*Methodological Document*

# Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

## Quality Index (VNRs-QI)

Cepei

SDG QUALITY TRACKER

VNR QUALITY INDEX

# Summary

This document presents the Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda Quality Index (VNRs-QI), a methodology to qualitatively measure the quality of Voluntary National Reviews submitted by United Nations Member States to inform international society of their progress on implementing the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals at the national level. In building this index, pre-existing procedures used to evaluate the quality of reports and information production have been taken into account, integrating variables on compliance with pre-established reporting commitments, stakeholder involvement in the drafting of reports, compliance with recommended reporting formats, and use of reliable and current data in the final index.

The VNRs-QI is based on the notion of *reporting quality,* understood as compliance with the reporting content commitments assumed by the countries in the 2030 Agenda, as well as alignment with the general commitments outlined in the same document, even in cases where these are not directly established in the chapters on reporting, as long as they are directly related to the commitments and forms of reporting pertaining to the 2030 Agenda. As a result, the quality of a Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals is defined as *the alignment between the reporting commitments made by States in adopting the follow-up and review mechanisms included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and with respect to other commitments made in that agenda that have a direct bearing on the reporting commitments*.

Based on that understanding, and using the experience Cepei has gained in the qualitative analysis of Voluntary National Reviews carried out since 2016—the year in which these reports were presented for the first time—the dimensions of the VNR-QI and its measurement variables were established, possible values were assigned for each of them, a direct weighting was chosen for each variable to obtain the final value of each dimension, and a direct weighting between dimensions was chosen to obtain a final result of the index represented by a number between 0 (no quality) and 100 (maximum quality).

Once the index corresponding to each VNR has been obtained, the VNRs are grouped into four categories: high, medium high, medium low, and low quality.

# Presentation

This methodological document supports and explains the elements and methodology of the Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda Quality Index (VNRs-QI), which is part of Cepei's process to track the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

This index aims to analyze the quality of the Voluntary National Reviews that countries voluntarily submit to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum to inform international society about their progress on implementing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs at the national level. The questions this index seeks to answer are:

What is the quality of the reports that are being submitted to report on progress made on national implementation of the 2030 Agenda?

What elements of reporting quality are most and least considered within the exercises of building Voluntary National Reviews to document progress on the implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda at the national level?

How can we compare the quality of reporting between different countries that submit their Voluntary National Reviews in the same year and/or over time?

To answer these questions, this index establishes an explicit concept of reporting quality based on objective elements taken from the commitments made by the States within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and uses them for qualitative measurements by contrasting the expectations resulting from the commitments with the realities expressed in the analyzed reports.

This initiative is part of an effort to strengthen reporting exercises linked to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, foster best reporting practices, and uphold the original purpose behind their creation. To this end, the strategy followed is based on evidence compiled from years of analyzing Voluntary National Reviews, resulting in the broad empirical evidence base the achieved results are based on.

The products resulting from this initiative are expected to contribute to a better analysis and understanding of the elements that impact the production of quality Voluntary National Reviews and in this sense support the work of governments that decide to present their reports to the international society, while providing evidence of the challenges of reporting the national progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

# Conceptual framework

## Main features of the proposed index:

1. It has a quantitative nature that is expressed in an aggregate measurement and mean values for each of the dimensions.
2. It considers multiple types of variables in response to the integrated nature of sustainable development and their representation in the reporting exercises subject to quality analysis. This results in a large number of indicators, which reduces the degree of statistical sensitivity between measurements and the occurrence of abrupt changes.
3. Its results can be used as input for new Voluntary National Review exercises that introduce reporting improvements based on the proposed methodology.

## The notion of *quality* reporting

There are multiple ways to understand the quality of a report from a statistical perspective, measuring compliance with the specifications for its consideration as a product, the degree of variability with respect to optimal standards, the degree of improvement promoted throughout the series in the standards used, or the degree of customer/user satisfaction, among other options.

In the measurement we propose, the idea of quality is directly related to the commitments expressly assumed by the United Nations Member States when adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015.

