

SOGIESC Advocacy and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

By Aoife Burke and Guillermo Ricalde Perez

On January 1st, 2016, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development officially came into force.¹ Last month marked the 7th anniversary of this important achievement, in which world leaders started mobilizing efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that they agreed to in 2015.



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In commemoration of this date, Guillermo Ricalde (ILGA World Consultant on Special Procedures and SDGs) and Aoife Burke (Junior Professional Consultant on Treaty Bodies, Special Procedures, and SDGs) have prepared the following article in which they briefly explore the importance of the Agenda 2030 for our LGBTI communities.

This document provides a broad overview of the Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs; explains why they are an important framework for LGBTI communities and advocates; describes how LGBTI advocates can use SDGs in practice; and lists particular ways ILGA World supports local LGBTI groups in their advocacy related to the Agenda 2030.

Introduction to the Agenda 2030 for LGBTI advocates

The Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals constitute the current international development framework. Historically, international development has focused on economic growth, particularly in low and middle-income countries.³ This framework is frequently considered as existing in parallel and alongside with human rights mechanisms and, specifically, allowing to overcome the latter's weaknesses. However, the SDGs are anchored in human rights and are grounded in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), the international human rights treaties, as well as other instruments such as the Declaration on the Right to Development.⁴ Thus, although the development framework works according to distinct methodologies, bodies, language and aims, it is mutually complementary to the human rights framework.⁵ For instance, in recent decades, and mostly after the creation of the Agenda 2030, there has been a stronger emphasis on achieving particular development outcomes on a global level, such as health, gender

¹ For more information consult: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda-retired/>

² Image retrieved from the [official website of the European Union](#).

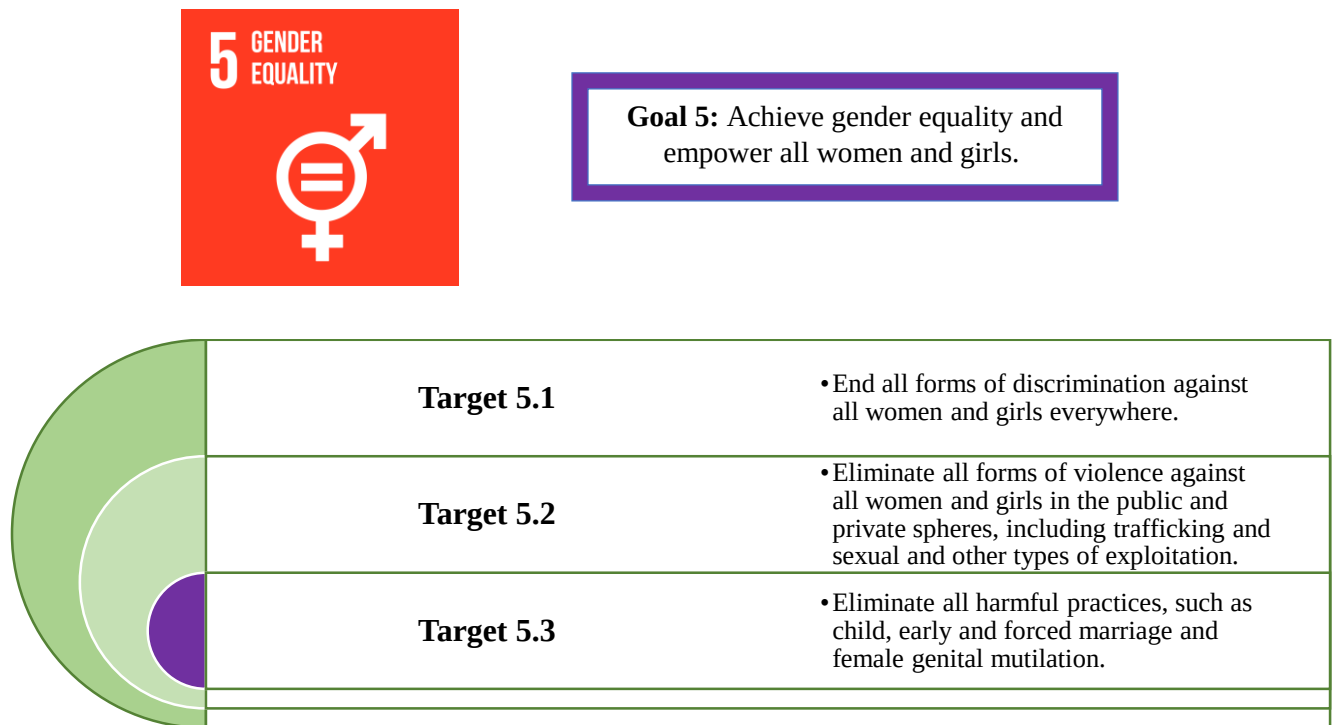
³ Andrew Park and Lucas Ramon Mendos, "FOR ALL: The Sustainable Development Goals and LGBTI Advocacy" (2019) RSFL Förbundet. p.10.

