

Libraries in Voluntary National Reviews – The First Five Years

2 December 2020

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) form a key part of the process, under the UN's 2030 Agenda, to monitor progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For governments, they are an opportunity to take stock of progress, to share their own experiences and plans, and to learn from others.

For libraries, as underlined in IFLA's Guide to VNRs, the process of putting them together can provide an opportunity to build new contacts, both among officials and other stakeholders. Crucially, they can also provide an opportunity to receive recognition for work towards the delivery of the SDGs. This can, subsequently, be used in advocacy to underline the role of libraries as partners for development, and so, potentially, to secure ongoing support.

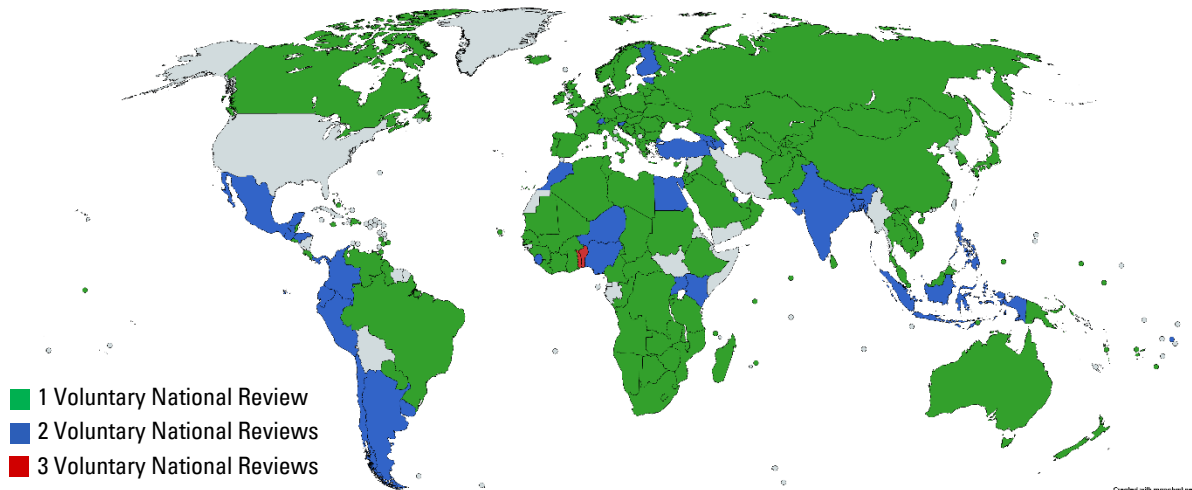
In the first five years of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, 205 reviews have therefore taken place, covering 169 countries in total. In 199 cases, a report has been published, and available on the [UN website](#) (for all of the reports mentioned below, please look here). Those from the first four years have already been explored in order to assess the prevalence of references to culture and related terms, thanks to the work of the [#Culture2030Goal Coalition](#), of which IFLA is a member.

This paper, in a very focused way, looks at how libraries feature in these reports, as well as presenting some overall statistics. The purpose is to illustrate the fact that libraries are being recognised, and to highlight examples of particularly good practice, both of which, we hope, will aid libraries in countries undertaking VNRs in 2021 to make the case for inclusion.

It starts with some overall information about the VNRs so far, and then looks at the number of countries referring to libraries in their reviews, before turning to the types of reference being made.

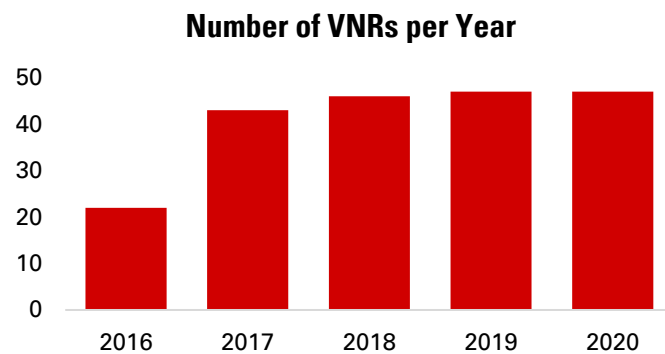
Voluntary National Reviews 2016-2020

As set out in the introduction, there have been a total of 2015 Voluntary National Reviews so far, covering 168 countries in total. It is to be noted that only countries which are recognised as United Nations Member States or observers undertake these. Of these, 133 have undertaken just one VNR, 33 have undertaken two VNRs, and 2 have undertaken three VNRs. The below map indicates which countries have done this.