This document, which constitutes a worldwide consensus of priorities to be addressed globally to promote sustainable development, is organized into four parts:

- An introduction, presenting a political vision of the world in 2015 and a vision of the desired world in 2030, including a conceptualization of sustainable development.
- Common goals to be achieved by the last day of 2030: the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Means of implementation, which identify tools to be put in place to achieve the SDGs by 2030.
- A follow-up and review system to monitor progress on achieving the SDGs at the national, regional, and global levels.

In the last of the aforementioned parts, the countries create a follow-up and review framework and establish commitments regarding roles and basic content, which must be interpreted within the 2030 Agenda framework as a whole, acknowledging that the entire system will be supported by national reports.

We commit to engage in systematic follow-up and review of implementation of this Agenda over the next fifteen years. A robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework will make a vital contribution to implementation and will help countries to maximize and track progress in implementing this Agenda in order to ensure that no one is left behind (2030 Agenda, paragraph 72).

Follow-up and review processes at all levels will be guided by the following principles:

**a)** They will be voluntary and country-led, will take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and will respect policy space and priorities. As national ownership is key to achieving sustainable development, the outcome from national level processes will be the foundation for reviews at regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on national official data sources.

**b)** They will track progress in implementing the universal Goals and targets, including the means of implementation, in all countries in a manner which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development.

**c)** They will maintain a longer-term orientation, identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices. They will help mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships, support the identification of solutions and best practices and promote coordination and effectiveness of the international development system.

**d)** They will be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support the reporting by all relevant stakeholders.

**e)** They will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind.

**f)** They will build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist, avoid duplication and respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities. They will evolve over time, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations.

**g)** They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.

**h)** They will require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programs, particularly in African countries, LDCs, SIDS and LLDCs and middle-income countries.

**i)** They will benefit from the active support of the UN system and other multilateral institutions (2030 Agenda, paragraph 74).

Based on these considerations, we consider that the quality of the reports results from the alignment between the reporting commitments assumed by the States when adopting the follow-up and review mechanism included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and with respect to other commitments assumed in that agenda that are directly related to the reporting commitments.

# Dimensions, variables, and weighting of the quality of the Voluntary National Reviews on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

Based on our concept of quality of the Voluntary National Reviews, the degree of quality is reflected in how these reports track a series of dimensions that express the central elements of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, which must also be addressed in accordance with the principles established for the follow-up and review processes (*see above, paragraph 74 of the 2030 Agenda*).

The dimensions referred to are:

1. Mainstreaming the SDGs at the national level: degree of relationship between the SDGs and national development goals.
2. Mainstreaming the core elements of the 2030 Agenda: the extent to which the basic principles of the 2030 Agenda are integrated into national sustainable development planning and implementation.
3. National implementation measures: involvement of different actors in SDG implementation at the national level.
4. Report coverage: extent of reporting on all SDGs.
5. Stakeholder participation in the construction of the VNRs: different stakeholders' degree of involvement in the preparation of the Voluntary National Review.
6. Means of implementation: extent of consideration of the means of implementation for SDG achievement referred to in the 2030 Agenda.
7. Data for development: quality of the data the report is based on and efforts for its continuous improvement.
8. Alignment of the VNR with SG guidelines: relationship between the contents of the Voluntary National Review and the content recommendations for such reports made by the United Nations Secretary-General in his Voluntary common reporting guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
9. Special topics (annual): treatment given to critically relevant topics at the time of reporting. Since 2020, it refers to the alignment between policies for the promotion of Sustainable Development and to face and overcome the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.
10. Continuity between reports: only applies to second and subsequent reports submitted by the same country. It refers to Voluntary National Reviews submitted by the reporting government on previous occasions, promoting continuous reporting and avoiding content repetition.

To flesh out each of these dimensions, variables which express their degree of consideration in the Voluntary National Reviews were set (see Appendix). Each variable is assigned an indicator. For nearly all the variables, there is a dispersion of results in three possible positions with their respective values: **"Satisfactory" (1), "Partially satisfactory" (0.5), "Unsatisfactory" (0).**

In order to assign the corresponding value to each dimension, its content is contrasted with what is effectively reported by each country in each year through its Voluntary National Review.

