



SDG Scorecard

The UK Voluntary National Review





The UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) brings organisations together to accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals in the UK.

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First published in September 2019 by UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development

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SDG Scorecard

The UK Voluntary National Review

Since 2015 we have been asking the UK Government to produce a plan for how it will implement the Sustainable Development Goals. In the absence of such a plan, we will struggle to have a comprehensive understanding of the actions we need to take to achieve the Goals, the role of different stakeholders, the resources or mechanisms that are needed and, crucially, nothing to judge our progress against in the future.

Introduction

When the 193 members of the United Nations committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they also committed to a process of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to track progress in national implementation, support international cooperation, and foster mutual learning.

In July 2019, four years after it committed to the SDGs, the UK Government produced its first VNR¹ and presented it to the United Nations.

Prior to this, UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) published *Measuring up*,² the first comprehensive assessment of how the UK is performing on each of the SDGs. We worked with over 100 organisations through an open process which allowed any stakeholder to contribute their perspective and add their expertise to our analysis.












Our assessment found that of the 143 SDG targets that are relevant to the UK domestic context, we are only performing well on 24%. Our performance on the remaining 73% is poor or inadequate, with the remaining 3% excluded because of insufficient data.

Although the production of a VNR is a voluntary process, there is an understanding that governments will follow the United Nations guidance. This, along with our own experience of producing *Measuring up*, meant that we have had clear expectations of the UK Government in the production of its VNR.

Our scorecard (see below) assesses how the UK Government has performed against these expectations organised within five priority areas. Of the 11 expectations we assessed the VNR against, four were considered poor (red), six were unsatisfactory (amber/red) and only one was satisfactory, though lacking in some areas (amber/green). None of the areas warranted a green rating for strong achievement.

Our scorecard explains why certain elements are important, how we reached our conclusion and what we think could be done in the future. We hope it provides a useful starting point for our ongoing efforts to work with the UK Government to achieve the Goals in the UK by 2030.

SDG Scorecard: The UK Voluntary National Review

| What we expected | Rating | Moving forward |
|---|---|--|
| 1a A commitment to the appropriate governance structures for the Sustainable Development Goals in the UK |  | A Minister in the Cabinet with domestic mandate must lead the UK's efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals across all government departments |
| 1b A commitment to a meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement mechanism |  | Clarity on the role that stakeholders will play in designing the stakeholder engagement mechanism and an agreement on its purpose are needed to ensure it is meaningful |
| 1c A commitment to develop a national plan for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals with stakeholders participating in its design and development |  | The UK Government must commit to an ambitious and comprehensive plan for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals |
| 2a The process for producing the VNR was open, transparent, accessible and inclusive, and a timeframe and plan for engagement was communicated publicly |  | We have an opportunity to explore, in open dialogue, why stakeholders feel that the Government's process did not engage them effectively. We need to learn lessons for future VNR and to inform decisions about the stakeholder engagement mechanism |
| 2b Stakeholder contributions in the review of UK progress against the Goals were meaningful and their perspectives are reflected in the final report |  | The Government must ensure that future stakeholder engagement recognises the value of stakeholder perspectives and includes them in decision-making |
| 3a The VNR reviews all the goals and targets in a systematic way to identify what has changed or is changing in the UK, both positively and negatively |  | A comprehensive and critical review of the UK's performance on the SDGs is needed, particularly to explore gaps in our understanding and on areas of policy incoherence |
| 3b The VNR identifies whether Government policies and programmes are coherent and describes the positive or negative impacts and synergies of domestic policies in the UK and abroad |  | Policy coherence should be given a greater focus by the Government and steps taken to enhance cross-departmental working |
| 4a The VNR identifies a process for the future engagement of Parliamentarians and all levels of government across the UK |  | Clarity is needed on how the Government will ensure that parliamentarians and all levels of governance will be engaged across the UK in the implementation of the SDGs |
| 4b There is a commitment to a future VNR and other follow-up and review processes, including an open learning process of the 2019 VNR |  | The Government should commit to a future VNR at the earliest opportunity |
| 5a There is a commitment to partnerships for the domestic delivery of the Goals, and specifically how the UK Government will enable these |  | The Government should outline how it will enable partnerships to develop to support the implementation of the Goals across the UK |
| 5b There is a commitment to future resource mobilisation that reflects the spirit of Goal 17 and addresses implementation requirements |  | The Government must establish an approach to resource mobilisation in the spirit of SDG17 to accelerate progress on the SDGs in the UK |

