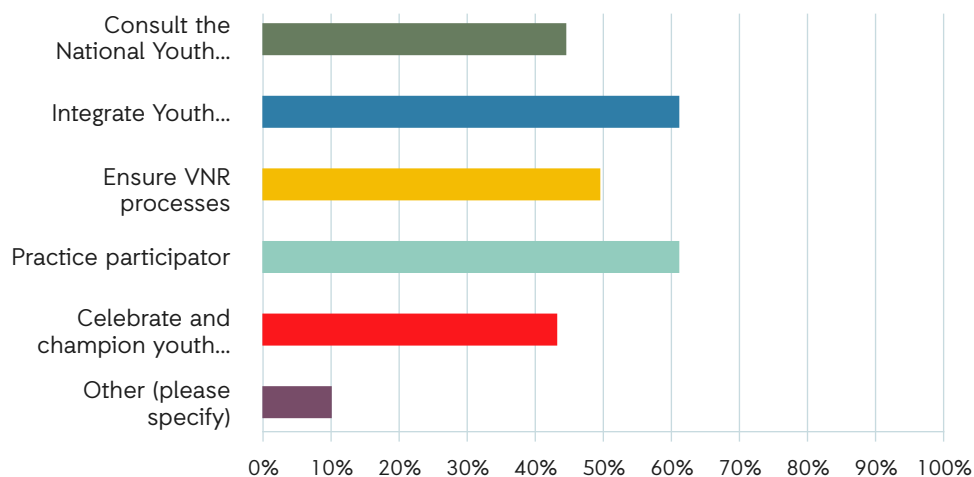


Annex 4. Youth voices from the online survey – how can processes be improved?

Areas to be addressed	Direct quote to support
Provision can be improved by...	
Ensuring local level VNRs are compiled	<p>"Implement VNR processes on a local level (which do not necessarily have to be presented on a UN-level) in order to involve (young) people directly in their environment."</p> <p>"Collect data through working groups or committees that could be set up. The working groups can be clustered around the themes of wellbeing, inclusivity, human capital, environment and natural resources, and economic growth. These working groups should consist of government and civil society and other stakeholders and provide inputs into the VNR."</p>
Holding local hearings/meetings/be creative	"Secure local mechanisms for participation and hearings related to SDG implementation. In many cases the distance between the local grassroots initiatives and national reporting is too great. Doing local meetings, as the slams are. Listening to the youth songs and poetry. Using internet. Giving prizes, money."
Making VNRs binding	"Experience shows that our voices (and their diversity) matter only when they are binding, so VNRs should contain a procedure in which countries will take binding responsibility for not adhering with those standards. It may scare off many of them, but quality is more important than quantity."
Using online and offline platforms	"They can be strengthened by giving them a platform to make their contribution, whether online or offline."
Ensuring youth reviews before submission	"Consult the less considered persons, use media to get them and give to youth to participate in preparations of the report if necessary; let them review the report before submission."
Working towards decolonization	For example, "Adopt de-colonial practices." Here the young respondent is referring to challenging dominant colonial narratives that still exist in development practice. In particular, by directly addressing beliefs and values that have been colonized at some point in history, still reinforces inferiority and practices of exclusion. ¹¹⁹
Ensuring/being open to feedback (freedom of expression)	"Voices criticizing must be taken as positive feedback to help change and not be threatened into silence; map local actors and identify in a more concrete way how to engage young people."
Training local government	"Local government should be given adequate knowledge on SDGs and their benefits, so that they can facilitate discussions, and make governments accountable to their SDG commitments."
Uptake can be improved by...	
Including grassroots, women and young people	"Women and the young are part of the national transformation processes, however they are not well recognized and never engaged."
Increasing outreach to non-organized young people	"More outreach, not just relying on youth to connect to other youth, but more help from local governments to strengthen outreach and incentives; to give more opportunities to emerging youth groups not just the famous ones."
Increasing accessibility of reports	"Make reports more attractive, simple, and accessible for that population."
Campaigning to include knowledge exchange/peer to peer learning	"Design a campaign for better data on the proportion of women and youth engagement. Support international knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning."
Shadow reporting	"Shadow reporting ongoing between VNRs. Youth climate councils (like Denmark) but more directly involved in VNR and Nationally Determined Contributions processes. Integration principle: checking effects in the SDGs of new laws."