⁴ About the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. [OHCHR and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

⁵ Andrew Park and Lucas Ramon Mendos, 10.

equality, education, and environmental sustainability⁶, which reflect the content of many international human rights standards.⁷

Building on its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals,⁸ and after one of the largest multi-stakeholder consultations in the UN history,⁹ the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015.¹⁰ This is an agenda consisting of 17 goals divided into 169 targets, which are to be achieved by the year 2030.¹¹ For more clarity see the example in the infographic below:



While none of the goals or targets explicitly mention SOGIESC issues, the SDGs nonetheless apply to LGBTI people and can be utilized to advance the position of our communities in all areas of society.

The key entry point for LGBTI activists to the SDGs is the principle of “leave no one behind”. This principle is outlined in the General Assembly resolution that adopts the SDGs and underpins all 17 goals. As stated in the preamble of the resolution:

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ About the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. [OHCHR and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.](#)

⁸ For more information see: <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml>

⁹ For more information consult: [Summit Charts New Era of Sustainable Development.](#)

¹⁰ See [Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.](#)

¹¹ The Danish Institute on Human Rights developed a comprehensive human rights guide to SDGs. Consult it here: <https://sdg.humanrights.dk/en>

“No one will be left behind... and we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first”.

This promise connects the agenda to the human rights principle of equality and makes clear that the goals cannot be achieved if they are not met for any specific marginalised group.¹² The 2030 Agenda also puts the principle of non-discrimination at its heart, with the commitment to “reach those furthest behind first”; giving special attention to marginalized groups, and formulating two dedicated goals on combatting discrimination and inequalities (SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 10 on inequalities within and between countries).¹³

As affirmed by the UN Secretary-General in 2015, the guiding principle of “leaving no one behind” can only be realised if the agenda reaches all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁴ The LGBTI community, thus, shares ownership of the goals and is crucial to their success. Furthermore, where the Agenda 2030 mentions protected categories of people, there is a reference to “other status” and “other characteristics,” which should be read as inclusive of SOGIESC.¹⁵

Despite this, the Agenda 2030 still lacks the explicit references to LGBTI communities that are also a commonplace in international human rights law. In consequence, the SDGs framework has seen less engagement from LGBTI advocates than other UN mechanisms such as Treaty Bodies, the Universal Periodic Review, and most recently, Special Procedures. The development space nonetheless provides an important advocacy opportunity that can complement existing work in the human rights framework. Indeed, there has been a strong effort to integrate development with human rights.¹⁶ That said, the two approaches are distinct, and to effectively claim space in the 2030 Agenda, it is necessary to understand the unique characteristics of the development framework. By understanding the unique features and opportunities provided by the SDGs framework, LGBTI advocates may strengthen their advocacy even further.

Perhaps most importantly, unlike human rights treaties, the SDGs are not legally binding. Rather, they are tools of policy formation and resource mobilisation.¹⁷ While this means that the development framework holds less force, it also has advantages. Firstly, the Agenda 2030 was adopted by all UN member states and is thus more far-reaching than many human rights treaties.

¹² About the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. [OHCHR and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ [Secretary-General's remarks at the High-Level LGBT Core Group Event "Leaving No-One Behind: Equality & Inclusion in the Post-2015 Development Agenda"](#) 29 Sep 2015.