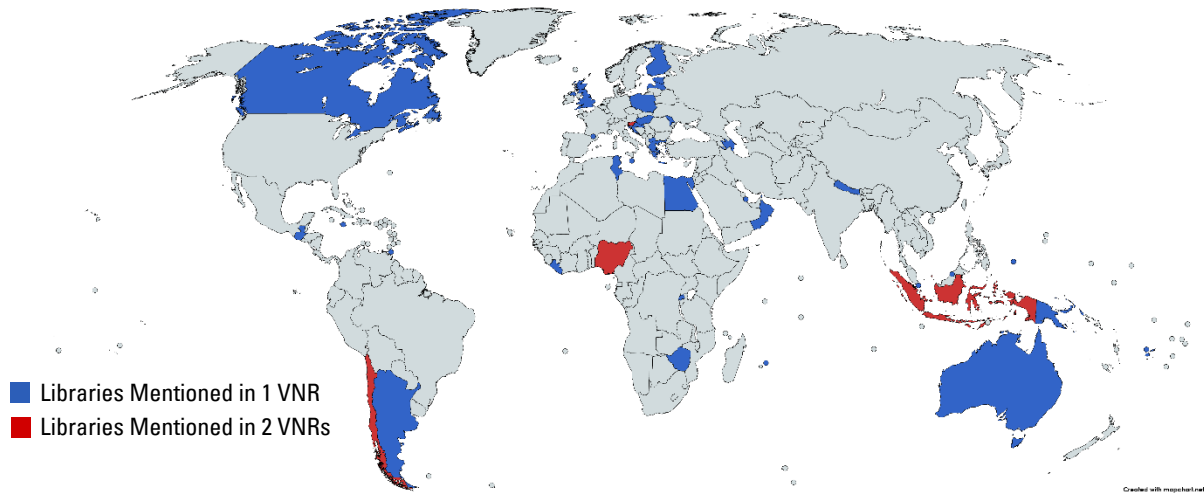
It is worth noting that in 2021, 10 countries will undertake their first VNR, 25 their second, and 9 their third. This will still leave 16 countries which will still have undertaken no VNRs at all.

Following just 22 VNRs in 2016, there has been a relatively constant number of reviews per year since then, in the mid-40s. This represents broadly the maximum capacity during the portion of the annual UN High Level Political Forum for discussion.



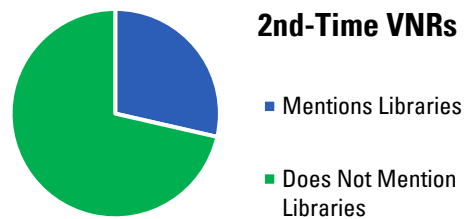
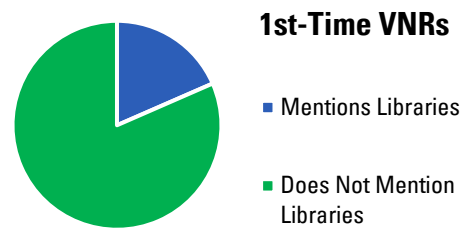
References to Libraries in Voluntary National Reviews – The Overall Figures

Across the 199 reports which can be accessed, a total of 41 refer to libraries in one way or another. The below map indicates which countries do this (with four referencing libraires in VNRs in different years).

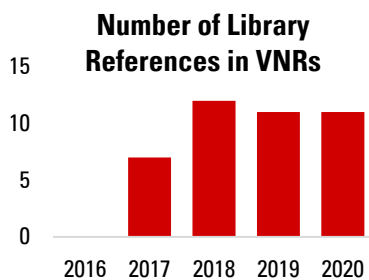


From this data, we can already see that VNRs from countries on all continents include reference to libraries, and that **Chile, Nigeria, Slovenia, and Indonesia** refer to libraries in two separate VNRs.

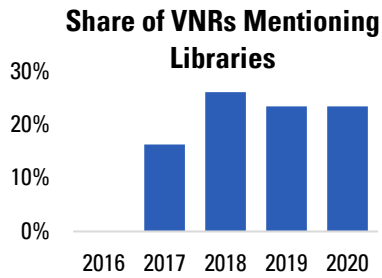
We can explore further, looking at whether first or second-time VNR countries are making more reference to libraries. The charts to the right indicate this. We can see that among first-time VNRs, only 18.4% mention VNRs (31 out of 168). However, among second-time VNR countries, the share rises to 28.6% (10 out of 35).



One reason for this improved presence of libraries could be that in their second reviews, countries are ready to look in more depth at their performance, and the drivers of sustainable development they have in place. This could therefore be leading them to include wider ranges of stakeholders, such as libraires.



