



GUIDING FOR ACCOUNTABILITY:

*Together 2030
recommendations for a revised
set of guidelines for Voluntary
National Reviews (VNRs) of
the 2030 Agenda and the
Sustainable Development
Goals (SDGs)*

October 2017

From policy to action

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GUIDING FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Together 2030 recommendations for a revised set of guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

October 2017

Background:

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are a critical element of the follow-up and review mechanisms for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. Governments are expected to **“conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven”** (paragraph 79, 2030 Agenda). Additionally, the VNRs are expected to be **“voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and shall provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders”** (Para 84).

To support the reporting process, the United Nations Secretary General has been requested to provide a set of [voluntary common reporting guidelines for VNRs](#), which were published in January 2016. After two rounds of VNRs presentations at the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF), a reflection and review of the proposed guidelines is needed in order to provide better guidance to volunteer Member States.

VNRs are a strategic tool for information sharing and peer learning, for policy review and route correction. It is critical that the guidelines for **follow-up and review in the VNRs are adapted to facilitate these processes.**

This paper presents **concrete recommendations** from Together 2030 to improve the current VNR guidelines. It also brings some perspectives and proposals from Together 2030 members about the VNR processes at national and global level.

The papers is presented in two sections:

- 1) Key Recommendations to the VNR Guidelines and process at the national and global level;
- 2) Specific Comments to the current Secretary-General Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for VNRs

1) Key Recommendations to the VNR Guidelines and process at the national and global level

Common Guidelines should be commonly followed

The experience of VNRs in 2016 and 2017, including [our review of the VNR main messages](#) for 2017, demonstrates the need for **a more coherent approach by Member States to the structure of the VNR reports**. We recognize that the UN Secretary-General proposed guidelines are voluntary and that VNRs will always- and should- reflect the diversity between Member States. However, **the lack of a more common structure across the reports undermines review and follow up by limiting the capacity for comparison of shared challenges and good practices**.

Member States should agree to follow some key elements of the VNR guidelines in their reports. Additionally, “Summaries” or “Main Messages” should have a more structured format as they are expected to provide a snapshot of the SDGs implementation in volunteer countries.

The guidelines should also propose a deadline for member states to submit their Summaries/Main Messages and final reports ahead of the HLPF and with appropriate time for reports to be reviewed prior to the Session in New York.

The Guidelines should support and protect the indivisibility and integrated nature of the SDGs and break a current trend of limited or selective SDG reporting in VNRs

We are concerned by the fact that some Member States are not reporting on all SDGs in their VNRs. The VNR guidelines need to be reviewed in order to ensure respect for the “universal, integrated and interrelated nature” of the SDGs, reflecting para 74b of the 2030 Agenda. **Under no circumstances should the Secretary-General’s guidelines foster, promote or signal that partial reporting of the SDGs is expected and/or accepted.** The integrated and interrelated aspect of all Goals, and the universal application of all goals to all countries should be fundamental to the guidelines for state reporting. Whenever data is not available, Member States should explain why and indicate their plans to fill any gaps.

The VNR guidelines should request governments to review SDG implementation at the level of targets, reporting on the success of plans and activities, and highlighting challenges and gaps. Two years in from the agreement on the SDGs, guidelines must reflect the need to move from outlining initiatives, activities and objectives, to evaluating how much progress has been made and why. VNRs should highlight good practices, lessons learned, and specific and general challenges of SDG implementation. This includes, for instance, reporting on how countries are mainstreaming the SDGs into their **national plans and budgets and integrating SDG-focused review into their national policies**. Updating the guidelines in these respects will help VNRs foster peer learning, promote the long-term success of the SDGs and mobilize the resources needed for SDG implementation.

Section 5.e should be revised, alongside this, to reflect the outcomes of the UNGA Resolution on

“Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level” (A/RES/70/299) and should call upon Member States to further contribute to thematic review processes, reflecting efforts that address the interlinked nature of the SDGs.