¹⁵ International instruments were not meant to be exhaustive in their enumeration of status. The reference to “or other status” is the clearest indication of the intention to encompass protection for unnamed categories. UN human rights mechanisms such as Treaty Bodies have developed jurisprudence in which it is affirmed that sexual orientation and/or gender identity are a protected status in International Human Rights Law under the term “other status”. For instance, the Human Rights Committee has considered the category of “other status” within Article 26 of the ICCPR to include discrimination based on SOGI, as used in several examples such as Toonen v. Australia, [Communication No. 488/1992](#), paras. 8.2-8.7; Young v. Australia [Communication No. 941/2000](#), para.10.4 and X v. Colombia [Communication No.1361/2005](#), para. 7.2 (See ICJ, 2009, [Sexual orientation, gender identity and international human rights law – Practitioners’ guide, no. 4](#), pp. 29-35).

¹⁶ For instance see: IACHR, Press release 110/2018, [Leave no LGBT person behind](#), 16 May 2018.

¹⁷ UN Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, [A new Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development](#), p. 13 (2013).

Moreover, the agenda extends beyond states themselves and is intended to be achieved through a collective effort by countries, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders.¹⁸ This opens new areas for advocacy and collaboration.

The agenda may also represent an opportunity to fill in the gaps of issues that cannot effectively be tackled through human rights bodies. In particular, the right to equality has been central for LGBTI human rights advocacy. However, in cases where LGBTI people are treated equally poorly to the broader population, framing the issue through equality may not be effective. In contrast, the development approach seeks to improve outcomes of LGBTI persons at all levels, regardless of whether there is evidence of disparity.¹⁹

Lastly, the language of development differs considerably from that of the other human rights bodies. Instead of the concepts of rights, obligations and violations seen in legal mechanisms, the development framework emphasises inclusion, participation, human potential and contributions. While it may take some time to get used for some activists, this language can be more conducive to building positive collaborations with government. Instead of speaking of government failures to meet their obligations, activists can frame LGBTI issues in terms of shared ambitions and strive to find solutions together.²⁰

For all these reasons, engagement with SDGs can be a highly useful addition to LGBTI advocacy on a local, national and international level.

LGBTI development priorities

As captured in the ‘leave no one behind’ principle, SDGs apply to the development of all groups in society, including LGBTI communities. The broad framing of the agenda means that the full scope of social, political and economic challenges facing SOGIESC diverse persons can be understood in terms of development. While LGBTI people share ownership of the agenda in a broad sense, it is important to identify development priorities that reflect the specific conditions facing communities on the ground. Due to the diverse experiences and needs of LGBTI persons, including those bearing intersecting forms of marginalization, it is not possible to have a one-size-fits-all approach. Priority areas will be defined by, and addressed within, differing national contexts. That said, certain LGBTI development issues lend themselves particularly well to SDGs advocacy.

¹⁸ See [Ending Violence and other human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity: A joint dialogue of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and United Nations](#), para 38. p. 21 (2016).

¹⁹ Andrew Park and Lucas Ramon Mendos, 16.

²⁰ Dodo Karsay, ["How to engage with the 2030 Agenda on LGBTI Issues"](#) 2021, MPact Global Action for Gay Men's Health and Rights.

Economic Exclusion

Goals 1, 4, and 8, covering **poverty eradication, quality education, and decent work**, respectively, form a clear basis from which to address the exclusion of LGBTI persons from economic and social life. Globally, stigma, violence, and discrimination limit LGBTI person's economic participation and influences their experience of poverty.²¹ Indeed, the World Bank has found that educational and employment barriers mean that SOGIESC diverse people are likely overrepresented in the bottom 40% of income earners,²² and studies from several countries have shown higher rates of poverty among this community.²³ Inaccessible education is another area contributing to the economic marginalization of LGBTI people.