As for the prevalence of references to libraries over the years, these started at a low level, but saw big rises in both 2017 and 2018, before appearing to stabilise at 11-12 countries per year. A similar trend is seen in the share of VNR reports in each year that refer to libraries, rising from 0% in 2016 to around a quarter of VNRs in each of 2018, 2019 and 2020.

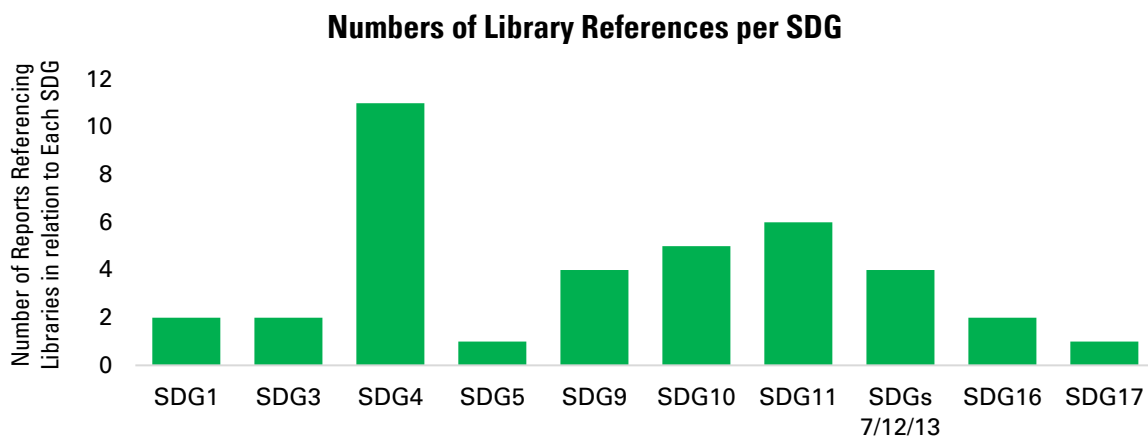


This could, also, be down to the growing maturity of the VNR process, with greater awareness of the importance of bearing in mind a wider range of stakeholders who contribute to development. It is worth noting that many of the countries where libraries are mentioned have seen activism by libraries around the SDGs.

References to Libraries in VNRs – The Content

In preparation of this report, we also explored the ways in which libraries are referred to. Across the 41 reports which do reference libraries, most did so in a positive fashion, recognising the contributions that they can make (30/41). Six reports went further still and made commitments to invest in libraries, something which is certainly welcome. Finally, five referred in a negative way, suggesting that a lack of libraries was holding the country back. The full list of countries referencing libraries in VNRs is in annex.

Looking across the Reviews, we can build an idea of the contexts in which references to libraries are made:



It is perhaps not surprising that education (SDG4) comes out on top, given the role of libraries in supporting literacy and wider school life, as well as acting as providers of, and portals to lifelong learning. Other areas which are relatively frequently covered include SDG9 (innovation and connectivity), SDG 10 (reducing inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and issues around energy efficiency and climate action (SDGs 7, 12 and 13), all of which featured in around 10% of reports mentioning libraries.

Looking in more depth, the following types of reference appeared per SDG:



SDG 1 (No Poverty): Canada’s VNR talked about the role of libraries as part of the social infrastructure, especially for people on lower incomes, helping them to find opportunities to improve their lives. Indonesia’s referred of the role of mobile libraries in bringing services and opportunities to poorer areas.



SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing): both Brunei-Darussalam and Slovenia suggested that libraries are connected to wellbeing, providing people with an opportunity to reflect and relax.



SDG 4 (Quality Education): a key theme was the role (or planned role) of school libraries in supporting the achievement of wider educational goals. The idea that each school should benefit from a good quality library appears in the reviews of Fiji, Greece, Indonesia, Liberia, Nepal, Nigeria (twice), North Macedonia, Palau, Poland, Trinidad and Tobago and Zimbabwe. The review of Papua New Guinea also refers to the work of a private foundation that builds school libraries as a good thing.

Beyond school libraires, the value of creating curated repositories of materials to support learning appears in the reviews for Chile, Egypt, Guatemala, and Oman.

The educational role of libraries is not only focused on children. The review of Rwanda underlines what libraries can contribute to adult learning, while Canada talks about their support for parents, Fiji for people who are otherwise disadvantaged, and Nigeria for people with special needs. Latvia notes the role of libraries in promoting digital skills. Finland, in the meanwhile, uses data on library visits as an indicator of lifelong education.



