

SURVEY REPORT

Parliamentary involvement in the 2021 voluntary national reviews

Every July, governments volunteer to submit progress reports on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the ministerial session of the UN high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) in New York. According to UN guidelines, these voluntary national reviews (VNRs) should include all stakeholders through the various stages of preparation, from early consultations to collecting data and forming actionable recommendations.

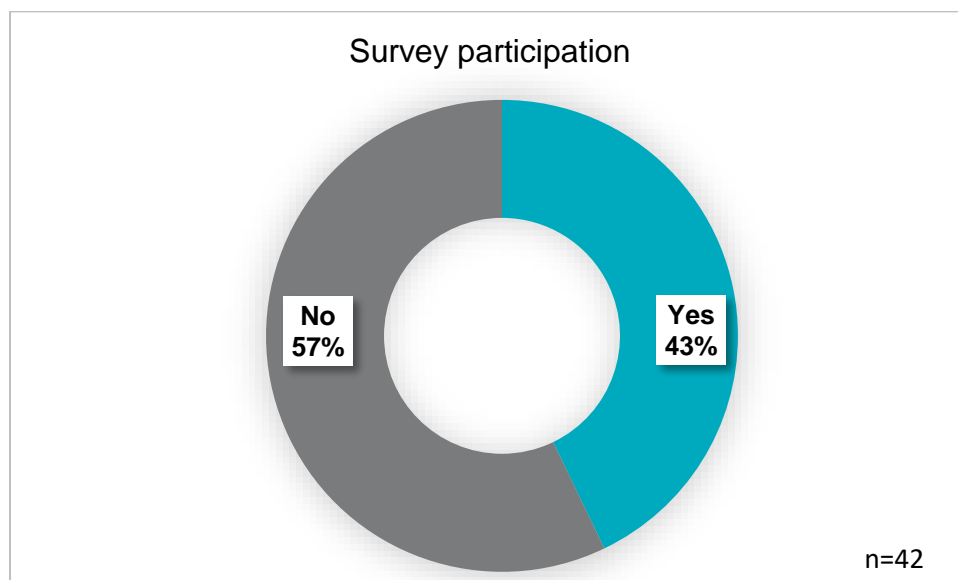
As a State institution whose oversight role is critical to accountability, parliament needs to be engaged in the VNR process, checking the accuracy of the government's review and providing input on behalf of the people. Parliamentary involvement in the VNRs is key to strengthening national ownership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

This report explains the findings of a survey that the IPU conducted with the parliaments of the countries scheduled to present a VNR to the 2021 HLPF. The IPU has run annual surveys since 2016 to probe the level of parliamentary engagement in the VNR process over time. This report provides an indication of how the involvement of parliaments has evolved.

The data collected for this report show that parliamentary involvement in VNR processes continues to be lacking. However, parliamentary engagement has doubled since 2016, which indicates greater awareness of the significance of parliamentary involvement for a successful process.

