



Voluntary National Reviews

Engaging in national implementation and review of the 2030
Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals
- a civil society quick guide

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1. Introduction

The global adoption of the 2030 Agenda and commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 marked a new phase of ambition for sustainable development. The agenda is the culmination of over two years of intensive public consultation and engagement with civil society and other stakeholders around the world to build upon the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals and to address their unfinished business, particularly in reaching the most vulnerable people.

The implementation of the SDGs has transformational potential to support the goals of civil society organisations (CSOs) working on economic, social and environmental dimensions. The participatory framework presents an opportunity for CSOs to engage, contribute and share ideas with policy makers and inform on programme development. CSOs have a critical role to play in monitoring commitments and holding governments accountable to implementation of the 2030 Agenda – to ensure governments mobilize efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

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 subnational levels, which are country-led and country-driven” (General Assembly resolution 70/1 – Paragraph 79). These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that

countries undertake at the national level and present at the high-level political forum (HLPF), the annual global meeting for assessing progress, achievements and challenges.

These VNRs are central in overseeing follow-up and review. They report on national SDG implementation strategies and 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” (General Assembly resolution 70/1 – Paragraph 84).

The main objective of VNRs is to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They also seek to strengthen government policies and institutions and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the SDGs. National consultations are often carried out to feed into the VNR process. Countries are encouraged to put regular review follow up processes into place at the national level after they are presented at the global level.

This quick guide aims to provide guidance to civil society, national coalitions and other non-governmental stakeholders on how to engage in this review process. For all the latest information and resources, visit the Together 2030 website, where these guidelines will be developed and updated: www.together2030.org/VNRs

2. Why engage in the VNR process?

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* is the global development framework that will guide development policy and practice at national, regional and global levels to the year 2030. *The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* are an integrated set of goals and targets agreed by the United Nations (UN) under the 2030 Agenda.

As the world's most comprehensive global framework on sustainable development, most, if not all, civil society actors working in economic, social and environmental sectors are already carrying out work that supports the SDGs. With governments primarily responsible for applying the goals at the national level and with the goals becoming more and more embedded in national plans and strategies, decision makers should become more and more receptive to issues that are couched within the themes and priorities of the 2030 Agenda framework.

The 2030 Agenda stipulates that implementation and review processes should be participatory and inclusive. All stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, national human rights institutions and all levels and sectors of government including government ministers, should be involved. These principles of inclusivity are equally relevant to the VNR process, which is central to follow up and review at the global level. This means that, when carried out as intended, civil society organisations have a place in the process and the government should be receptive to engagement. Moreover, the process should provide opportunities to shape and influence decisions that will affect the realisations of civil society goals and concerns.

Civil society may choose different ways to get involved depending on their priorities, capacity and

resources. Most CSOs are likely to focus on thematic areas and specific goals and targets that align to their priorities. Others may prefer to focus on coordinating civil society networks or highlighting the transformational aspects of the agenda to push for deeper change.

Furthermore, the VNR process presents CSOs with opportunities to:

- **Ensure stronger CSO coordination at the national level.** VNRs act as a convening mechanism bringing CSO partners together around tracking SDG implementation. CSOs can jointly advocate for a cause and build or strengthen the national CSO coalition on SDGs. Coordinated CSO engagement can lead to enhanced information flows, reinforced consistent messaging, and structured dialogues with governments.
- **Push towards united implementation.** SDG implementation will be contextual to the country, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances. Civil society has a key role to play in reaffirming that all 17 SDGs and their targets are integrated and indivisible and that governments are responsible to deliver on all their commitments by 2030.
- **Break down silos and open doors.** VNRs can open new channels for dialogue with the government and build a platform for regular exchange around the implementation of the SDGs. The exchange should be fully inclusive of all stakeholders ensuring the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable are heard.