Health

Another key area for LGBTI development is health. On this respect, it is important to recognise that certain populations face unique challenges that must be prioritised from a development perspective. For example, intersex children are often subjected to medically unnecessary and non-consensual surgeries, which can result in permanent infertility and loss of sexual function, among other consequences.²⁴ As well as amounting to a human rights violation, such interventions undermine the aim of ensuring healthy lives for all as outlined in SDG 3. Similarly, the specific health needs of the trans community can and should be addressed through the Agenda 2030. Evidence shows that acquiring gender characteristics congruent with gender identity improves health, wellbeing and quality of life.²⁵ However, financial limitations can act as a major barrier for trans persons in accessing gender-affirming healthcare. This is particularly relevant to target 3.8 which is to achieve universal health coverage.

Violence

Violence based on SOGIESC is another area that can be addressed through the development framework. LGBTI persons are at heightened risk of physical and sexual violence, which can include murders, beatings, kidnappings, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, and so-called “corrective rape” perpetuated specifically against lesbian and bisexual women.²⁶ Moreover, law enforcement agents may be indifferent to violence carried out based on SOGIESC and, in some cases, may be the perpetrators of abuse.²⁷ SDG 16 on **peace, justice, and strong institutions** provides a basis from which to address these issues in the context of development. In particular, target 16.1 aims to reduce all forms of violence everywhere, and target 16.3 seeks to ensure equal access to justice for all.

²¹ Felicity Daly [“LGBTI+ Inclusion and the UN Sustainable Development Goals”](#) (2020) Open for Business.

²² The World Bank, [Understanding Poverty, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity](#), 2022.

²³ Andrew Park and Lucas Ramon Mendos, 48.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Micah Grzywnowicz et al [“Leveraging human rights and the 2030 agenda to advance LGBTI rights”](#) (2020) DIHR and RSFL.

²⁷ Andrew Park and Lucas Ramon Mendos, 62.

Other areas

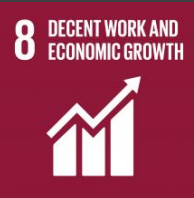
Several other SDGs also provide relevant entry points for LGBTI advocates. SDG 10 on **reduced inequality** aims to promote inclusion of all in society, regardless of status, and to eliminate discriminatory laws and policies. While LGBTI people are not explicitly mentioned, there is scope to discuss SOGIESC issues in this context.

Furthermore, SDG 5 on **gender equality** strives to eliminate violence against all women and girls and ensure universal access to reproductive health and rights. These targets are particularly relevant given the unique forms of gender-based violence imposed on LBTQ women and their regular exclusion from reproductive healthcare, but also, for example, trans men and gender non-conforming persons who may be stigmatized in relation to reproductive health and childbirth.

Lastly, SDG 11 on **sustainable communities** contains targets on ensuring safe and inclusive public spaces and access to safe housing, which are often not available to LGBTI people.

Overall, a large portion of the SDGs are readily applicable to the challenges facing LGBTI communities. The particular focus of LGBTI activists will depend on their local contexts and existing advocacy strategies. However, it is worth noting that, as with human rights, the goals are interconnected and interdependent, and thus a holistic approach is often useful. Ensuring SDGs targets are met with respect to LGBTI people will not only advance these communities' position but also contribute to the development of society by increasing general levels of human capital.

The following table shows some examples of SDGs priorities concerning LGBTI persons and the possible targets to use for advocacy responses:

SDG	Examples	Targets
 1 NO POVERTY	LGBT people of color face compounded marginalization in places where people of color constitute a minority. Also, individuals who bear more stigmas such as transgender people are often restricted to living in poorer areas.²⁸	Direct attention to LGBTI poverty, and its causes, is essential to end extreme poverty and ensure equal rights to economic resources. Target 1.3 aims to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, to achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable. Thus, it can be an entry point for LGBTI priorities implementation regarding poverty.
 3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	Discrimination can manifest in ways that directly damage the physical and emotional health of SOGIESC diverse people, including sexual and gender-based violence, forced sterilisation, non-consensual surgeries, so-called “conversion therapies,” and increased risk of sexually transmitted infections.²⁹ Stress and trauma associated with discrimination can also lead to mental ill-health, increased risk of suicide, drug and substance abuse and disordered eating.³⁰	SDG 3 on good health and well-being is wide-reaching and covers many of these issues within its targets. For instance, target 3.3 strive to end the AIDs epidemic, target 3.4 includes the promotion of mental health, and target 3.5 seeks to strengthen the prevention of substance abuse. As always, these targets can only be achieved when the needs of the LGBTI community are met.
 4 QUALITY EDUCATION	Gender non-conforming children are more likely to be refused enrolment to schools and there have been reports of schools that expressly discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity during admission.³¹ Furthermore, LGBTI students face high levels of bullying, harassment, and violence from both peers and teachers, often leading to school dropouts.³²	Educational disadvantage can have knock-on effects in terms of income, employment, and health, and should therefore be seen as a key development priority for LGBTI defenders. Goal 4 on quality education offers several entry points in this regard. Target 4.a commits to providing “safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.” In contrast, target 4.5 aims to eliminate gender disparities and ensure equal access to education for the vulnerable.
 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	According to the International Labour Organization, trans people face the most severe form of workplace discrimination, and in some cases, members of this group are excluded completely from formal employment.³³	Target 8.5 aims for full employment and equal work for equal pay, while target 8.8 strives to protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers. Goal 8 cannot be achieved while LGBTI persons face hardship due to discrimination in the labour market.

²⁸ Andrew Park and Lucas Ramon Mendos, 59-60.

²⁹ Report of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity on “The right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health of persons, communities and populations affected by discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals” (2022) [A/HRC/50/27](#).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Andrew Park and Lucas Ramon Mendos, 48.

³² Micah Grzywnowicz et al [“Leveraging human rights and the 2030 agenda to advance LGBTI rights”](#) (2020) DIHR and RSFL.

³³ International Labour Organisation, [Discrimination at work on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity](#), 2015.

Advocacy opportunities

As important as understanding how SDGs relate to LGBTI rights, is understanding how LGBTI activists can engage with and utilise the 2030 Agenda. Because the agenda is people-centred, civil society have an important role to play in the realisation of the goals. Thus, it is essential to build a sense of ownership of the goals among local LGBTI communities and ensure LGBTI participation in the SDGs implementation at all levels.

Countries – meaning, the governmental/official bodies – are responsible for their own implementation of the Agenda 2030, and they are tasked with adapting the goals to their local contexts. The national implementation process **should include civil society** and thus may present an **important opportunity for local LGBTI issues to be incorporated into development strategies**. For example, the goals and associated targets are complemented by indicators that are developed by member states. Where possible, activists can push for indicators relevant to LGBTI development issues to be included.³⁴ As every country will have its own unique systems in place, it is useful for activists to identify which government agencies are responsible for SDGs implementation and monitoring.³⁵

High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)

A particularly important opportunity for international LGBTI advocacy is the **High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York**. This event takes place annually under the auspices of the UN Social and Economic Council, and every four years under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. The purpose of the forum is to track the implementation and progress of the SDGs. The main channel for civil society participation in the HLPF is through Major Groups and of Stakeholders (MGoS). There are currently 21 formally recognised, self-organised MGoS. As of 2019, these include the **LGBTI Stakeholders Group**,³⁶ which collaborates with all other MGoS, civil society organisations, and human rights defenders to ensure the visibility of LGBTI issues at the HLPF.³⁷

³⁴ [Engaging with the voluntary national review process: A guide for members of the Women's Major Group](#) (2018) Women's Major Group.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The LGBTI SG is a coalition of civil society organizations across all regions working to advance the rights and achieve highest development outcomes for LGBTI people. It is a space for LGBTI advocates and allies to reflect and strategize on the issues around the implementation of the Agenda 2030, its relevance to the lives of LGBTI persons and ways forward. Most of all, the LGBTI Stakeholder Group is an opportunity for LGBTI advocates to support and learn from each other through best practices exchange, capacity building for newcomers, and continuous dialogue. For more information consult here: <https://www.lgbtistakeholdergroup.org/>

³⁷ [“UN High Level Political Forum – An Overview for Activists”](#) (2018) RSFL.