Findings

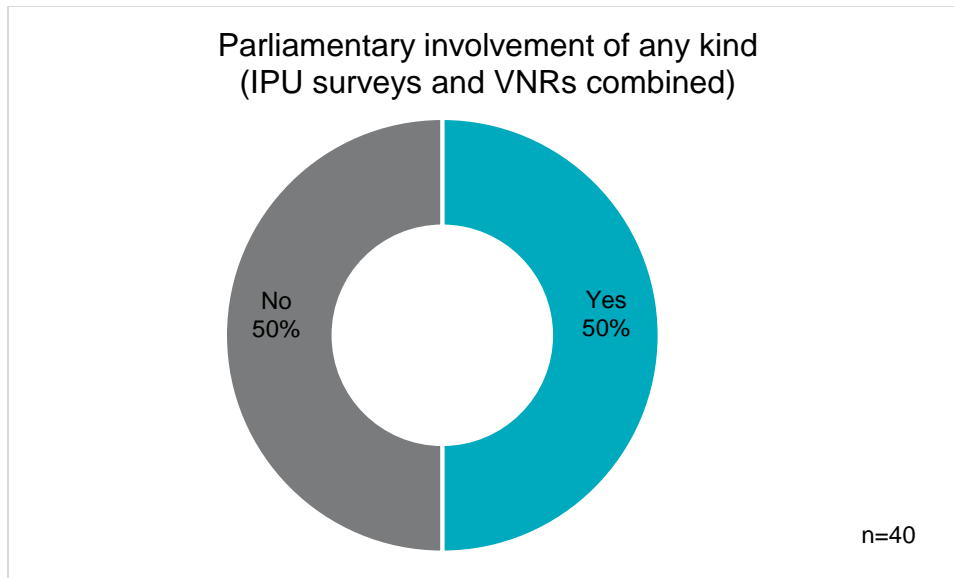
A total of 42 countries volunteered to submit national reports to the 2021 HLPF session, and 40 VNRs had been submitted and published at the time of writing.¹ The IPU followed up with its own survey, which was dispatched to the parliaments of those 42 countries. In response, 18 parliaments returned completed surveys – a participation rate of 43 per cent (see annex for the list of survey participants).



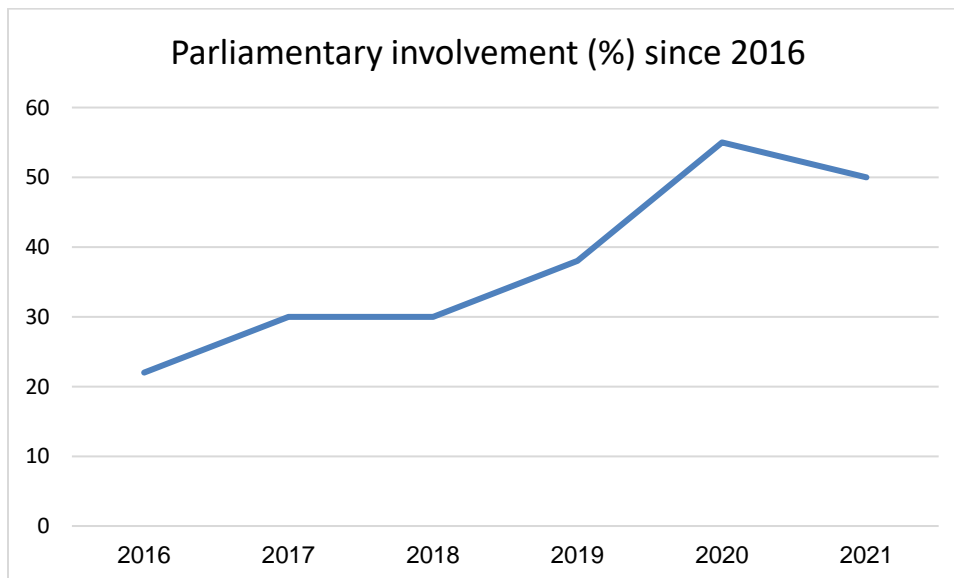
In an effort to fill the information gap for the parliaments that did not participate in the IPU survey, all available VNR reports were scanned for any mention of parliamentary involvement in the government-led process. Since few VNRs specify the actual modalities and impact of parliamentary involvement, the lion's share of the analysis in this report is based on the information that parliaments provided through the IPU questionnaire. Where information in a State's VNR conflicted with information from that country's parliament, only the latter was considered for this report.

Taking the combined information from the two main sources at face value, parliaments appear to have been involved in this year's VNR exercise in 20 cases, or 50 per cent of the VNRs submitted to the HLPF.

¹ As at 27 August, when this report was prepared, two countries (Barbados, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines) had yet to submit their reports. Submitted VNRs can be found at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>.



The IPU has been tracking parliamentary involvement in VNRs since the reviews began in 2016. This year's data indicate a slight weakening of parliamentary involvement compared to 2020 (when it was 55 per cent). However, the overall trend shows a clear improvement since 2016, when data indicated that less than a quarter of VNRs were based on any type of parliamentary input.