- **Participate in new institutional arrangements.** It is important to ensure that new institutional structures set up to implement the SDGs are formed in collaboration and participation with all stakeholders.
- **Secure funding.** Civil society can help governments to secure funding for SDG implementation.
- **Bring attention to CSO messages at the global level.** By being part of the VNR process, CSOs can include challenges they face in the final report presented to the HLPF.
- **Engage in national dialogues.** The beauty of the VNRs is that, although they culminate in a report and presentation at the global level, the national dialogues between CSOs and their governments before and after the global reporting are the cornerstones of progressing the 2030 Agenda.
- **Hold governments accountable.** The VNR process gives CSOs the opportunity to hold governments accountable to their commitments under the 2030 Agenda. More so, this is an opportunity to present constructive solutions and inform programmatic delivery.

VNRs at the national, regional and global level

When governments adopted the 2030 Agenda, they committed to engaging in systematic follow up and review at the national, regional and global levels.

- ▶ **National:** Governments lead VNRs at the national level, which provides an opportunity for civil society to discuss SDG implementation and to strengthen relationships with policymakers, often through national consultations.
- ▶ **Regional:** UN Regional Commissions support the review process by holding annual regional workshops for VNR countries to discuss regional specificities, exchange experiences and share lessons learned. Regional outcome reports inform the global level discussions at the HLPF.
- ▶ **Global:** The *United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)* is the global structure responsible for assessing progress, achievements and challenges faced by developed and developing countries and ensuring that the 2030 Agenda remains relevant and ambitious. A central feature of the HLPF are Member State presentations of VNRs. These take place after thematic discussion, during the three-day ministerial segment of the HLPF.

3. How to engage in the VNR process

This chapter provides a step-by-step overview of the action that CSOs can take in the VNR process and includes supportive tools to guide your work at each stage. The following table provides a brief overview and quick links to the steps and tools below.

Step	Target outcome	Supportive tools
1. Call for your government to conduct a voluntary national review	Your country informs the UN Economic and Social Council's President (ECOSOC) that they would like to conduct a VNR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Checklist: Call on your government to conduct a voluntary national review (Tool 1)
2. Find out about opportunities for engagement	Timelines, avenues for engagement and focal point identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Checklist: Understand how the government is organizing itself for the VNR process (Tool 2)
3. Plan engagement with other civil society organisations	Aligned messaging and coordinated CSO approach to consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Checklist: Understand the civil society landscape and plan engagement (Tool 3.1) ▪ Template letter to request a meeting with government representatives (Tool 3.2)
4. Participate in national consultations	CSO messages reflected in VNR process and report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How to take part in national consultations (Tool 4)
5. Review the VNR report	Analysis of country VNR report produced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ United Nations voluntary common reporting guidelines (Tool 5.1) ▪ Questions for analysing the VNR report (Tool 5.2)
6. Engage at the HLPF	CSO messages delivered during VNR presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How to engage at the HLPF (Tool 6)
7. Follow up global discussions	Gaps, challenges and achievements are evaluated and addressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 2030 Agenda follow up and review principles (Tool 7.1) ▪ Evaluating the VNR process (Tool 7.2)

Step 1: Call on your government to conduct a voluntary national review

As the review process is voluntary, each government can choose if, when and how many times they wish to report. The voluntary process is open to all countries and encouraged by each ECOSOC President, who annually writes to all Member States to invite them to volunteer. Countries intending to take part officially notify the President's office of their intention. The list of VNR countries is established on a first come, first served basis, until the maximum number – decided by the President of ECOSOC – is reached.

Although a great number of countries have already volunteered to present a VNR, some countries are

still reluctant to commit. CSOs have a role to play in pushing for a national VNR process. If your country has not yet engaged, your first step will be to encourage your government to participate.

On the other hand, if your country has already conducted such a review, you can encourage it to report again. The 2030 Agenda does not stipulate how often VNRs should be carried out so in theory a country could report on an annual basis. Togo, for example, has reported a number of times. Use the following checklist as a guide for calling on your government to conduct a voluntary national review.