Annex 5. Survey recommendations for governments, civil society and the UN

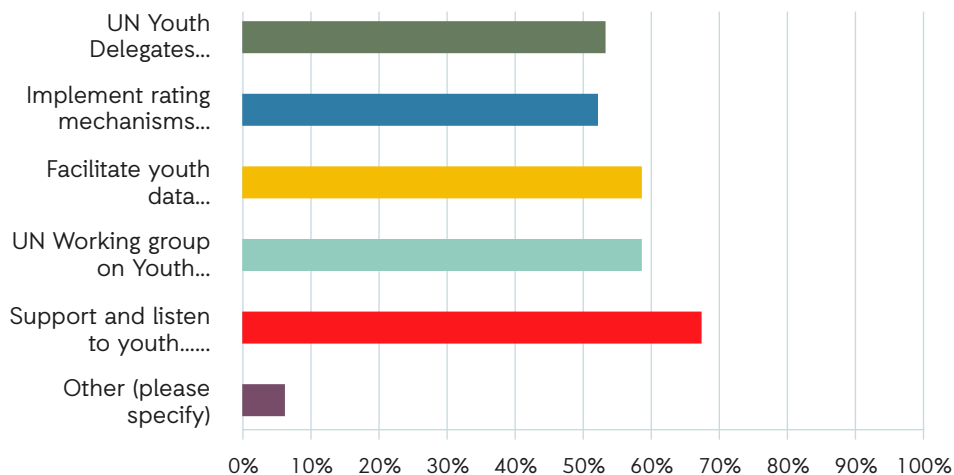
Answered: 78 Skipped:0



Answer choices	Responses	
Consult the National Youth Council/Parliament	44.87%	35
Integrate youth engagement in National citizens forums e.g. Kenya SDG Forum	61.54%	48
Ensure VNR processes include youth reps / groups	50.00%	39
Practice participatory budgeting relating to SDG accountability processes that includes youth representation	61.54%	48
Celebrate and champion youth led monitoring initiatives	43.59%	34
Other (please specify)	10.26%	8

What is your top recommendation for the United Nations, in order to strengthen youth inclusive monitoring, review and accountability processes of the SDGs?

Answered: 78 Skipped:0



Answer choices	Responses	
UN Youth Delegates are informed and supported to contribute to VNR processes by member states	53.85%	42
Implement rating / mechanisms to find out which young people are engaged beyond the delegate programme e.g. youth panels/advisory boards	52.56%	42
Facilitate youth data collection processes: both collecting data on youth and supporting youth-led data collection	58.97%	46
UN Working group on Youth to produce annual scorecard of progress towards youth engagement in National SDG monitoring and review processes	58.97%	46
Support and listen to youth accountability platforms	67.95%	53
Other (please specify)	6.41%	5

Annex 6: Checklist for member states from the ECOSOC Youth Forum side event on VNRs in 2017

- ☐ You have disaggregated the data used in the National Voluntary Reviews on the basis of your age.
- ☐ You have involved youth organisations in the collection of data used for the National Voluntary Reviews, especially when it comes to youth-related issues.
- ☐ You have attended regional and international meetings that are meant to foster the inclusiveness of the National Voluntary Reviews, specifically concerning youth.
- ☐ You have studied the reports of last year's National Voluntary Reviews and the toolkits that are already available concerning this issue
- ☐ You include youth as a separate stakeholder group in the preparations for the National Voluntary Review.
- ☐ You try to involve youth in a way that connects to their world experience.
- ☐ You bring a Youth Delegate/multiple Youth Delegates to the High-Level Political Forum and engage them in a structural way when it comes to the National Voluntary Review.
- ☐ You map the youth organisations that work on implementing the SDG's on a national level, but also on a regional level.
- ☐ You engage with member states in your region in preparation of the National Voluntary Reviews and actively try to connect the youth voices of your countries.
- ☐ You have tangible examples of youth being a priority in the ways you approach policy on a National level and you actively promote youth issues in a global context.
- ☐ You have thought about ways to make the High-Level Political Forum more youth sensitive in a structural way and you have thought about a strategy on how to do this.