Many governments that volunteered to submit a report this year have submitted one in the past. This provides an opportunity to examine the evolution of government perspectives on the role of parliaments in the process. The 2021 reports indicate increased parliamentary involvement or, at a minimum, greater governmental awareness of the significance of parliaments for an inclusive and successful process.

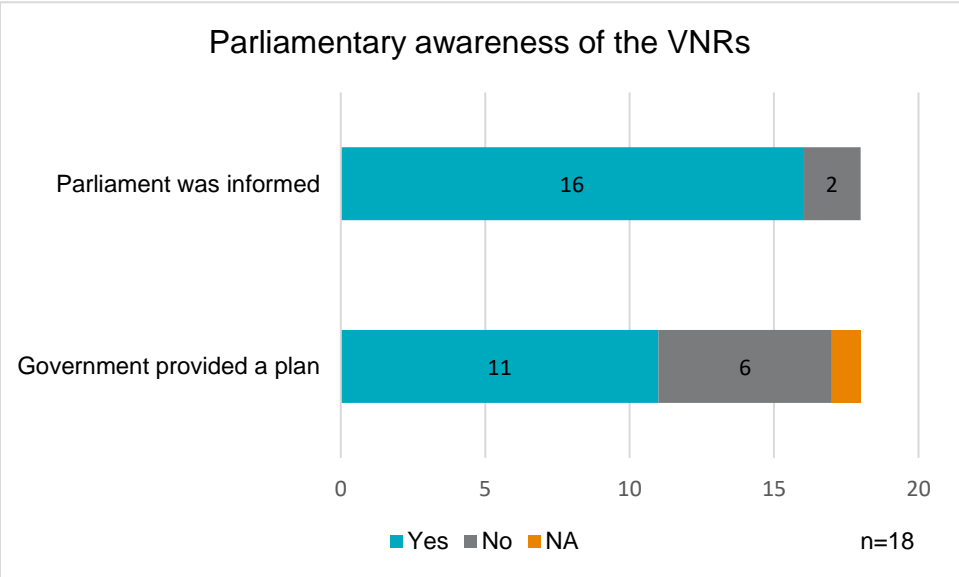
Of the 40 Member States that submitted a VNR this year, 31 had also done so previously. Data from surveys and VNRs submitted since 2016 indicate that 11 parliaments which have not been asked to participate in the past now play a role in the process.

As with 2020, this year’s survey consisted of two main questions broken down into sub-questions. The findings reported below were drawn exclusively from parliaments’ survey responses.

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

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

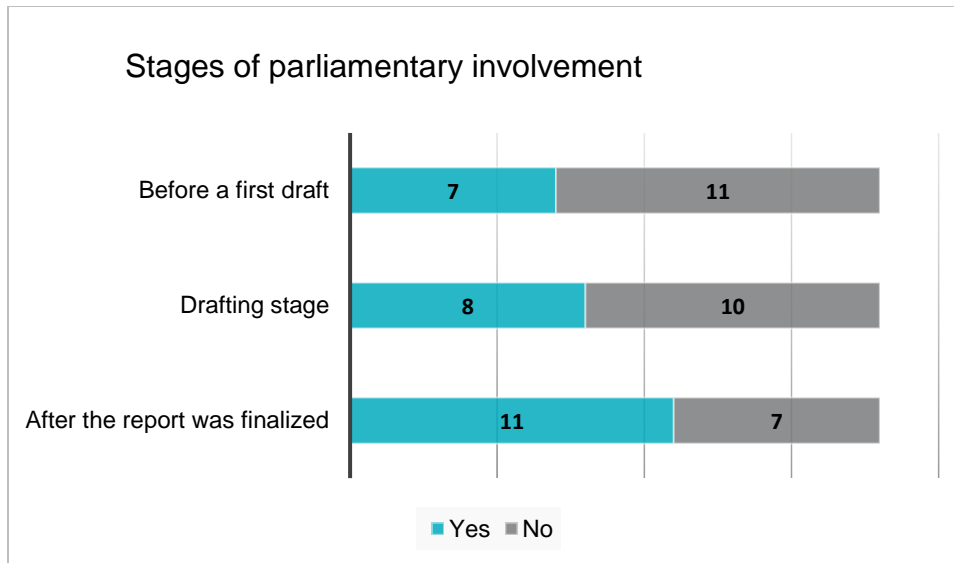
Of the 18 parliaments that returned a completed questionnaire, 16 (89%) were informed of the VNR process directly by the government. However, only 11 parliaments (61%) were presented with a consultation plan. This is a slight improvement on last year’s data, which showed that only half of the parliaments had been given a plan by the government.