TOOL 1

Checklist – Call on your government to conduct a voluntary national review

Research	Action	Complete? ✓
Which other CSOs and stakeholders will you reach out to? This will ensure a coordinated approach.	Set up a meeting with other civil society partners for joint planning around the following questions.	
Why your government has not yet volunteered? This will help to inform your messaging.	Develop messaging that makes the case for why your government should volunteer.	
Which other countries in your region have already reported (check the VNR countries list)?	This could be helpful for generating peer pressure.	
Who is responsible for making the decision? This will inform who to target.	Work with other civil society partners to gain access to the decision maker.	
When and how will you call on the government to volunteer, eg through joint letters and campaigns?	Plan how you will engage your government with civil society partners.	

Step 2: Find out about opportunities for engagement

Civil society engagement in the VNR process is most important at the national level. One of the founding principles of the 2030 Agenda is the requirement for processes to be participatory and inclusive. In practice, this means that all stakeholders have a place in the process. Participation and consultation builds ownership of the 2030 Agenda, which supports a whole-of-society approach to the implementation of the SDGs.

Countries are encouraged to initiate a national preparatory process. As well as appointing a focal point, this may include some of the following elements:

- **A coordination structure** (responsible government entity for the VNR)
- **Resource allocation** (to cover cost of writing the review, stakeholder meetings, travel for officials, etc.)
- **Stakeholder engagement plans** such as national consultations
- **Data collection**
- **Definition of the scope/content of the VNR**, time allocation, availability of existing reports to draw on etc.

Checklist – Understand how the government is organizing itself for the VNR process

Research	Action	Complete? ✓
Who in the Government is in charge of drafting the report?	Find your Government's focal point under https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs , choose your country and select focal point for details.	
Is there is a roadmap and timeline for the national process?	Contact your focal point and arrange meetings to find out.	
Is there a SDG civil society coalition that will be consulted by the government or will there be targeted consultations?	Make contact with the civil society coalition or other national platforms planning to engage in the process (see Step 3).	
Will there be an option for online engagement with the government?	If yes, organise joint submissions with civil society organisations or SDG platforms.	
Will parliament be involved in the preparation of the VNR and, if so, how?	If yes, plan to include parliament in your VNR engagement strategy. If Parliament will not be involved, consider advocating for its engagement in the process. <i>See Together 2030's handbook on engaging parliament on the SDGs.</i>	
What data will inform the report and what gaps are there?	Contact your national statistics office to find out what data sources are available. Think about any data sets you and your civil society partners may be able to contribute or highlight as relevant.	
Are all SDGs being reported? If not, why not?	If the government is not planning to report on all SDGs, include the importance of comprehensive review in your engagement plans.	
Are there any plans for a regular review of progress on implementation at the national level?	Persuade the government to include civil society throughout and beyond the VNR process.	

Step 3: Plan engagement with other civil society organisations

Joining forces with other civil society organizations working on SDG implementation to build strong coalitions will help to deliver unified messages and to push for engagement opportunities. In some countries this type of coalition will already exist, in which case the VNR process can strengthen the collaboration. For best results, find out which organisations are already working on the process and which ones are missing and work together for a coordinated approach.

Once you have connected with partners, it is time to work together to define your key messages and

plan how you will make your position/requests known. Your first and foremost goal is to approach your government for a meeting but you can also raise awareness through social networks, email lists and the media. Prepare for national consultations together, share information, participate and ensure follow up. Conduct CSO pre-meetings and/or participate in related CSO coalition meetings to align positions. Plan when you will engage and how. Craft your advocacy messages by defining your requests and priorities and submitting them in writing. You may consider developing a shadow or parallel report.