How we produced our scorecard

This scorecard has been produced by organisations in UKSSD’s advocacy action group. It draws on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development³ itself, supplementary UN resolutions on SDG review, the UN Voluntary Reporting Guidance and Handbook for preparation of VNRs⁴ and the OECD’s Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development Toolkit.⁵ It assembles a set of realistic expectations for the UK’s VNR, that also reflect practice on the SDGs across the globe. The scorecard rating offers an “at a glance” measure of how well the UK’s VNR, in its process, presentation and substance, fares against these expectations.

Inevitably, these judgements involve a degree of subjectivity, and we outline the rationale for the rating in the accompanying text for each section.





Following a process similar to Measuring up, individual partners reviewed the VNR against these expectations and decided an indicative rating. This was then collated and shared with the group for wider deliberation and comment before being published. We introduced a four-scale rating system following concerns from the group that some of the elements under review did not fit neatly in our original red, amber, green rating system.

An important limitation of this scorecard is that it does not aim to address the sections produced by the devolved administrations, instead focusing on the UK overall. These sections of the VNR each merit their own analysis and review – and have their own processes and pathways for stakeholder involvement.

Five priorities

Scorecard of the UK Voluntary
National Review

Key to scorecard rating system

| Rating | What it means | Rating | What it means |
|---|--|--|--|
|  | Strong achievement across the board |  | Satisfactory performance or outcome but some areas lacking |
|  | Unsatisfactory in most areas with some satisfactory elements |  | Poor performance or outcomes across the board |

1. Vision, leadership and commitment



We expected

- 1a. A commitment to the appropriate governance structures for the Sustainable Development Goals in the UK.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

A dedicated governance structure exists within the UK Government where the Secretary of State for International Development is responsible for the implementation of the SDGs in coordination with the Minister for Implementation in the Cabinet Office. This relationship is meant to ensure a ‘coordinated cross-government approach’ (p11) but the VNR offers little evidence of departments working collaboratively in support of the SDGs.



A cross-departmental group exists that is co-chaired by Cabinet Office and the Department for International Development (DFID), but the terms of reference or activities of this group have not been communicated transparently. The membership of this group, how this group links to other SDG actors (such as Departmental SDG champions), how often it meets, how much time and effort it devotes to SDG implementation, and what its decisions have been so far, are unknown.

The review does not identify further steps to improve or enhance these mechanisms though it does commit to ‘review and further strengthen the existing means and mechanisms’ (p213).

Moving forwards

To ensure that the SDGs are implemented across government, an appropriate Minister in the Cabinet with a domestic mandate needs to have responsibility for them. Given the cross-cutting nature of the SDGs and the need for them to be embedded across all areas of government, this responsibility would ideally be with the Prime Minister.

A Minister in the Cabinet with domestic mandate must lead the UK’s efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals across all government departments.



We expected

- 1b. A commitment to a meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement mechanism.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

We welcome the Government's commitment to develop an 'effective mechanism... to enhance stakeholder engagement and cooperation with government in the domestic sphere' (p213).



The VNR itself does not articulate the form this mechanism will take, its specific purpose or how it will be designed.

Moving forwards

To build action across the country and ensure that everyone takes part in SDG delivery, the perspectives and expertise of stakeholders should be engaged through specific mechanisms.

For such mechanisms to be meaningful they must be part of a clear decision-making process, such as providing clear deliverables or targeted advice to government officials to inform government programmes and future policy creation.

To reflect the principle of 'Leave No One Behind' this should also include a commitment and process to engage groups that are the furthest behind in our society.