Interlinkages beyond siloed themes

The guidelines should be reinforced on encouragements for governments to reflect on **how the interlinked aspects of the SDGs are being implemented and monitored** at the national level. This section is extremely important and should be supported by concrete examples, outlining the country's efforts towards integration and how they contribute to the three dimensions of Sustainable Development (economic, environmental and social).

Leave no One Behind and reaching the furthest behind first

We suggest the addition of a new section (g) on ‘**Leaving no one behind**’ to encourage states to **address** this foundational commitment of the SDGs, which is not properly emphasized in the current guidelines. Reflecting this explicit, systematic treatment of “leave no one behind” has been largely absent from the VNR presentations at the last two HLPF sessions. VNR guidelines should foster a clear expectation that those ‘left behind’ should be identified in VNR reports and made statistically visible in the detailed review and evaluation of progress.

Moreover, the VNR guidelines should request Member States to report on how their policies, plans and programmes are being adapted to reach the **furthest behind first**.

Additionally, the VNR report should include the outcomes of civil society and stakeholder consultations and reports as annexes.

The Outcome reflects the process

Governments should be requested to set out how they publicized their plans and which processes were established in preparation of the VNR report. The report should also include a specific discussion on the opportunities created for wide stakeholder participation, challenges experienced, and best practices in stakeholder engagement.

Feedback from civil society colleagues in VNR countries over the last two years as well as the [outcomes of surveys](#) conducted by Together 2030, show that access, quality and processes need to be improved to generate meaningful participation.

The VNR guidelines should ask governments to publish an annex with the timeline followed for the preparation of the report.

Spell out which stakeholders have been engaged

On para 74d of the 2030 Agenda, Member States agreed to undertake reviews that were ‘open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people’ supporting the reporting ‘by all relevant stakeholders’. For this reason, the guidelines should request governments to report on how they are enabling **clear, open, coherent, transparent and regular spaces for the participation of stakeholders** in the planning, implementation, follow up, monitoring and evaluation of the 2030 Agenda at all levels.

The guidelines should reflect the recommendation made in the [HLPF 2017 Ministerial Declaration](#) that “*there can be no effective implementation, or accountability to our citizens, where no awareness exists. Efforts should be made to reach out to all stakeholders, including subnational and local authorities, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, civil society, business, the private sector, the media, parliamentarians, and the scientific and academic community*” (para 28).

The guidelines can help establish a practice of governments reporting on these efforts, in the context of the VNR and wider processes of national and subnational review: the consultation and participatory process followed, including on which stakeholders have been engaged and at what levels (national, provincial, municipal and community levels). Details on stakeholder engagement should also be incorporated at the report and as annexes.

From local to global and back to local: VNRs and the accountability cycle

An accountability cycle should be continually in place until 2030, providing regular and predictable spaces for interaction, review and participation for civil society and stakeholders, be the result of inclusive national discussions and part of a multi-layered review system.

The VNR guidelines should be more explicit on the details requested from governments regarding the process established to prepare the reviews and the plans for following up on main findings **after** the presentation at the HLPF. The guidelines should request countries to indicate their plans for debriefing on the outcomes of the VNRs at the national level (after the HLPF) as well as their plans to volunteer again at the global level, which would facilitate planning and accountability at the national level.

2) Specific Comments to the Secretary-General Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for VNRs