TOOL 3.1

Checklist - Understand the civil society landscape

Research	Action	Complete? ✓
How are civil society and stakeholders coordinating (or not) to push for an inclusive process.	Meet with other CSOs and coalitions to develop and align messaging.	
Which sectors are engaged and which sectors are missing? Are there strategies in place to ensure that the most vulnerable and marginalized groups contribute to the process? Is there outreach targeting vulnerable and marginalized groups? Is any group left behind?	Work with civil society partners to ensure marginalised groups are represented in your VNR influencing activities.	
Are people in your country aware of the SDGs? Have there been any awareness-raising campaigns or dissemination of information on the SDGs?	Plan public awareness raising activities.	
During the review, how will the institutional framework incorporate actors and stakeholders?	Make a plan that details when will you approach your government to set up meetings. Define when you will engage, who will you target, what will you tell them and how. Insist on regular dialogue.	

Template letter to request a meeting with government

H.E. X.Y.

Minister of (FULL TITLE OF THE MINISTRY, FOR EXAMPLE, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS)
DATE

EXCELLENCY OR HONORABLE MINISTER,

On behalf of <<the chair/or representatives of the CSO's name/organization's name>>, I (or we) am (are) requesting a meeting with your Excellency to discuss how to realize/achieve the Sustainable Development Goals for civil society, how this should be reflected upon in the upcoming Voluntary National Review to be presented at the High-level Political Forum of <<year>>. We would like to congratulate your Excellency and the government of <<country>> for volunteering to report at the High-level Political Forum. We the <<name of the CSO>> are ready to engage with your Excellency and the government to ensure that the perspectives of civil society are reflected upon during the review process at national, regional and global levels.

On 25 September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with the objective to bring a fundamental change to all people and the planet. Governments, including <<country>>, committed to building a better future, ending poverty, reducing inequalities, and saving the planet.

(Suggestion: Provide a short description of your organization and your key advocacy requests.)

Our representative <<name of representative>> will be in contact with you shortly to confirm the receipt of this letter and to discuss the possibility of scheduling a convenient meeting time. Thank you in advance for your consideration and we look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

SIGNATURE

Name, title, organization

Step 4: Participate in national consultations

One of the most important opportunities to engage in the VNR process will be through the national consultations organised by your government. National consultations vary considerably. Some countries hold several face-to-face meetings between the government and CSOs, while others organize thematic clusters, conduct consultations

online or hold one large consultation. Often, CSOs are invited to make submissions, usually to a word limit. After the consultation takes place, you will need to keep track of follow-up opportunities, which could include a validation meeting. Keep in mind there might be deadlines with a quick turn around so be sure to manage expectations.

TOOL 4

How to take part in national consultations

- ▶ Take part in all consultations related to the SDGs and the VNR process.
- ▶ Use social media to raise awareness of your messages.
- ▶ Take an active role and make your government fully accountable.
- ▶ Be constructive, offer solutions, and offer to work together.
- ▶ Emphasize that it is beneficial for your government to work with civil society, as a valuable partner for sharing data, expertise and knowledge.
- ▶ Considering calling for:
 - a second VNR review date
 - a validation meeting in which stakeholders review and comment on the report
 - inclusion of parliament in the VNR process (see Together 2030's civil society *handbook on engaging parliament on the SDGs*)
 - inclusion of CSOs in the official delegation at the HLPF and allocation of speaking opportunity during the official presentation.
- ▶ Make sure the conversation is brought to the sub-national level.

Step 5: Review the VNR report

Countries are encouraged to submit a short report in the run up to the HLPF, usually by mid-May. The full report is due prior to the HLPF but there is no set deadline. Member States are invited to address all SDGs and have the discretion to showcase topics of their choice in their report. These reports should be based on substantial actions taken by the national government. They are not about describing existing or planned policies, but rather analysing

progress and challenges at national and sub-national levels. They must be evidence based. Reports are made publicly available on the HLPF website.

Although, there is no official mechanism that allows for the submission of parallel CSO reports at the HLPF, CSOs in several countries have considered it strategic to develop a parallel or spotlight report in response to their government's VNR report.

