



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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SURVEY REPORT

Parliamentary involvement in the 2020 Voluntary National Reviews

Each year, governments volunteer to submit progress reports on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the ministerial session of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in July, in New York. According to UN guidelines, these Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) should be inclusive of all stakeholders through the various stages of preparation, from early consultations to data collection and the formulation of actionable recommendations.

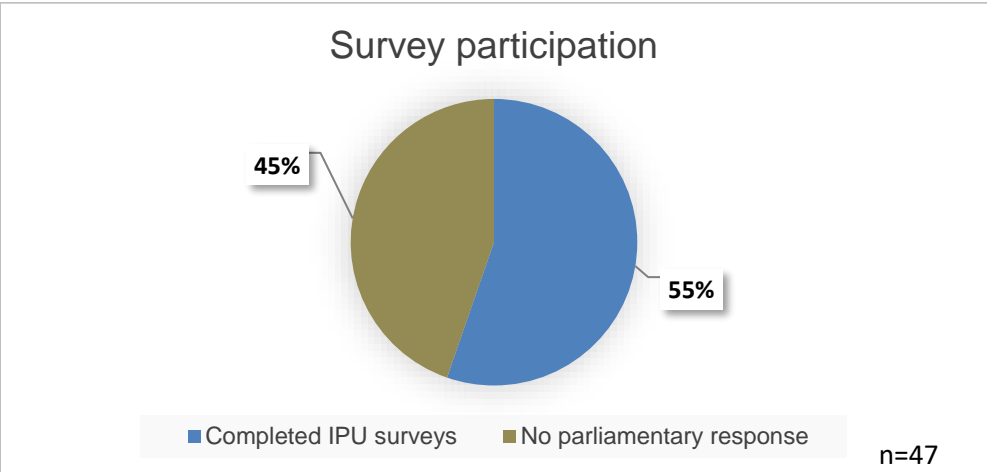
As a State institution whose oversight role is critical to accountability, parliament needs to be engaged in the VNR process, checking the accuracy of the government's review and providing input on behalf of the people. Parliamentary involvement in the VNR is key to strengthening national ownership of and building more political support for the SDGs.

This report explains the findings of a survey that the IPU conducted with the parliaments of the countries scheduled to present a VNR to the 2020 HLPF session. The survey builds on past surveys since 2016, with a set of new questions to probe the quality of parliaments' engagement in the VNR process.

Consistent with previous years' findings, this 2020 survey shows that parliamentary engagement in the VNR process is uneven. It also reveals that there is considerable scope for more substantial and substantive engagement.

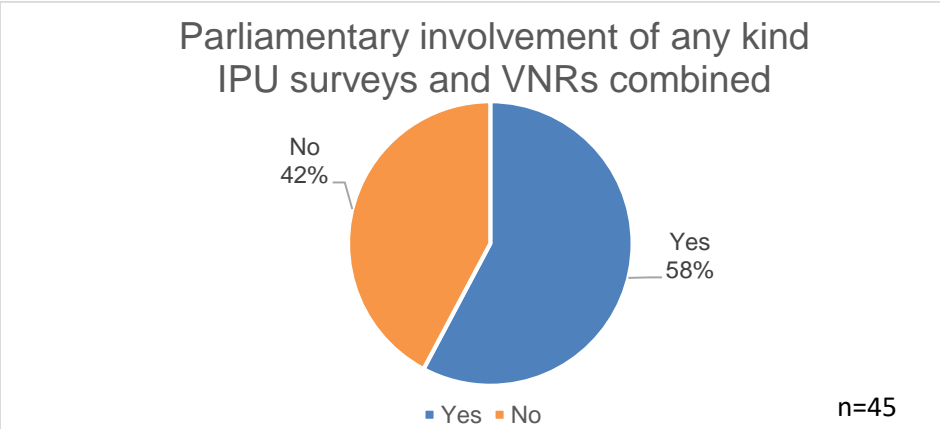
Findings

A total of 47 countries volunteered to submit national reports to the 2020 HLPF session, resulting in 45 actual submissions to the HLPF.¹ During the IPU survey, 26 parliaments submitted completed questionnaires to the IPU, which corresponds to a survey participation rate of 55 per cent (see annex for the complete list of survey participants). This constitutes an improvement on the 2019 participation rate of 49 per cent.