| SG Voluntary Guidelines for VNRs (by Paragraph) | Recommendations and Rationale |
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| <p>1. Opening statement. An opening statement by the Head of State or Government, a Minister or other high-ranking Government official could highlight the key messages from the review and touch on critical issues in implementation of sustainable development that the country wishes to highlight.</p> | <p>In the Opening Statement, Member States should be encouraged to highlight not only progress made but also obstacles encountered and eventual drawbacks and, where possible, present concrete solutions they are considering to overcome those challenges.</p> <p>This section should include a reference to which has been “the highest level in government” that has reviewed the VNR report.</p> |
| <p>2. Summary. A one-to-two page synthesis of the process and findings of the review highlighting two or three good practices the country wishes to share, two or three lessons it has learned in trying to accelerate implementation, two or three challenges on which it wishes to hear about other countries’ good practices and two or three areas where it would need support in terms of finance, capacity-building, technology, partnerships etc.</p> | <p>Member States should be requested to prepare only one document summarizing main messages and a cap on the number of pages and structure should be proposed and followed.</p> <p>The guidelines should propose for MS to follow a common structure for the summary, allowing for comparability. The summary should flag how collaboration and integration among different ministers has been ensured.</p> <p>Furthermore, the guidelines should request Member States to highlight how their progress in implementation is considering all three dimensions of sustainable development.</p> <p>The summary should also show how countries have made the SDGs a political priority and how they are promoting a consistent ‘whole of government’ approach to the SDGs, and encouraging inclusive partnerships across all national and subnational stakeholder groups in order to make the 2030 Agenda a reality.</p> |
| <p>3. Introduction. The context and objectives of the review could be presented here. The introduction may briefly describe key features of the country context as it pertains to the 2030 Agenda, with a discussion of national</p> | <p>This section needs to clarify the national institutional and organizational framework for the implementation and follow up of the 2030 Agenda, including which government institutions are engaged, which levels (federal,</p> |

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| <p>priorities and targets for sustainable development and their relation to the Sustainable Development Goals, and a discussion of critical challenges.</p> | <p>state, municipal, local) and which stakeholders participate.</p> <p>Additionally, this section should summarize the progress and lessons learnt in implementing the SDGs and highlight efforts made to address the interlinkages between the goals and the three dimensions of sustainable development.</p> |
| <p>4. Methodology and process for preparation of the review. This section may discuss the methodology that was adopted for the review, including its scope, depth and limitations. Information on the process for preparation of the national review may be presented, including, for example, how different levels and sectors of Government contributed to the review, whether parliaments were engaged, whether national evaluation/oversight institutions contributed, how stakeholders from civil society, academia and the business sector were involved, which consultations took place, and possibly whether another Member State or institutions contributed to the review, etc. Lastly, the country may indicate what support it received. The sources used for the review may be discussed. This could include, as per paragraph 74 (f) of the 2030 Agenda, how existing platforms and processes have been built on, as well as how existing national reports have been used in the process.</p> | <p>In this section, Member States should detail the methodology and process for the preparation of the review and how they comply with the guiding principles for follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda (para 74, a-i), including its scope, depth and limitations.</p> <p>This section should identify the different national and international, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders at various levels, including government, Parliament, national evaluation/monitoring institutions, CSOs, business, academia, that contributed to the review. It should explain how these contributions have been compiled and taken into account, including outlining which consultations took place, which data sources have been used and which documents have been consulted during the process. A new and transformative element of the 2030 agenda reside in the enhancement of partnerships and the guidelines should ask for those aspects to be stressed at the VNR reports.</p> <p>The VNR guidelines should ask MS to report on how their draft reports were reviewed at national and sub-national levels prior to the presentation at the HLPF. Member States should be encouraged to publicize and discuss the drafts as a preparatory stage in the development of the VNR report, so that its content and analysis is open to public scrutiny and debate and outcomes considered on the final report.</p> |

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| | <p>The guidelines should suggest for MS to organize national and subnational consultations to collect inputs for drafting of the report.</p> <p>Finally, the guidelines should encourage governments to inform the next steps on follow up and review AFTER the VNR presentation at the HLPF in New York.</p> |
| <p>5. Policy and enabling environment.</p> | |
| <p>(a) Creating ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals. The review could outline efforts made towards all stakeholders to inform them on and involve them in the Goals and targets, including national and local government, legislative bodies, the public, civil society and the private sector. It could indicate how it is planned to keep the Goals under review at the national level and, including the possible dissemination of reviews and their findings.</p> | <p>As currently stated, this paragraph of the VNR guidelines merges three things - (1) Raising awareness about the SDGs (2) stakeholders participation in SDGs implementation and (3) plans for future follow up.</p> <p>On (1), the current language asks countries only to report on particular things they are doing, not to state whether or not stakeholders are involved. As the SDGs become less new, this is less appropriate, and so could be replaced with a focus on how successful these efforts have been.</p> <p>On (2) the guidelines should be more specific and ask governments to explain how enabling civic spaces are being established to generate opportunities for the poorest and most vulnerable, particularly women, children, youth and older persons, persons with disabilities and others to engage in decisions that affect their own lives, expressing challenges and devising solutions and strategies.</p> <p>We recommend that plans for future follow up (3) to be moved to another section of the guidelines - either 5.f or 7 (Next Steps).</p> <p>The review could outline <i>how</i>, and <i>how far</i>, all stakeholders - including national and local government, legislative bodies, the public, civil</p> |



