

# **What do Voluntary National Reviews tell us about priorities in education?**

## **Blog**

Education and development

As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda encourages member states to “[conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven](#)”.

These national reviews, which are voluntary, state-led and undertaken by both developed and developing countries, aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, strengthen governments’ policies and institutions, and mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships with a view to accelerating the implementation of the SDGs. Called Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), they are submitted and discussed during the [United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#) (HLPF) held each year. According to the [VNR Handbook](#), countries should report on all 17 SDGs in each VNR and not limit their review to those selected for special focus by the HLPF.

This piece analyses the VNRs of the six Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries that reported progress on education in 2018: Cabo Verde, Guinea, Mali, Namibia, Niger and Senegal.

## **SDG4 integration into national frameworks - where do SSA countries stand?**

According to the VNR Handbook, one of the key building blocks of the VNRs is the “incorporation of the SDGs into national frameworks”. It is widely acknowledged that effective implementation of the SDGs largely depends on their integration into all relevant national policies and plans. All six countries seem to have the political will to integrate the SDGs into their frameworks, but in practice, they are at various steps of the process and most of them only refer to national development plans rather than education sector plans (ESPs).

Mali is the only country to acknowledge explicitly that the SDGs have not yet been integrated into its development planning documents. Cabo Verde’s and

Senegal's VNRs report on alignment both at the national and at the sectoral level. In [Plan Senegal Emergent](#), for instance, 8 out of 10 SDG4 targets are considered sufficiently well addressed. At the sectoral level, Cabo Verde's [2017-2021 strategic plan for education](#) is aligned with SDG4 and is showcased at the beginning of the VNR as an example of best practice in terms of policy alignment with the SDGs. [Senegal's Education Sector Plan](#) is also presented as being fully in line with both the SDGs and the [African Union's Agenda 2063](#). Namibia has integrated the SDGs – as well as the objectives of the Agenda 2063 and the SADC's [Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan](#) – into its [5th National Development Plan \(NDP5\)](#) which was launched shortly after the adoption of the SDGs. It includes 15 strategic interventions for education that are in line with SDG4 to be achieved by 2022. In Guinea and Niger, the alignment of national development plans with the SDGs was also assessed, showing limited success. The longer term [Strategy for sustainable development and inclusive growth](#) (Niger Horizon 2035) also considers education as a priority but its logical framework does not integrate SDG4 indicators.

## **Quality basic education and enhanced equity as top priorities**

Although progress has been made in all countries, access to basic education is still a challenge in most of Sub-Saharan Africa. However, except for Mali, whose VNR is limited to enrolment issues, the focus is mainly placed on the lack of quality and relevance of learning, reflected in high dropout and repetition rates as well as poor learning outcomes, specifically at the lower secondary level.

Guinea goes beyond access and addresses quality through learning assessments. In Niger, where less than 27% of children and youth achieved minimal competency in basic subjects in 2015, SDG 4.1 is one of the three prioritized SDG4 targets, with a specific focus on learning outcomes. Namibia experienced a significant increase in enrolment since the introduction of free primary education, but is also concerned with unsatisfactory learning outcomes, high rates of repetition, and dropout. Senegal and Cabo Verde both highly prioritize the extension of basic education to the lower secondary level by establishing a 10-year basic education cycle of improved quality in Senegal and extending “compulsory basic education up to the 8th year” in Cabo Verde.

Disparities of all kinds (SDG4.5) seem to be the second common challenge. Gender inequity is of particular concern in Guinea, Mali and Niger. In Senegal,

there is special concern for higher education. In Cabo Verde and Namibia, girls generally perform better than boys until lower secondary after which the tendency is reversed. The rural/urban divide and disparities between regions are of concern to most countries. Children and youth with disabilities, poor households, as well as vulnerable persons are also mentioned as underserved groups. Finally, in the most advanced countries, disparities prevail in higher education and Early Childhood Development (ECD).

## **Early childhood, TVET and higher education - well considered sub-sectors**

All countries except Niger highlight the importance of ECD (SDG 4.2), be it from the angle of enhanced access, equity, or teacher qualifications. For Namibia and Cabo Verde, it is clearly a top priority. In Senegal, ECD is seen as an integrated part of an extended basic education cycle.

Technical and vocational education and training (SDGs 4.3 and 4.4) seems to be important mainly in Senegal and Namibia. Namibia considers that investing in education and skills for employment is a key tool that contributes to poverty reduction, while promoting vocational training oriented towards the labour market is part of Senegal's strategic orientations. The two countries and Cabo Verde also see equitable and quality higher education (SDG 4.3) as crucial for their further development.

## **The SDG4 targets that are somehow left behind**

Although adult literacy rates are still low in many African countries, few of the VNRs focus on adult education and non-formal education. Apart from Senegal, which has the objective of eradicating illiteracy through basic education for youth and adults, countries do not seem to engage much with this sub-sector. This echoes the "neglect of youth and adult education and skills development, both formal and non-formal (p.2)" noted by the [SDG-ED2030 committee](#).

Teachers (SDG4.c) and infrastructures (SDG4.a) are referred to in all reports but as transversal issues rather than real priorities. Finally, SDG 4.7 is almost absent, which seems to corroborate the observation of the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee that there is a "poor mainstreaming of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education (p. 2)".

## Conclusion

This short analysis provides some insights into the level of integration of SDG4 and the difficulties and priorities of a small selection of countries. Whilst some trends emerge, the heterogeneity of the countries and the lack of standardization in content, structure and data makes it difficult to compare and draw conclusions. The question that arises, however, concerns the purpose and utility of the VNRs. As stated in [ODI's 2018](#) analysis, their prime value lies in showcasing countries' commitment to the 2030 Agenda and motivating national governments to engage further. The very fact that these countries voluntarily submitted reports to the HLPF and included a review of their education system is a sign of their commitment towards the 2030 Agenda in general and SDG4 in particular. But this should not be an end in itself. Beyond their "public relations exercise", the VNRs should highlight the challenges countries face in implementing the SDGs "so that the HLPF can serve as a forum to troubleshoot implementation problems common across several countries". What we see is that even if challenges are clearly identified in most cases, there is no real effort at interpretation and no identification of best practices or possible ways forward. Hopefully, with lessons learnt and HLPF 2019 addressing specifically SDG4, the analysis of next year's VNRs shall be an invaluable source of information on SDG4 advancement around the world.

## Voluntary National Reviews

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- [Mali](#)
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