Exceptions to the use of the three possible values assigned to each variable result from applying other scales to those with more qualitative content. In particular:

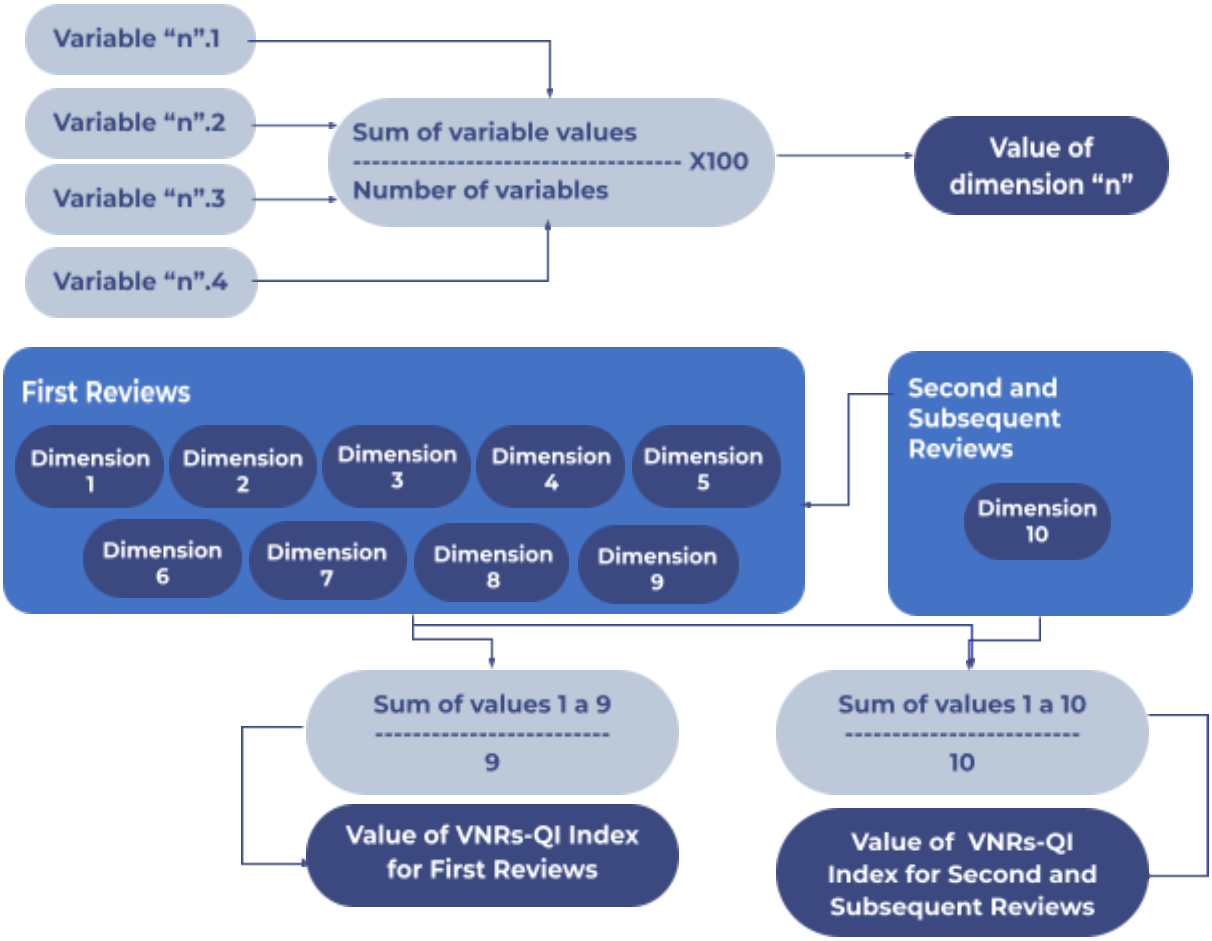
- The coverage variable for the 17 SDGs is assigned the value points "Yes" (1), "Only the relevant ones" (0.66), "Covers other issues" (0.33), "Does not cover the SDGs" (0).
- The continuity between reports variable is assigned the value points "The reports establish a continuum" (1), "The reports establish continuities on a regular basis" (0.66), "The reports rarely establish continuities" (0.33), "The reports do not establish continuities" (0).