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| | society and the private sector- are participating in the implementation of the SDGs. |
| <p>(b) Incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals in national frameworks. The review could outline critical initiatives that the country has undertaken to adapt the Sustainable Development Goals and targets to its national circumstances, and to advance their implementation. It may describe national efforts made to integrate the Goals into the country’s legislation, policies, plans and programmes, including the sustainable development strategy, if there is one. The review could indicate the main challenges and difficulties experienced in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals as a whole. It could also highlight additional goals, beyond the Goals, which are national priorities. Countries could consider referring to major efforts undertaken by local authorities and non-State actors to implement the Goals, including partnerships.</p> | <p>This section should include the request for an analysis of the policy environment with a precise description of the policy-gaps or policy-fit and indicate baselines/ base years to allow year on year progress tracking. It is also important for countries to indicate in this section how they are transforming the institutional frameworks (policies, laws and institutions) to reach the ambition of the 2030 Agenda.</p> <p>The VNR guidelines should call for MS to report on how effectively the country has adapted the SDGs and targets to its national circumstances whilst developing an ambitious national response to the universal SDG agenda and its full integration into national policies and development plans.</p> <p>The current guidelines request governments to “outline initiatives” in their report. This contributes less to meaningful review than assessing whether these initiatives have been <i>successful</i>, and whether they are <i>enough</i>. Countries should not just list their initiatives but include concrete examples of success and/or challenges in implementing them.</p> <p>In drafting this section, governments could allude to existing information and indicate how they have implemented recommendations from other reporting mechanisms, in particular those that derive from human rights frameworks (i.e Reports to Human Rights Committees, Universal Period Review).</p> |
| <p>(c) Integration of the three dimensions. The review might discuss how the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) are being integrated and how sustainable</p> | <p>This section is a critical aspect of VNR reports reflecting the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda.</p> <p>Member States agreed, as part of the 2030</p> |

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| <p>development policies are being designed and implemented to reflect such integration. The review could also assess how other principles of the 2030 Agenda, for example, leaving no one behind, have been mainstreamed in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.</p> | <p>Agenda, that review of the SDGs should respect “their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development” (para 74). Accordingly, VNRs should reflect on the implementation of all goals and their interlinkages.</p> <p>A revised set of guidelines should propose a dedicated section at VNRs where governments could report on how the commitment of ‘leaving no one behind’ is being implemented and how the revised policies and programmes are ‘reaching the furthest behind first’. This is a critical commitment of the 2030 Agenda not properly emphasized in the current guidelines.</p> <p>Providing a specific section to the issue of “leaving no one behind” elevates the pledge made by Member States and allows for peer-learning among countries.</p> <p>Moreover, the ‘left behind’ need to be known and made statistically visible as a valuable resource at the global, national, and subnational scales. VNR countries should also be requested to report on efforts to improve data collection and disaggregation and of tailoring policies to reach the most marginalized.</p> <p>In line with the principle that review “have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind” (para 74 e) the review could identify the poorest, most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in that country’s context and in the context of particular SDG targets. It could address how the principle of ‘leaving no one behind’ has been incorporated into policy-making and review processes including (i) the availability of disaggregated data (ii) efforts (made or planned) to hear the voices of vulnerable, marginalized and disadvantaged groups (iii) critical initiatives undertaken to reach those furthest behind first (iv) financing and capacity building (v) efforts</p> |