Clarity on the role that stakeholders will play in designing the stakeholder engagement mechanism and an agreement on its purpose are needed to ensure it is meaningful.



We expected

1c. A commitment to develop a national plan for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals with stakeholders participating in its design and development.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

The Voluntary National Review recognises several important factors in the UK's implementation of the SDGs. This includes the competencies of devolved administrations, the need to include stakeholders, some links between the targets and the importance of local delivery.

The Government's current approach is to align Single Departmental Plans (SDPs) to the SDGs. The SDG targets should be included in the plans that departments use to guide their work, at present 'all of the Goals are reflected throughout the UK government programme of work' (p11). Earlier analysis by Bond⁶ has shown that this has not yet adequately embedded the targets of the SDGs, although it is anticipated this will improve with future iterations of the SDPs.



The VNR maps some government activity against SDG target areas. It is not clear, yet, whether the sum of these activities amount to a coherent, comprehensive response to the SDGs.

Although no commitment to a national plan exists within the VNR, it is possible that the stakeholder engagement mechanism and the Government's commitment to 'further review the means and mechanisms to oversee its contribution to domestic delivery of the Goals' (p213) could result in one. This will be reliant on the appropriate leadership from within the Cabinet or from the Prime Minister.

Moving forwards

To ensure that we can all work effectively together to address the biggest challenges the UK faces, the VNR could be used as an opportunity to develop a national plan for the implementation of the Goals.

By developing this plan with stakeholders, the UK Government can mobilise resources to build support for its efforts to implement the Goals.

The UK Government must commit to an ambitious and comprehensive plan for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. The process of delivering the Voluntary National Review



We expected

2a. The process for producing the VNR was open, transparent, accessible and inclusive, and a timeframe and plan for engagement was communicated publicly.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

The VNR testifies that the Government ‘adopted a comprehensive approach to stakeholder engagement’ (p8). However, our own experience of engagement in the VNR (and that of other organisations⁷) is not in line with the Government’s view.



The information communicated to stakeholders about events and engagement opportunities was limited, despite a dedicated website for the VNR. The process was not clearly articulated, with last minute events resulting in limited engagement. This was particularly the case of department-led engagement activities which primarily occurred, at short notice, over a couple of weeks at the end of the VNR drafting process.

Although some events focused on gender, disability or inequalities, very little was done to ensure the voices of those left behind were included. Some vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as refugees, older persons or BAME groups, had little representation. Likewise, there was very limited engagement outside of London or with specific industries.

There was an over-reliance on civil society organisations, including UKSSD and our partners, to support event organisation and engagement without any formal role or funding.

Moving forwards

Stakeholder engagement is a critical component of the process of producing a VNR. It helps to build understanding and to identify areas of conflict or compromise between existing government priorities or approaches and those of other stakeholders. Without it, a VNR, is likely to result in outcomes which do not have the support of stakeholders, including from those in opposition to the Government.

Stakeholder engagement, when done well, has a few key components. The overarching priority is to communicate transparently, in a timely and accessible manner, the process for engagement. It should also be clear how such contributions will be used and how perspectives will be incorporated.

The process should also ensure that the voices of the most marginalised and underrepresented groups are heard. The principle of ‘leave no one behind’ must be adequately reflected.

Given that stakeholders were frequently critical of the opportunities the government offered to engage, an opportunity to explore what did or didn’t work in open dialogue would be beneficial for future efforts.

We have an opportunity to explore, in open dialogue, why stakeholders feel that the Government’s process did not engage them effectively. We need to learn lessons for future VNR and to inform decisions about the stakeholder engagement mechanism.



We expected

2b. Stakeholder contributions in the review of UK progress against the Goals were meaningful and their perspectives are reflected in the final report.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

Although efforts were taken to engage stakeholders, we are concerned that stakeholder perspectives are not reflected in the VNR.



The variety of case studies included illustrate the breadth of stakeholder-led activity in support of the Goals across the UK – adding interest and context to the review. However, the engagement of stakeholders in review of the SDGs in the UK was not comprehensive, and there has been no indication since of how, if at all, stakeholder input was taken on board in the final report.