The values of the variables of each dimension are weighted directly to obtain the value of each dimension. The values of each dimension are weighted directly to obtain the value of the Voluntary National Review Quality Index.

Given that the number of variables that make up each dimension varies from a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 15, this generates a variation in the specific weight of the variables that are grouped in each dimension, from 1/3 to 1/15 of the determination of the final data for each dimension. This reflects the fact that each dimension presents broader expectations for inclusion of elements, and therefore how they are addressed in the Voluntary National Review leads to a lower impact on the reporting of the corresponding dimension. In contrast, when a dimension is composed by a more limited number of elements expected to be reported, the exclusion or poor treatment of some of them produces wider reporting gaps, leading to a greater impact on quality, which is what the proposed index is able to reflect.

In the particular case of dimension 10, "continuity between reports," this only includes one indicator, so it has a higher weighted value in the total of the indicators, which is also correct since the non-consideration or insufficient treatment of the relationship between successive reports ends up jeopardizing the overall quality of the report when the relationships between successive reporting exercises are interrupted, which in itself affects the possibility of understanding the country's work on implementing the SDGs in terms of processes, and not as a succession of statistically static moments.

**Figure 1:** How the VNR-QI is structured




## Grouping of results

Once the index has been calculated for each analyzed case, a grouping exercise is carried out in four categories:

1. High-quality VNR
2. Medium-high quality VNR
3. Medium-low quality VNR
4. Low quality VNR

The following thresholds are considered for assigning categories:

**Low-quality VNR:** Reports with a score between 0 and 33.33.

The reports in this group do not reach one third of the maximum total score, so their quality is seriously compromised and they fail to present the contents of the report in a way that reflects the reporting behaviors agreed in the 2030 Agenda and/or suggested by the Secretary-General in the guidelines on VNR submission.

**Medium-low quality VNRs**: Represent the lowest third of the remaining two-thirds of possible scores once the lowest third is removed. Their score ranges from 33.34 to 55.66. In these reports, between one-third and slightly more than half of the reporting commitments agreed in the 2030 Agenda and/or suggested by the Secretary-General in the guidelines on VNR submission have been respected.

**Medium-high quality NRVs**: Represent the middle third of the remaining two-thirds of possible scores once the lowest third is removed. Their score ranges from 55.67 to 77.89. In these reports, between slightly more than half and slightly more than two-thirds of the reporting commitments agreed in the 2030 Agenda and/or suggested by the Secretary-General in the guidelines on VNR submission have been respected.

**High-quality VNRs:** Represent the upper third of the two-thirds of possible scores once the lowest third is removed. Their score ranges from 77.90 to 100. These reports have respected between just over two-thirds and all the reporting requirements agreed in the 2030 Agenda and/or suggested by the Secretary-General in the guidelines on VNR submission.

**Figure 2:** VFNRs grouping categories and score ranges according to their Quality Index

<table>
<tr><td>High</td><td>77.9-100</td><td rowspan="3">Upper two-thirds</td><td>Upper two-thirds</td></tr>
<tr><td>Medium-high</td><td>55.67-77.8</td><td>Middle two-thirds</td></tr>
<tr><td>Medium-low</td><td>33.4-55.5</td><td>Lower two-thirds</td></tr>
<tr><td>Low</td><td>0-33.3</td><td colspan="2">Lower third</td></tr>
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## Appendix: Dimensions and variables used in the Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda Quality Index (VNRs-QI)