Source: Enhancing the Inclusiveness of National Voluntary Reviews, Bridging the Intergenerational Gap. Outcome document of side event on Youth and the VNRs at the ECOSOC Youth Forum 2017

Endnotes

1. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/dcr-2015-11-en.pdf?expires=1583491560&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=245A1799535CF44D8C671CB58494C447>
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4. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/rio20>
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6. <https://www.un.org/en/ga/>
7. <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-Intergenerational-Approach-to-Development-Bridging-the-Generation-Gap.pdf>
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22. According to the CCIC, in 2018 only 65% of countries had incorporated the SDGs into existing national development plans directly, and only 15% provided a roadmap for getting there.
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26. <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpay2010.pdf>
27. https://www.youthpolicy.org/library/wp-content/uploads/library/1998_Lisbon_Declaration_Eng.pdf
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29. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/the_ibero_american_pact_for_youth_is_signed/
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32. <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/>
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44. See: Clement Voule's 17 October 2018 blog, Eight Challenges to One of Our Most Essential Rights.
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47. SDG 16+ refers to targets in other SDGs that also contribute to building peaceful, just and inclusive societies, such as targets included under SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the Goals).
48. This is also stated concisely in the WFUNA 16+ Forum Annual Showcase in Sierra Leone which emphasized: "It is critical that young people are included in the development processes of their countries and have access to decision-making processes and public institutions, as well as be provided with educational and work opportunities. Exclusion is often understood as structural inequality, which leads to mistrust in the government and society as a whole. Addressing this will require political inclusion that is both meaningful and legitimate." See page 23 of WFUNA (2018) *2018 Annual Showcase – Sixteen plus Forum*.
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67. See the work of Naila Kabeer for example: <https://nailakabeer.net/category/articles/womens-empowerment/>
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69. See annex 2 for the demographics of young participants in the online survey. The survey was conducted from 26 July – 6 August with 78 responses.
70. See annex 3 for a profile breakdown of organizations that participated and contributed.
71. National Youth Councils don't exist in all countries and therefore other youth networks can also be identified.
72. Major Groups and other Stakeholders are also active in the annual follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda, which culminates in

the annual High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development. Following the country VNR presentations, MGoS is accorded time for their inputs.

73. UN World Youth Report, 2018: 109
74. This term is explained in the glossary and picks up on the socio-spatial relationality of youth identities and lived experiences in contemporary times (introduced in chapter 1). Specifically, now focusing on the plurality of localities: how several youth localities (fluid identities, places and practices at a local scale) intersect and influence each other, as well as then at global levels.
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109. The approach: empowers young people with data, skills and networks (increased capacity); connects them to meaningful opportunities to participate in review processes and dialogue and engage with decision-makers; and in turn report back progress and respond to the communities they represent; young people will take a lead on holding decision-makers to account (access and agency). Restless Development & UNFPA (2018), *Youth, Participation and Accountability 2.0*.
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This paper builds on efforts undertaken by the Interagency Working Group on Youth and the 2030 Agenda, co-led by UNDP and the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, on meaningful engagement in the follow-up and review processes of the SDGs.

The paper is a modest undertaking that we hope will ignite and contribute towards already existing materials, and add to calls to strengthen meaningful youth-led and partnered approaches towards the accountability of the 2030 Agenda.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the United Nations.

Cover photo: Young people in Sudan talking about their experience in practicing democracy and their role in the political transition at the Youth Open Dialogue. Credit: Sufian Abdul-Mounty (UNFPA)

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