Discussions that took place between officers and stakeholders at events or the consultation feedback on the Emerging Findings⁸ document have not been published as an appendix to the VNR itself. This rich and important content is missing.

We are aware of concerns that were raised at engagement events or in feedback on the Emerging Findings document which have been overlooked entirely in the review. The information presented focuses on the positives rather than the challenges stakeholders identified. Notable examples of this include the reference to the positive impacts of public spending and welfare reforms in Goal 1, which some stakeholders dispute, and the failure to recognise concerns raised about the loss of legal aid and access to justice in Goal 16. There are other examples where stakeholder perspectives would have balanced the tone of the review.

Moving forwards

Stakeholder perspectives should help to identify areas of conflict or compromise between existing government priorities or approaches, and their alternatives. It can also reinforce

where existing activities are yielding positive outcomes to encourage continued activity. Stakeholder participation is also necessary to achieve successful implementation of the Goals.

To do this, a process of engagement needs to ensure that the perspectives of stakeholders are properly reflected and considered in the government's own analysis.

The Government must ensure that future stakeholder engagement recognises the value of stakeholder perspectives and includes them in decision-making.

3. Quality of the Voluntary National Review



We expected

3a. The VNR reviews all the goals and targets in a systematic way to identify what has changed or is changing in the UK, both positively and negatively.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

The Government set out to undertake a data-led review. However, while we should be proud of the extent of Office of National Statistics reporting on the SDG indicators, the review is not consistent and comprehensive in its analysis of the UK's progress.



While all the Goals are covered and the review acknowledges some of the challenges with data disaggregation, the review presents an incomplete picture of where the UK (or England) currently sits, rather than a comprehensive, self-critical analysis of the country's performance. There is little discussion of how the UK fares against the ambition of the SDGs, or of whether current policies will realise the SDGs in the UK by 2030.

There are inconsistencies between the levels of analysis in each of the four nations. In general a more selective approach is taken for England, where for example, SDG targets are identified here only when they have been met (for example Target 10.1, 12. 3 and 14.2).

The VNR is missing comment on targets that would seem squarely relevant to the UK, for example on substance abuse and addiction (target 3.5), or precarious employment (target 8.8). English sections of the VNR omit cross-cutting coverage of some 'left behind' groups, such as homeless people and gypsy travellers.

The tone of the UK review, overall, emphasises the positive. It fails to recognise the concerns about backwards trends in our performance on the Goals or to explore the wider context. Where challenges are identified, they are seldom addressed in detail. For example, mental health is identified in the initial overview as an important challenge for the UK but receives only one paragraph – focused on Scotland – under Goal 3 challenges (p60). The Goal 2 section on food insecurity for England (p40-41) fails to explore the conditions that allow food insecurity to exist, who is experiencing it and how it could be addressed. Given the attention we gave food insecurity in *Measuring up* and the subsequent Environmental Audit Committee inquiry,⁹ this is perhaps surprising.

The review does not critically consider the Government's own role, to ask where its policy interventions might be improved. In some instances, for example on hate crime statistics under Goal 16, evidence is presented selectively to make the best case for the effectiveness of current policies (p192, 195). Elsewhere, the impact of welfare reform (p31, 37-8) or legal aid policies (p195) are presented as wholly positive. Overall, there is a strong suggestion that the current approach, or business as usual, is enough.

Moving forwards

To ensure we have a thorough understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the UK, the VNR should be exploited as an opportunity to review and analyse the relevant government policies and all data sets relating to the SDG targets. This will enable government and stakeholders to understand where further action is needed and could also identify gaps in monitoring and policy interventions.

In an ideal scenario, non-official data would be used to complement or add context to official data, particularly where government data is lacking.

A comprehensive and critical review of the UK's performance on the SDGs is needed, particularly to explore gaps in our understanding and on areas of policy incoherence.



— We expected

- 3b. The VNR identifies whether Government policies and programmes are coherent and describes the positive or negative impacts and synergies of domestic policies in the UK and abroad.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

As mentioned above, the intended role of the cross-departmental group is to 'coordinate goal implementation' (p11). This should support a coherent approach to the implementation of the SDGs.