In an effort to fill the information gap for the parliaments that did not participate in the survey, the corresponding VNR reports were scanned for any mention of parliamentary involvement in the government-led process. In at least two cases, the government VNRs seemed to claim greater parliamentary engagement than reported by the parliaments themselves. Seven reports of a total of 19 VNRs read contained one or more references to the involvement of parliament or individual MPs. Because these references generally did not provide sufficient detail as to the quality, timing and modalities of the parliamentary involvement, only the actual 26 survey questionnaires received from the parliaments were considered for the purpose of this report.

Nevertheless, taking all information at face value and combining the two main sources together, in a total of 26 cases, or 58 per cent of the VNRs actually submitted to the HLPF, parliaments appear to have been involved in this year's VNR exercise. This gross figure is significantly better than the 2019 finding of 38 per cent.



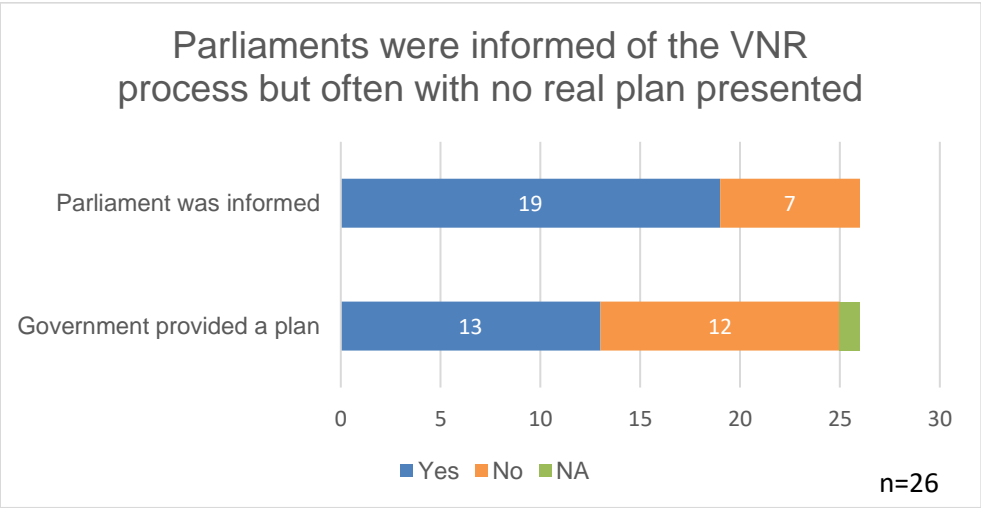
¹ As at 27 August, when this report was prepared, two countries (Barbados and St. Vincent and the Grenadines) had yet to submit their reports.

The survey questionnaire consisted of two leading questions broken down into a number of sub-questions. The findings reported below were drawn exclusively from the survey responses from the parliaments.

The first leading question focused on the government side and enquired whether the government had duly informed parliament of the VNR process. A parliament cannot necessarily be expected to learn on its own, and in good time, that the government has volunteered a progress report to the United Nations. The onus of informing the parliament at the start of the process should fall on the government.

Moreover, in informing the parliament, a plan should ideally be introduced as early as possible to clearly explain the objectives and modalities of the review process, including the stakeholders to be consulted and the overall timeline broken down into its various stages (i.e. data collection, consultations with stakeholders, review of findings, etc.). It can safely be assumed that when such a plan is drawn up and shared with the parliament, the VNR process and the input that parliaments may provide are more likely to be of quality.

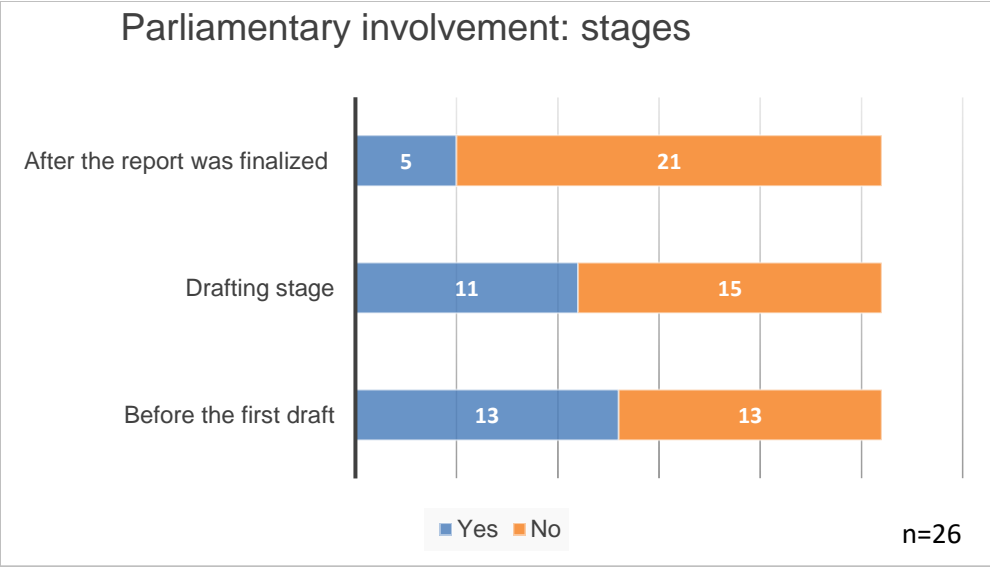
Of the 26 parliaments that returned a completed survey questionnaire, 19 were informed of the VNR process directly by the government. However, only 13 parliaments – half of all survey participants – were presented with a consultation plan.