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| | <p>towards institutionalizing legal, policy and programme frameworks of groups left behind.</p> <p>To further peer-learning opportunities, the review could outline how far and with what tools the country has moved towards policy coherence for sustainable development, and note any challenges or gaps.</p> |
| <p>(d) Goals and targets. The review may provide brief information on progress and the status of all Sustainable Development Goals, and critical difficulties encountered in reaching them, making reference, when appropriate, to data provided in the statistical annex (see sect. 8 below). The review may indicate whether a baseline for the Goals has been defined and remaining obstacles to doing so. The review may also provide a more in-depth analysis on a few selected Goals and targets. Those may be chosen by the country in the light of its priorities but also because they were tackled through innovative policies, are relevant to other Member States, and can be addressed in an international context. The discussion could focus on trends, successes, challenges, emerging issues, and lessons learned, and describe what actions have been taken to address existing gaps and challenges. It could support the identification of gaps, solutions, best practices and areas requiring advice and support. The review may examine the agreed global indicators for those goals and targets identified as priorities. Countries may choose to refer to complementary national and regional indicators.</p> | <p>The VNR guidelines should request countries to report on policies and programmes that address and integrate all 17 goals with a balanced view of the three pillars.</p> <p>We strongly recommend the deletion of the phrases: <i>“The review may also provide a more in-depth analysis on a few selected Goals and targets. Those may be chosen by the country in the light of its priorities but also because they were tackled through innovative policies, are relevant to other Member States, and can be addressed in an international context”</i>. Those are misleading instructions that are currently leading Member States to ‘cherry-pick’ SDGs and to partial SDG reporting.</p> <p>The review may provide brief information on progress and the status of all Sustainable Development Goals and indicate the targets that have not been addressed, why and steps planned to address those gaps.</p> <p>Members States committed to the implementation and review of ALL SDGs and the VNRs are the main instrument for the reporting at the global level. The SG guidelines cannot foster, promote or signal that partial reporting of the SDGs is expected and/or accepted.</p> <p>All goals and targets should be reported on with gaps highlighted including for capacity for disaggregation (goal 17 target 17.18) and financing. Data presented on this section should be disaggregated at least by ‘income, gender,</p> |



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| | <p>age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts’, as committed on SDG 17.18. In terms of comparability, it would be crucial to have an overview of how comprehensive coverage of the SDGs have been.</p> |
| <p>(e) Thematic analysis. As appropriate for the country, the review could include an analysis of progress and initiatives related to the high-level political forum’s thematic focus for that year.</p> | <p>The thematic reviews of a set of SDGs, undertaken during the first segment of the HLPF, should not dictate nor minimize the scope of the VNRs. On the contrary, a section on the HLPF ‘thematic focus for the year’ should be prepared aiming to broaden the scope of the voluntary reviews, deepening the analysis for all goals through a cross-cutting approach.</p> <p>Countries are expected to report on ALL SDGs and their interlinkages in their VNRs, hence, the inclusion of a country review on the HLPF thematic focus of the year should not encourage any cherry-picking of SDGs.</p> <p>Countries deciding to undertake in-depth reviews of the SDGs under analysis by that year’s HLPF, should focus on fostering integration, acceleration and interlinkages of those Goals with the whole framework. Countries should also use this space to share experiences on the benefit of integration, successful stories or challenges encountered.</p> |
| <p>(f) Institutional mechanisms. The review could provide information on how the country has adapted its institutional framework in order to implement the 2030 Agenda. This could include information on how the views of different ministries, agencies, levels of government and non-governmental stakeholders are taken into account and on the institution in charge of coordination and integration. The review could consider highlighting efforts to mobilize institutions around the Sustainable Development Goals,</p> | <p>After 2 years of the launching of the 2030 Agenda, countries should have structures in place to review progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.</p> <p>The guidelines should encourage governments to share how they are generating effective and inclusive institutions for SDG delivery – what can be considered the “fourth pillar” of sustainable development.</p> |