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

Perhaps the most important aspect of the HLPF from the perspective of LGBTI advocacy is the **Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)**.³⁸ These reviews are state-led and are intended to provide a platform to share successes and challenges in implementing the Agenda 2030. As the name suggests, these reviews are not mandatory; however, most UN states have already completed one or more of them.³⁹ States are supposed to ensure that the review processes are inclusive and participatory, and involve all MGoS. Thus, local LGBTI activists should be aware that they have the right to be consulted and take steps to influence their states report.⁴⁰

Spotlight reports

However, even where it is not possible to have meaningful consultations with the state, NGOs are encouraged to contribute to the review process by submitting a **spotlight report**.⁴¹ While the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process is the primary channel for reporting on country-level progress on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, civil society reports are vital to ensuring an independent, robust and accurate assessment of progress within countries, and provide direct means to promote government accountability to its citizens. These reports are particularly important where civil society has little or no opportunities to engage in official VNR processes at the national level.⁴² While civil society reports cannot be submitted directly to the UN, they can nonetheless serve to highlight LGBTI development issues and form a basis for dialogue with governments.⁴³ Furthermore, during the HLPF, states give an oral presentation and **engage in a dialogue with other states and MGoS** about their reports. This is another relevant opportunity to ensure LGBTI development priorities are raised.

³⁸ For more information consult here: <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs>

³⁹ Micah Grzywnowicz et al [“Leveraging human rights and the 2030 agenda to advance LGBTI rights”](#) (2020) DIHR and RSFL.

⁴⁰ Dodo Karsay, [“How to engage with the 2030 Agenda on LGBTI Issues”](#) 2021, MPact Global Action for Gay Men’s Health and Rights.

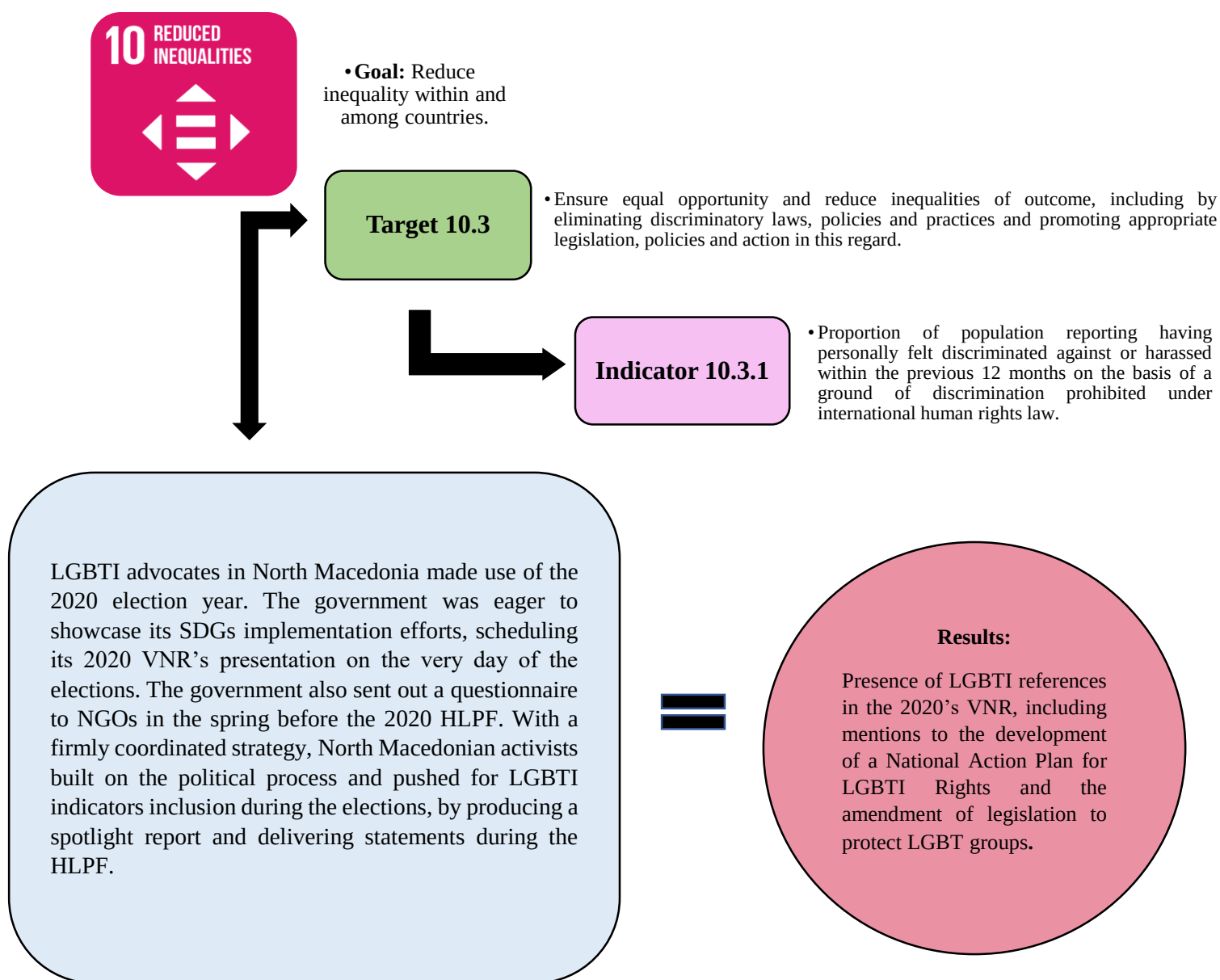
⁴¹ See examples of spotlight reports from the Women’s Major Group here:

<https://womensmajorgroup.org/resources/wmg-members-alternative-reports/>

⁴² For more information, see: <https://www.sdgaccountability.org/working-with-informal-processes/spotlightreporting/>

⁴³ Dodo Karsay, [“How to engage with the 2030 Agenda on LGBTI Issues”](#) 2021, MPact Global Action for Gay Men’s Health and Rights.

For a concrete example on SDGs advocacy and inclusion of LGBTI indicators in the VNR process see the infographic below⁴⁴:



⁴⁴Information about the North Macedonian example was retrieved from the source Dodo Karsay, "[How to engage with the 2030 Agenda on LGBTI Issues](#)" 2021. It is also important to highlight that the North Macedonian government published a statement after the presentation of its 2020's VNR. This statement further develops on their plans for LGBTI groups in the country, and it was made in response to the questions made by LGBTI advocates during the HLPF. For more information consult: [Response to HLPF Major Groups and other Stakeholders Q&A](#)

How ILGA World can support you?

International LGBTI organisations such as the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights (RFSL),⁴⁵ Outright International,⁴⁶ and COC Nederland⁴⁷ have been leading the pathway for LGBTI advocates to engage with the SDGs framework since the creation of the Agenda 2030. ILGA World also has years of experience engaging with the UN in several areas, including the Human Rights Council, Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Treaty Bodies, Special Procedures, and now the SDGs. All these organisations, and many others, constitute the LGBTI stakeholder group and constantly work to make SOGIESC issues visible in the development forums.

There are several ways that ILGA World can offer support to LGBTI defenders seeking to engage with the Agenda 2030:

- We are constantly monitoring opportunities in the development framework for LGBTI advocates, and we are on our way to start producing new advocacy materials on SDGs.
- We collaborate with the LGBTI Stakeholder Group members and participate in the SDGs forums and other side events and strategic meetings.
- We develop statements aiming to impact the outcomes concerning LGBTI persons and influence the language related to SOGIESC in development spaces.
- We support activists to attend the HLPF and engage in the dialogue on their state's VNR. In countries where governments are reluctant to communicate with LGBTI organisations, the HLPF can provide a unique opportunity for activists to establish contact with state representatives.
- Furthermore, ILGA assists advocates in increasing the visibility of LGBTI communities in development spaces by providing technical support to produce a spotlight report on SDGs and LGBTI people in their country.

⁴⁵ For more information, consult RFSL website: <https://www.rfsl.se/en/>

⁴⁶ For more information, consult Outright International website: <https://outrightinternational.org/>

⁴⁷ For more information, consult COC website: <https://www.coc.nl/>