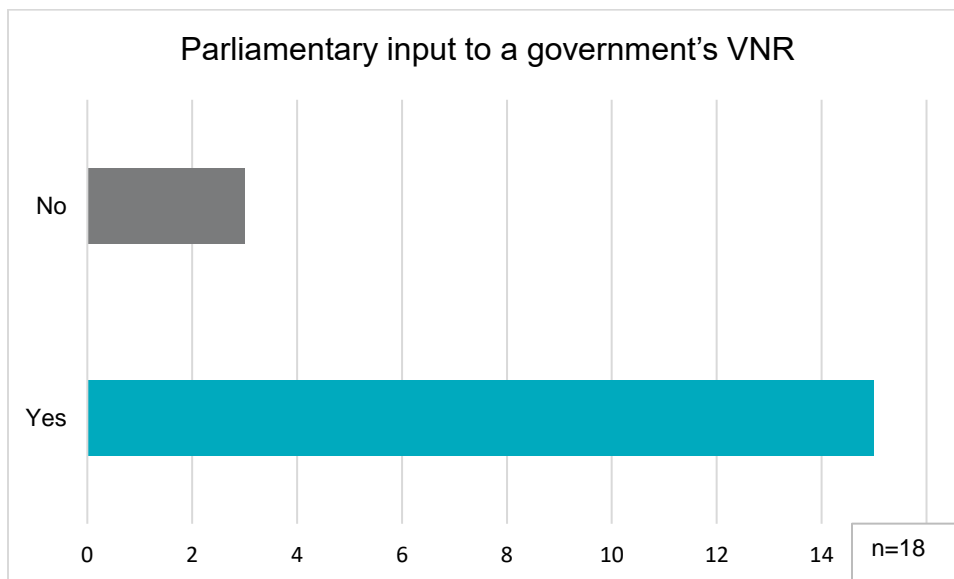
The point in time when a parliament is engaged in the VNR process – before a first draft of the report, at the drafting stage, or after the report is finalized – is a good indicator of the quality of parliamentary oversight of this government-led exercise. Ideally, parliaments should be involved in all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

In 2020, parliaments were most likely to be involved in the initial stages of drafting the report but were less likely to be consulted about the final draft. This year’s data showed the reverse. Less than half of the parliaments that responded to the survey had some kind of interaction with the government before the first draft (7) and at the drafting stage (8); but the majority of respondents (11) were able to review the report after the government had finalized it.² However, as in previous years, parliaments were rarely involved in all stages of the review process. Only four parliaments reported participating in all three stages of the process. Ten parliaments were involved in just one stage, and one parliament took part in two stages.