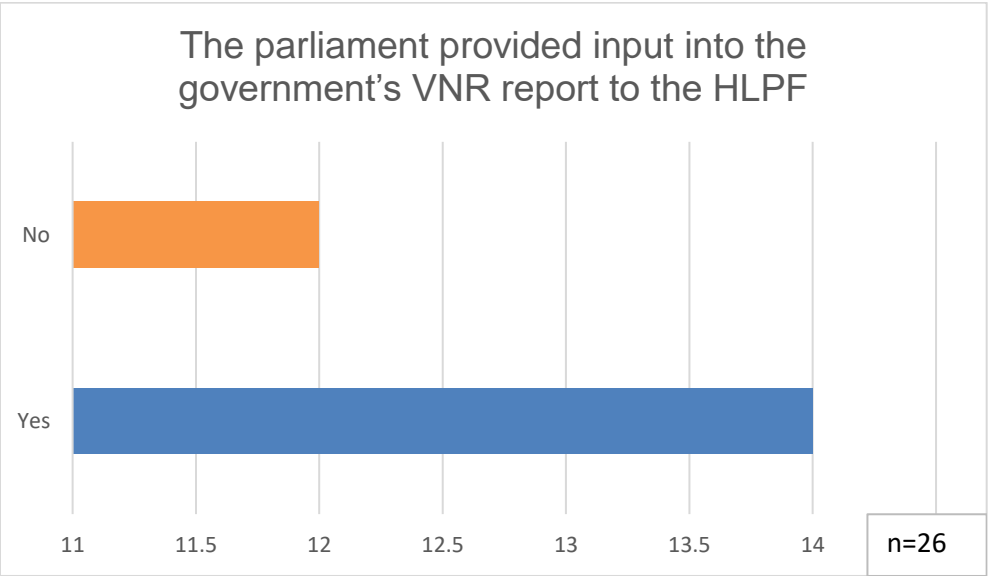
The point in time when a parliament is engaged in the review process – before a first draft of the report, at the drafting stage, or after the report is finalized – is a good indicator of the quality of parliamentary oversight of this government-led exercise. Ideally, parliaments should be involved in all three stages of the review.

While half of all respondents had some kind of interaction with the government before the first draft (13) and at the drafting stage (11), only a small number (5) were able to review the report after it was finalized by the government.² Only three parliaments reported being involved in all three stages of the review process. Twelve parliaments were involved in just one stage and three parliaments in two stages of the review process. These numbers combined indicate a fairly weak level of parliamentary involvement.

² Note that all sub-questions in the questionnaire such as this one allowed for more than one answer.