SDG 5 (Gender Equality): the one reference that appears is in the United Kingdom’s review, which highlights library efforts to ensure proper recognition of the historical contribution of women.



SDGs 7, 12 and 13 (Energy, Sustainable Consumption and Climate Action): reports here had in common the fact that libraries can be powerful exemplars of the application of green technologies and approaches, and places to learn about how to live more sustainably. Canada’s VNR mentions placing solar panels on libraries and Slovenia’s talks about greening library buildings, while Finland’s notes their role as learning centres. Malta, meanwhile, talks about promoting more sustainable tourism through greater digital access to library collections.



SDG 9 (Industry, Infrastructure, and Innovation): references here focus equally on support for research, for example throughout the country (Nepal), and the value of digital libraries (Greece). Meanwhile, Jamaica,

Oman, and **Singapore** stress how libraries can support ICT access across wider groups, enabling them to engage more effectively in economic, social, and civic life.



SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): the specific role of libraries in reaching out to groups which risk being marginalised is highlighted, for example in **Canada**, which notes libraries work with immigrants and other newcomers, and **Argentina** and **Nigeria**, which focuses on services to people with disabilities. Meanwhile, **Indonesia** highlights targeted efforts towards people in poorer areas, while the **United Kingdom's** review notes work in Wales to work through libraries to empower vulnerable groups.



SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities): this SDG covers not only better lives within cities, but also territorial equality and the safeguarding of heritage. Reflecting this, the reviews of **Greece** and **Nepal** underline the role of libraries across each country in promoting balanced development across the country, while that of the **United Kingdom** notes how libraries can be important community spaces. **Andorra**, **Croatia**, and **Qatar** focus more on the role that building – or rebuilding – libraries contributes to cultural goals.



SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions): while a very important Goal from the point of view of libraries, there are fewer references to libraries here, both focusing on their role in helping people access justice and participate in politics. The review of **Chile** sets out library work to promote plain-language law, to make it more understandable for people, while that of **Mauritius** notes library efforts to provide access to the constitution, and so promote access to justice.



SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals): this SDG covers a wide range of issues, but it is worth noting the reference in **Indonesia's** review to counting the number of data scientists at the National Library as an indicator of uptake of digital skills.



Beyond individual SDGs, there are very positive references in the reviews of **Argentina**, **Australia**, **Chile**, and **Estonia** to the role of libraries in developing the overall government response to the SDGs. This is a powerful point, recognising the role of libraries themselves as stakeholders in the future of the communities they serve, and as places which can bring people together to engage in participatory democracy.

Libraries are also recognised important shop-windows for the SDGs, acting as places which can raise awareness of, and engagement in, the 2030 Agenda. References to this role appear in the reviews for **Australia**, **Chile** (twice), **Estonia**, **Finland**, **Hungary**, **Jamaica**, and the **United Kingdom**.

Conclusion

The examples set out here are important indicators of the recognition of the importance of libraries for development by governments on all continents. With libraries referenced as part of efforts to deliver success across the SDGs, as well as in raising awareness of, and designing responses to, the 2030 Agenda, there is plenty of material that libraries elsewhere can draw on. As we look to the 2021 VNRs, and beyond, libraries are encouraged to draw on these examples to advocate for recognition, and so strengthen their arguments for inclusion in sustainable development policy planning.

ANNEX – Voluntary National Reviews Referencing Libraries

Country	Year	Link
Andorra	2018	link
Argentina	2020	link
Australia	2018	link
Azerbaijan	2017	link
Brunei	2020	link
Canada	2018	link
Chile	2017	link
Chile	2019	link
Croatia	2019	link
Egypt	2018	link
Estonia	2020	link
Fiji	2019	link
Finland	2020	link
Greece	2018	link
Guatemala	2019	link
Hungary	2018	link
Indonesia	2017	link
Indonesia	2019	link
Jamaica	2018	link
Latvia	2018	link
Liberia	2020	link
Malta	2018	link
Mauritius	2019	link
Moldova	2020	link
Nepal	2017	link
Nigeria	2017	link
Nigeria	2020	link
North Macedonia	2020	link
Oman	2019	link
Palau	2019	link
Papua New Guinea	2020	link
Poland	2018	link
Qatar	2018	link
Rwanda	2019	link
Singapore	2018	link
Slovenia	2017	link
Slovenia	2020	link
Trinidad and Tobago	2020	link
Tunisia	2019	link
United Kingdom	2019	link
Zimbabwe	2017	link