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



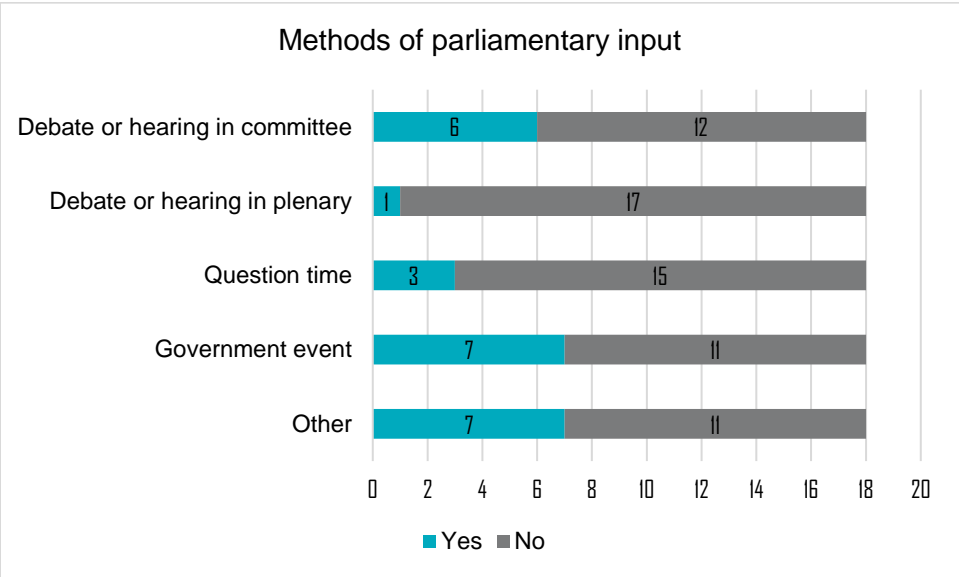
The survey's second main question asked generally whether the parliament provided input in any way to the VNR submitted to the HLPF. Eighty-three per cent of respondents (15) said they provided such input, up from 50 per cent of respondents last year. The scanning of the VNRs for any mention of parliamentary involvement provided a more mitigated picture, with only 43 per cent of reviews (17) mentioning parliaments as participants in the process. Nevertheless, the data indicate an improvement over time; in 2020, just over 50 per cent of respondents and 31 per cent of VNRs indicated any type of parliamentary participation.



There are at least four ways in which a parliament can provide input to a VNR report. They are not mutually exclusive and can be used at various stages of the review. Holding a hearing in one or more committees is generally considered the most substantive way for parliament as an institution to delve deep into the substance of a government process. When individual parliamentarians participate in government-sponsored events (e.g. workshops) that are open to other stakeholders, the input is likely to

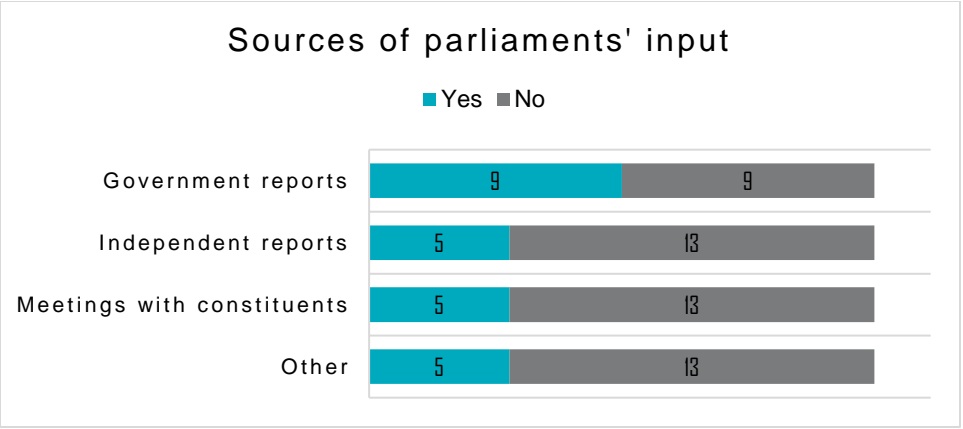
be less effective. It may also be less representative of the views present in parliament, especially when members of the opposition are not involved.

As shown below, only six parliaments reported having held at least one committee hearing on their country’s VNR report. Within this group, only three parliaments reported providing input through almost all other means listed in the questionnaire. Participation in a government event was the most frequent approach.