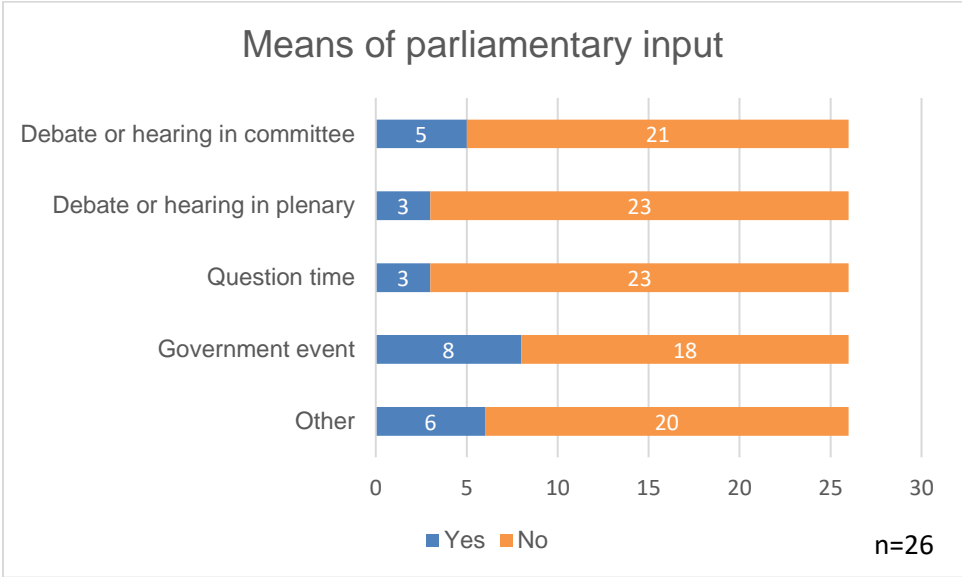


The second leading question of the survey asked generally whether the parliament provided input into the actual VNR submitted to the HLPF in any way. Just over 50 per cent of respondents, a total of 14, said that they provided such input. However, if compared with the total number of 45 VNR presented to the HLPF, this figure comes down to a more modest 31 per cent. Interestingly, five of the parliaments that answered no to this question had actually been informed of the VNR process by the government according to their answer to the first leading question. This situation may be due to a lack of openness in the review process, poor timing to allow the parliament to be part of it, or simply insufficient parliamentary capacity to engage in the process.



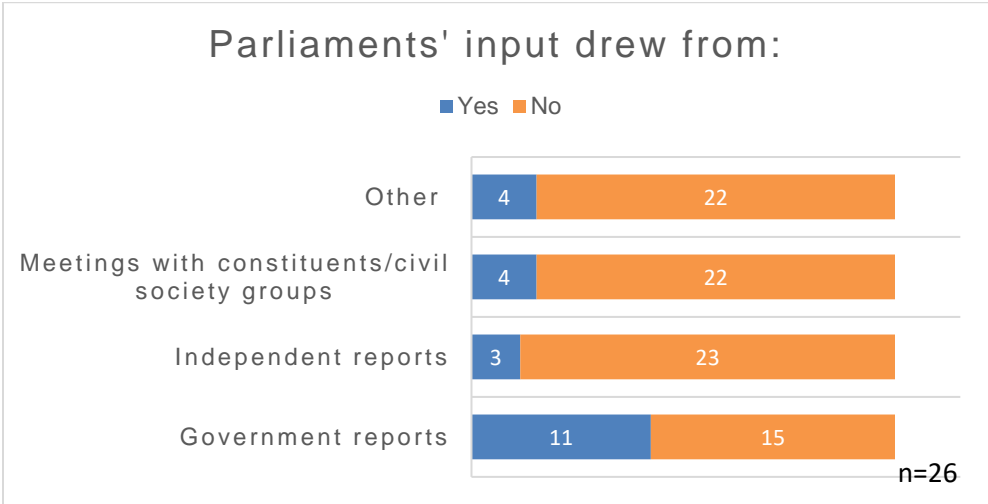
There are at least four ways in which a parliament can provide input into a VNR report. These ways are not mutually exclusive and can be utilized at various stages of the review process. Holding a hearing in one or more committees is generally considered the most substantive way for parliament as an institution to delve deep into the substance of a government process. When individual parliamentarians participate in government-sponsored events (e.g. workshops) that are open to other stakeholders, the input is likely to be less effective. It may also be less representative of the views present in parliament, especially when members of the opposition are not involved..

As shown below, only five parliaments reported having held at least one committee hearing on the VNR report. Within this group, only two parliaments reported providing input through almost all other means indicated in the questionnaire. Participation in a government event was the more frequent modality.



Another indication of the quality of a parliament’s input is the sources it is able to draw from in order to formulate its own position vis-à-vis the government’s report. Independent sources, such as reports provided by a parliamentary budget office or leading civil society organizations, can be used to supplement or critique official government information. Similarly, constituency meetings can help MPs compare the reality on the ground with that depicted in reports that originate from within the government’s bureaucracy.