| **Dimension 1: Mainstreaming the SDGs at the national level** |
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| Are there references to the SDGs in national policies and planning documents? |
| Does it refer to the institutional framework for implementation/tracking at the national level? |
| Have national strategies been aligned with the SDGs? |
| Have the SDGs been nationalized? |
| **Dimension 2: Mainstreaming the core elements of the 2030 Agenda** |
| Are there references to the "leave no one behind" principle? |
| Are there references to the principle of "universality"? |
| Are there references to the "human rights-based" principle? |
| Are there references to the principle of "SDG interdependence"? |
| Are there references to the five "critical dimensions" (5Ps) defined in the 2030 Agenda? |
| Are there references to the integrated approach to sustainable development? |
| Are there references to "multi-stakeholder implementation"? |
| Does it mention the Addis Ababa Action Agenda? |
| Does it mention the Paris Agreement? |
| Does it mention the Sendai Framework for Action? |
| Does it mention other international global documents? |
| Does it mention international regional documents? |
| Does it refer to policy coherence for development? |
| **Dimension 3: National implementation measures** |
| Are there references to government-led public awareness efforts? |
| Does civil society participate in the national institutional framework for implementation/tracking? |
| Does the private sector participate in the national institutional framework for implementation/tracking? |
| Does the academy participate in the national institutional framework for implementation/tracking? |
| Do subnational governments participate in the national institutional framework for implementation/tracking? |

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| Is the parliament involved in the national institutional framework for implementation/tracking? |
| Are other actors involved in the national institutional framework for implementation/tracking? |
| Is civil society involved in national implementation/tracking? |
| Is the private sector involved in national implementation/tracking? |
| Is academia involved in national implementation/tracking? |
| Are subnational governments involved in national implementation/tracking? |
| Is parliament involved in national implementation/tracking? |
| Are other stakeholders involved in national implementation/tracking? |
| Does it identify challenges/obstacles in the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs? |
| Does it refer to sources of funding for national implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs? |
| **Dimension 4: Report coverage** |
| Does it identify activities at a global level? |
| Does it identify activities at a regional level? |
| Does it cover all 17 SDGs? |
| **Dimension 5: Stakeholder participation in the construction of the VNR** |
| Does it identify government institutions responsible for the VNR? |
| Has civil society participated in the VNR construction process? |
| Has the private sector participated in the VNR construction process? |
| Has academia participated in the VNR construction process? |
| Have subnational governments participated in the VNR construction process? |
| Have other non-governmental stakeholders been involved in the VNR construction process? |
| Has parliament been involved in the VNR construction process? |
| **Dimension 6: Means of implementation** |
| Does it refer to technology as a means of implementation? |
| Does it refer to human capacity building as a means of implementation? |
| Does it refer to external public financing as a means of implementation? |
| Does it refer to international cooperation (North-South, South-South, triangular) as a means of implementation? |
| Does it refer to international trade as a means of implementation? |
| Does it refer to systemic issues as a means of implementation? |
| **Dimension 7: Data for development** |

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| Does it identify a national entity responsible for data creation and management? |
| Was a data availability study conducted? |
| Does it refer to the sufficiency/insufficiency of data for SDG implementation/tracking at the national level? |
| Does it identify programs/plans to improve national statistical capacities? |
| Does it identify government partnerships with non-government data stakeholders? |
| **Dimension 8: Alignment of the VNR with SG guidelines** |
| Does it open with a word by the Head of State or Government, Minister, or other high-ranking official? |
| Does it have a "highlights" section (sometimes referred to as an executive summary)? |
| Does it have an introduction? |
| Does it present the methodology used to build the report? |
| Does it include information on appropriation? |
| Does it include information on mainstreaming the SDGs into national frameworks? |
| Does it include information on mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development? |
| Does it include information on "Leaving No One Behind"? |
| Does it include information on "Institutional Mechanisms" to implement the 2030 Agenda at the national level? |
| Does it include information on "Systemic Issues and Transformative Actions"? |
| Does it include information on progress made on goals and targets? |
| Does it include information on new challenges to achieving the 2030 Agenda or the SDGs? |
| Does it include information on means of implementation? |
| Does it make conclusions? |
| Does it contain information on future steps? |
| Does it have a statistical appendix? |
| Does it show best practices? |
| **Dimension 9: Special topics (annual)** |
| Does it report on COVID-19 and 2030 Agenda/SDGs? |
| Does it establish a connection between its post-COVID-19 recovery plans and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda/SDGs? |
| Does it link COVID issues with the Secretary-General's call to "Build Back Better"? |
| **Dimension 10: Continuity between reports** |
| **Only if it is the second or third report:** Is it linked to the previous report? |