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| <p>improve their functioning, and promote change. Information may also be provided on how responsibility is allocated among various levels of Government (national, subnational and local) for coherent implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda. It would be useful to highlight how the country intends to review progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, including possible plans regarding the conduct of national reviews.</p> | |
| <p>6. Means of implementation. Based on the above challenges and trends highlighted, the review may discuss how means of implementation are mobilized, what difficulties this process faces, and what additional resources are needed to implement the 2030 Agenda, including in terms of financing, capacity development needs, including for data and statistics knowledge-sharing, technology and partnerships.</p> | <p>The guidelines should directly ask countries to report on how they are mainstreaming the SDGs into their national plans and budgets. A detailed section on “financing the SDGs” (at national level and overseas) could be included.</p> <p>MS should also be requested to report on how policies showcased in the VNR report will be funded and how resource allocation is aligned to support the realization of sustainable development.</p> |
| <p>7. Next steps. The review could outline what steps the country is taking or planning to take to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.</p> | <p>The review could outline what steps the country is taking or planning to take to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and what learning, follow-up and review mechanisms have been put in place. A clear accountability cycle should be presented, including how the outcomes of the HLPF discussions will be brought back to the national level.</p> <p>Additionally, countries should be requested to inform when they plan to volunteer again to present a VNR at the HLPF as this will be a positive information for planning and follow up.</p> |
| <p>8. Statistical annex. Countries may include an annex with data, using the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators to be proposed by the Statistical Commission as a starting point and adding priority indicators identified</p> | <p>As per target 17.18, the level of data disaggregation achieved in the results presented in the VNR must be indicated in this section.</p> <p>Existing gaps, specific initiatives to fill those gaps</p> |



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| <p>at the regional and national levels. They may highlight whether statistics were collected from the national statistical system and pinpoint major gaps in official statistics on indicators.</p> | <p>and a description of how progress is being measured (clear methodologies) in the light of those gaps must be included in the guidelines.</p> |
| <p>9. Conclusion. The section may present a summary of the analysis, findings and policy implications. It may discuss new or emerging issues identified by the review. Lastly, the country may indicate what lessons it has learned from the review process, what support it would need in the future for preparing such reviews and any adjustment it believes should be made to the guidelines to ensure that they are useful.</p> | <p>In order to make the VNR an action-oriented document, the guidelines should encourage governments to explain how they plan to tackle the main and emerging issues identified.</p> <p>Governments should include among the lessons learned, their experience engaging with civil society in the process of drafting the VNRs.</p> <p>Government volunteering for next rounds should include a section in their reports reflecting on how the lessons and challenges identified in the previous reports have been addressed.</p> |
| <p>10. The report could have a link to more in-depth national reports and reviews through the dedicated United Nations Secretariat website.</p> | <p>In this section, independent third party reports and evidence (civil society, press reports, academia) should be included to support and challenge national claims of success and commitments.</p> |



About this paper:

This paper is issued on behalf of the Together 2030 Initiative. It was drafted based on three rounds of consultations held with Together 2030 members from August – October 2017. Drafts were revised by the International Secretariat. The final version has been revised by the Together 2030 Core Group.

Members of Together 2030 were invited to collaborate and provide inputs to this document. Final text reflects the summary and collection of those inputs but not necessarily, the agreement or endorsement of those organizations on all proposals presented.

Together 2030 is grateful to all those that contributed inputs.

About Together 2030

Together 2030 (www.together2030.org) is a civil society initiative that promotes national implementation and track progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Initiative, set up in December 2015, aims at generating knowledge and project voices from different civil society and stakeholders around the world on the challenges and opportunities for the 2030 Agenda.

Together 2030 brings together actors to discuss the way to formulate and implement roadmaps at national level and hold governments to account at all levels.

As of October 2017, 559 organizations have joined Together 2030 from around 101 countries. More than 70% of those are based in developing countries and around 30% in developed countries.



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