However, there is no clear institutional mechanism to enhance policy coherence or resolve conflicts. Coherence between levels of government – for example, between UK and devolved administrations, or national and local government – is not addressed in the VNR.

Some of the interlinkages between Goals are recognised, for example the relationship between gender equality and Goal 8 (p105). But this is not done systematically across the review, which means some important interlinkages will be missed. For example, the review does not sufficiently recognise the impact of the UK's consumption of imported products on the rest of the world, which should logically be a focus in the section on SDG12. No detailed examples of policy coherence, or incoherence, are examined, even though it's a specific SDG target (17.14 – covered in 2 paragraphs on p208-9) and the UN guidance specifically invites such an analysis.

Moving forwards

The SDGs give the Government an opportunity to identify where issues of coherence currently exist and set out steps to enhance coherence and processes, to resolve policy conflicts.

This should consider both coherence between social, economic and environmental outcomes, and the coherence between our actions at home and the impact this has on global efforts to deliver the SDGs.

Policy coherence should be given a greater focus by the Government and steps taken to enhance cross-departmental working.

4. Improving for the future



We expected

4a. The VNR identifies a process for the future engagement of Parliamentarians and all levels of government across the UK.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

The VNR acknowledges the existence of select committees and All-Party Parliamentary Groups and contains sections on the approaches and progress being made in each of the devolved administrations.



We also anticipate that the stakeholder engagement mechanism will include different levels of governance in the UK or a separate process for engagement will be created.

At the moment, it is not clear how all levels of government will work together to deliver the Goals, what support or enabling role the Government will provide, or how this may need to be resourced. This is something that could be the outcome of the review of existing means and mechanisms.

Moving forwards

As with all stakeholder engagement, the engagement of parliamentarians, Select Committees and All-Party Parliamentary Groups provides government with a mechanism to build understanding or identify areas of conflict or compromise. Parliamentarians also have a role in officially scrutinising government action and holding it to account.

Given the UK's devolved decision-making structures and the need for local responses to the SDGs, the process for future engagement and interaction between the UK Government, devolved governments and city, regional and local government should be articulated so delivery mechanisms can be developed.

To follow the spirit of the SDGs, other stakeholders should also be part of this process.

Clarity is needed on how the Government will ensure that parliamentarians and all levels of governance will be engaged across the UK in the implementation of the SDGs.



We expected

4b. There is a commitment to a future VNR and other follow-up and review processes, including an open learning process of the 2019 VNR.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

It is positive that the VNR has provided the UK Government with an opportunity to deepen its 'understanding of the Goals' and former Secretary of State Rory Stewart was clear that there is 'more to do' (p4). However, there is no specific process articulated for reflecting on the process to learn for future.



Despite the expectation that the Government undertakes a review at regular intervals, there is no commitment to a future VNR in the review itself or of further follow-up and review processes.

Moving forwards

We have an opportunity to collectively learn from the experience of preparing the first UK VNR. This could be done through an open dialogue between officials and stakeholders. This, in turn, could aid the planning for the next VNR which the Government should commit to as soon as possible.

The Government should commit to a future VNR at the earliest opportunity.

5. Clear delivery mechanisms and approaches



We expected

5a. There is a commitment to partnerships for the domestic delivery of the Goals, and specifically how the UK Government will enable these.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

The VNR consistently recognises the role of partnerships and the need for them, and commits in principle to partnership and collaboration. It refers to some partnership programmes such as the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance (p156), though these primarily relate to international development.



There is no explicit mention of the role that the Government will play in enabling more partnerships to develop in its pursuit of the SDGs.

Moving forwards

Addressing the systemic and complex nature of the SDGs requires partnerships between stakeholders and with Government. This is a crucial part of implementation, without which there will be limited success. It will require partnerships at different geographical levels as well as across themes and business sectors.