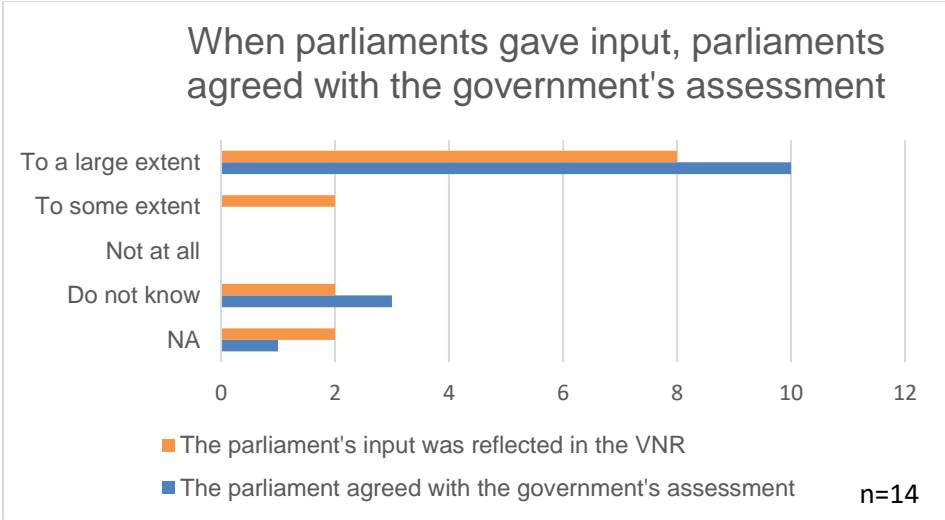
Of the 26 parliaments that participated in the survey, 11 relied on government reports in order to complement or arrive at its own assessment of SDG progress in the country. For six of those parliaments, government reports were the sole source of information throughout the whole VNR process. Only three parliaments reported utilizing at least two more sources of information in addition to what was provided by the government. Taken together, these findings suggest that the input that parliaments provided to the VNR process was not as substantial as it could have been.



An important question when it comes to parliaments providing input into the government-led VNR process is whether such input makes any difference to the final outcome. Another consideration is the

extent to which the parliament is satisfied that the government's assessment of SDG progress more or less matches the parliament's own assessment.

Of the 14 parliaments that provided any kind of input into the VNR report according to the survey questionnaires, 10 ultimately agreed with the government's assessment and 8 were satisfied that much of their input had been reflected in the final report. The comparison of these two responses shows a fairly strong correlation indicating that when parliaments engage in the VNR process, they can make a positive contribution to the final outcome.



Conclusions

Parliamentary involvement in the 2020 VNRs fell short of the mark in terms of quality and depth, with only 14 out of 26 parliaments that participated in the survey actually providing input into the process through relatively weak means. Parliamentary involvement seems to be particularly lacking towards the end of the process, as only five parliaments seem to have looked at the final report before its presentation to the HLPF. A number of parliaments that were aware of the VNR process did not provide any input.

Despite this, there is some evidence that parliaments' contribution to the VNR exercise generally leads to a more satisfactory outcome. Another positive finding, is that 26 parliaments (58 percent of 45 VNRs submitted) had something to do with the 2020 VNR cycle, as shown by the combination of information from survey responses and VNR reports.

While a solid majority of governments appear to have informed parliaments of the VNR process, only 13 parliaments were presented with a proper consultation plan, which made thorough parliamentary engagement less likely.

Going forward, two important issues will need to be addressed:

1. Possible discrepancies between survey responses provided by the parliaments and information provided by the governments' own reports about parliamentary engagement need to be clarified. Future surveys should be supplemented by a complete review of all VNR reports submitted (i.e. including those of countries for which a survey questionnaire was returned by the parliament) so that information can be cross-checked and clarification sought from the parliaments concerned. In this regard, it would be most helpful if the official government reports to the HLPF provided more detailed information about the involvement of parliaments.
2. The survey participation rate of 55 percent leaves room for improvement. Organizing virtual briefings with the parliaments concerned at the start of each VNR cycle, dedicating a segment of the spring session of the IPU Committee on United Nations Affairs to the VNRs, and proactively offering support to individual parliaments, may all help to bring more parliaments into this important process.

Annex: List of survey participants (26 total)

Armenia	Niger
Austria	North Macedonia
Benin	Republic of Moldova
Costa Rica	Russian Federation
Ecuador	Seychelles
Estonia	Slovenia
Federated States of Micronesia	Solomon Islands
Finland	Trinidad and Tobago
Gambia	Uganda
Georgia	Ukraine
India	Uzbekistan
Kenya	Zambia
Kyrgyzstan	
Nepal	

The complete list of all VNR reporting countries included:

Argentina
Bangladesh
Barbados
Brunei Darussalam
Bulgaria
Burundi
Comoros
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Honduras
Liberia
Libya
Malawi
Morocco
Mozambique
Nigeria
Panama
Papua New Guinea
Peru
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Samoa
Syrian Arab Republic