TOOL 5.1

United Nations voluntary common reporting guidelines

To support the reporting process, the United Nations Secretary-General was requested to provide a set of voluntary common reporting guidelines for VNRs, which were published in January 2016. These were updated in January 2018 to reflect lessons learned from the previous two years. The guidelines provide a framework for certain common elements within reviews, while allowing for flexibility so countries can adapt to their own circumstances. The guidelines serve to promote consistency between reviews and comparability over time. However, in line with the voluntary nature of the VNRs, it is up to countries to decide how to carry out their reviews, in accordance with their national contexts and circumstances.

[Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development \(HLPF\)](#)

[Handbook for the preparation of Voluntary National Reviews](#) produced by the UN Division of Sustainable Development for Economic and Social Affairs (October 2018).

[2016](#) and *[2017 VNR synthesis reports](#)* provide a snapshot of general characteristics of the VNRs for that year and contain additional examples of good practices and lessons learned for countries conducting VNRs.

Questions for analysing the VNR report

- ▶ Has the country conducted a gap analysis of the SDGs and its national frameworks?
- ▶ To what extent can the implementation of the SDGs be advanced through existing plans and strategies? Do they need to be updated or revised to implement the SDGs?
- ▶ How have the SDGs been aligned with national policy frameworks?
- ▶ What has been done to integrate the SDGs into legislation, policies, plans and programmes?
- ▶ What are the main challenges and difficulties that the country faces in implementing the SDGs?
- ▶ What actions have been undertaken by sub-national and local government to implement the SDGs?
- ▶ What partnerships, including with the private sector, have been put in place for implementation of the SDGs? Consider examples that could be showcased as good practices.

Source: Handbook for the preparation of Voluntary National Reviews (January 2018), produced by the UN Division of Sustainable Development for Economic and Social Affairs.

Step 6: Engage at the HLPF

Countries present their VNR reports in a short oral statement during the Ministerial Week at the HLPF. The presentation usually highlights key messages from the review and touches on critical issues in implementation and is usually given by a minister or a senior official.

Civil society engagement with the High-level Political Forum is facilitated through the *Major Group and other Stakeholder (MGoS)* coordination mechanism. The MGoS mechanism has the opportunity to present joint statements and is usually allowed to

present a limited set of questions to Member States during their VNR presentations. Membership of the MGoS HLPF coordination mechanism is open to all representatives of nine stakeholder groups, known as Major Groups, as well as other relevant stakeholders.

Governments can provide space in their official presentations for civil society. A government's collaboration with CSOs on joint messages can strengthen relationships and contribute to thoughtful leadership and profile-building.

TOOL 6

How to engage at the HLPF

You can find out when your country will report on the *sustainable development* website. The actual VNR presentations are brief and provide only limited opportunities for CSOs to take part. The main opportunities to input include:

- ▶ *Join the MGoS Coordination Mechanism* and look out for messages on the VNRs or engage through Together 2030 by becoming a member of the initiative.
- ▶ Contribute to MGoS joint statement. Prior to the HLPF, a questionnaire is sent out through the HLPF Coordination Mechanism email list calling for contributions from Major Groups and other Stakeholders.
- ▶ Volunteer to be a part of the drafting team and volunteer or support someone to deliver the statement. The drafting group chooses presenters.
- ▶ If you are attending the HLPF in person, you have the following additional chances to connect with your government:
 - Ask for a bilateral meeting with your government during HLPF
 - Attend side events organized or co-organized by your government
 - Canvass governments to hold a reception with national CSOs

Step 7: Follow up global discussions

The progress of the implementation of the SDGs should be reviewed on a regular basis. It is essential that civil society has the opportunity to discuss next steps and countries are expected to conduct debriefings or follow up on the global discussions at the national and sub-national levels. It is important that VNRs are forward looking and should conclude with a clear outline of the follow-up process including a date for the next VNR.