For these to develop, Government needs to play an enabling role; this will also ensure partnerships develop that respond to national, local and business sector challenges or that complement existing initiatives. This enabling role does not need to be financial, though in some cases and particularly at a local level, financial support would be beneficial.

The Government should outline how it will enable partnerships to develop to support the implementation of the Goals across the UK.



We expected

5b. There is a commitment to future resource mobilisation that reflects the spirit of Goal 17 and addresses implementation requirements.

The Voluntary National Review

Rating

The VNR references taxation and existing government programmes but does not go as far as to mention future resourcing to support the SDGs. The failure to link the SDGs with future budgetary processes is a significant concern since it signals a lack of real commitment to their implementation.



Although the VNR recognises the role of different stakeholders, including the finance sector and business, it does not articulate an adequate approach to engagement or resource mobilisation. This is something that could be explored with the stakeholder engagement mechanism.

We are also concerned that there is no mention of any process for awareness raising within government departments and publicly. This, and the failure to adequately recognise the need for a comprehensive approach to mobilising resources in support of the SDGs, will continue to inhibit progress but is something that could be addressed with the development of a national implementation plan.

Moving forwards

To respond to the urgent need to progress the SDGs and deliver them by 2030 it will be necessary to increase or focus resources across the UK in an ambitious and coherent manner.

The VNR was an opportunity to articulate this, but as it has not been included on this occasion. The efforts government takes now to ‘enhance the means and mechanisms’ (p213) should consider an approach to resource mobilisation and specific mechanisms like national budgetary processes.

Government should also recognise the need for further research to enhance policies and accelerate progress on specific SDGs or targets. And it should recognise the need to rapidly raise awareness of the SDGs through a widespread communications campaign.

The Government must establish an approach to resource mobilisation in the spirit of SDG17 to accelerate progress on the SDGs in the UK.

Conclusion

The UK's current political context has caused a distraction, not just in the process of delivering a VNR, but in our ability as a country to have a meaningful discussion about the central challenges that lie beneath much of the division and tension we're experiencing: the relationships between present and future generations, people and government, richest and poorest, our country and others - and between people and planet. Brexit, our relationship with the European Union, and the political turmoil this has caused have diverted our attention away from how we could work together to deliver the SDGs.

We believe that the SDGs offer a framework and common language for people to work together and address the greatest challenges we face as a country – such as poverty, inequality, environmental breakdown and climate change.

However, the Goals barely feature in our national consciousness. We need a concerted attempt to raise awareness and engage people across the country to help them understand their own role in achieving the Goals. This would ideally be led by the Government.

The process and outcome of the VNR has caused frustration for our stakeholders. We recognise the difficult task that producing a VNR can be, and the hard work and good faith of the officials tasked with assembling the VNR. However, the absence of leadership from within the Government inhibited the impact the VNR could have had on the UK's progress towards the Goals. VNRs can be powerful opportunities to create a step change in implementation of the SDGs, and we fear that the UK risks missing this opportunity.

We hope that by building on the valuable experience and lessons learned from this process, the Government will rapidly accelerate its efforts. We all need to take responsibility and to act, but the Government must recognise its role as an enabler of action. It must step up to the challenge of the SDGs with the urgency and ambition the Goals require.

With thanks

We would like to thank the representatives of UKSSD partner organisations who sit on our advocacy action group for their time and contributions to this project.

Endnotes

- 1 HM Government, *Voluntary National Review*, 2019
- 2 UKSSD, *Measuring up: How the UK is performing on the UN Sustainable Development Goals*, 2018
- 3 UN, *Transforming our world: the agenda 2030 for sustainable development*, 2015
- 4 United Nations, *Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the HLPE*
- 5 OECD, *Policy coherence for sustainable development toolkit*
- 6 UKSSD blog, *Single departmental plans and the Sustainable Development Goals*
- 7 For example, as indicated by evidence to the *International Development Committee* by WWF UK, Commonwealth Medical Trust, Restless Development, and NASUWT
- 8 HM Government, *Voluntary national review: Emerging findings and further engagement*, 2019
- 9 Environmental Audit Committee, *Sustainable development goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK*, 2019