This dialogue between civil society and government is an opportunity to evaluate and address gaps, challenges, and achievements. To feed into this dialogue, you can develop a CSO evaluation of the

VNR process using the VNR evaluation checklist below. Consider what opportunities there are for learning and how to address any challenges and gaps the VNR highlighted. Develop recommendations to share with the government. Remain positive and offer pragmatic, constructive solutions to develop a strong partnership with your government.

If your country does not indicate a follow-up process, call for a dialogue. While any organisation can request this, it is better if this comes from a coordinated CSO coalition.

TOOL 7.1

2030 Agenda follow up and review principles

VNRs should:

- ▶ Be voluntary and country-led, considering national contexts
- ▶ Track progress on all 17-SDGs implementation and the means of implementation
- ▶ Maintain a longer-term direction and inform government policy, through identifying achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors
- ▶ Encourage open, inclusive, participatory and transparent reporting for all relevant stakeholders
- ▶ Be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and particularly focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind
- ▶ Build on existing platforms and processes, where these exist
- ▶ Evolve over time incorporating emerging issues as they arise
- ▶ Be rigorous and evidence-based, informed by disaggregated country data

Questions for evaluating the VNR process

A good VNR is inclusive, participatory, transparent, evidence-based, and focuses both on quantitative and qualitative reporting. Use the following checklist to analyse your country's VNR process and draw up recommendations.

(a) VNR presentations at the HLPF should clearly outline how inclusive the national process leading up to the VNR has been at country level, by responding to the following questions:

- ▶ Was there a multi-layered review system focusing on whether national plans match the global ambition, the gaps, opportunities and commitments to action?
- ▶ Were civil society and other stakeholders included in all phases of the review cycle, including for VNRs, from planning at the national level to the presentation at the HLPF and at national debriefing and planning after the HLPF?
- ▶ Was there a clear, open, accessible and inclusive process to prepare the VNR established at national level and was information about how stakeholders could participate extensively exchanged? What was the timeline and was it publicly shared?
- ▶ Were there targeted efforts made by the government to reach marginalized groups and those at risk of being left behind?
- ▶ Were there online consultations organized as well as face-to-face discussions at the national level where civil society and stakeholders could directly bring their perspectives to the report preparation?
- ▶ Did the government establish awareness-raising and public outreach, making use of government communication services, social media?
- ▶ Did the government provide opportunities for stakeholders to comment and to integrate comments from all national actors and stakeholders?
- ▶ Were stakeholder representatives part of the official country delegation to the HLPF; and did they get to present?
- ▶ Will governments organize a debriefing at the national level to review the process and inputs received and plan next steps in addressing main challenges after the HLPF review?

(b) VNR presentations should directly address comprehensive, coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda, that reflects the global ambition including responding to the following questions:

- ▶ Are internal synergies being created?
- ▶ Is policymaking coherent?
- ▶ How are silos being avoided?
- ▶ Are there multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder governance mechanisms in place for planning, implementation and accountability of the SDGs?
- ▶ Did civil society and other stakeholders get to ask a set of questions after the VNR presentation?

(c) The accountability framework surrounding VNRs should be progressively strengthened

- ▶ Are governance arrangements for national SDG accountability detailed by countries volunteering for national reviews?
- ▶ Is a clear accountability cycle presented, including how outcomes from the HLPF will be brought back to the national level?



CAFOD

CAFOD is the Catholic Agency For Overseas Development, an international development charity and the official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. CAFOD stands beside people living in poverty – whatever their religion or culture. Through local partners, it helps people directly in their own communities, and campaigns for global justice, so that everyone can reach their full potential.



Together 2030 – from policy to action

Together 2030 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 the national level and hold governments to account at all levels.



Uniting to Combat NTDs

Uniting to Combat NTDs is a group of organizations committed to achieving WHO's 2020 goal to control and eliminate ten NTDs. By working together, Uniting to Combat NTDs aims to chart a new course toward health and sustainability among the world's poorest communities. Affiliated organizations have signed the London Declaration on NTDs, which was launched on 30 January 2012.



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