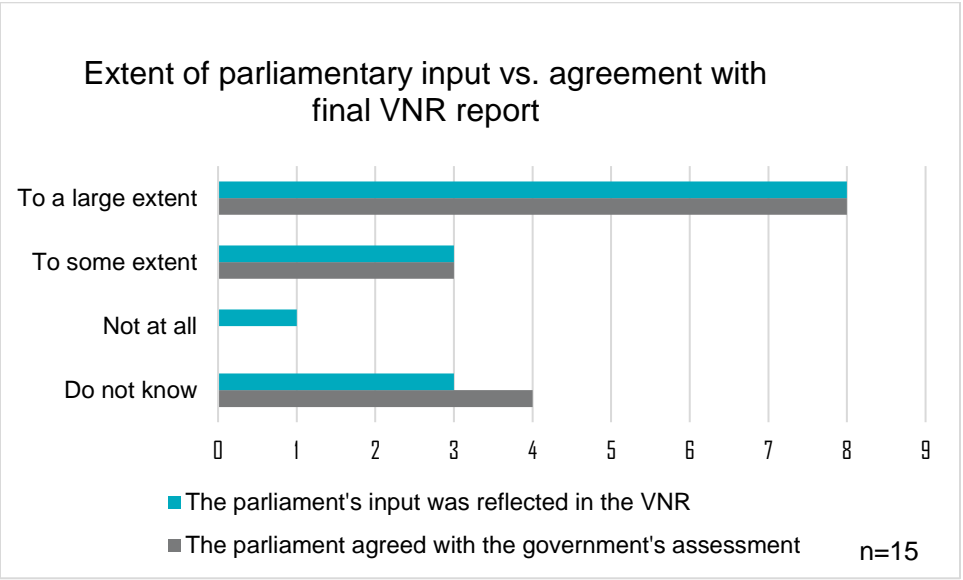
Another indication of the quality of a parliament’s input are the sources it can draw from to formulate its own position as compared to information the government uses for its report. Independent sources, such as reports by a parliamentary budget office or leading civil society organizations, can be used to supplement or critique official government information. Similarly, constituency meetings can help MPs compare reality on the ground with what is depicted in reports originating from a government bureaucracy.

Of the 18 parliaments that participated in the survey, nine relied on government reports to complement or arrive at their own assessments of SDG progress in their countries. For five of those parliaments, government reports were the sole source of information throughout the whole VNR process. Only four parliaments reported using at least two more sources in addition to government material. Taken together, these findings suggest that parliamentary input to the VNR process could be more substantial if parliaments drew on a greater variety of information sources. Still, these data demonstrate that parliaments are now relying on different sources compared to last year, when less than half the parliaments relied on government reports alone.



An important question is whether parliamentary input to government-led VNR processes makes any difference to the final review. Another consideration is the extent to which a parliament is satisfied that a government's assessment of SDG progress more or less matches the legislature's own assessment.

Of the 15 parliaments whose surveys recorded at least one kind of input to the VNR report, 11 ultimately agreed with the government's assessment, and were satisfied that much of their contribution had been reflected in the final report. The remaining four parliaments had not seen the final product when responding to the survey, and so could not evaluate the effect of their input on the report.



Conclusions

An inclusive process of reporting on the successes, challenges and lessons learned in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs requires active and effective parliamentary involvement.

The findings of this report indicate that parliamentary involvement could be more substantial. Although the majority of respondents to the survey indicated some kind of parliamentary involvement, the more complete review of the 40 VNRs available to date provides a more mitigated picture, with less than half the reports mentioning parliament as a stakeholder in the process.

Few parliaments are involved in the drafting process from beginning to end, and their contributions are still largely based on government information. Opportunities provided by parliamentary involvement are not captured adequately. There is significant room for legislatures to contribute more strongly and effectively through greater involvement in the process at the parliamentary level, and more engagement with constituents.

However, examination of the data over time indicates significant improvements in parliamentary engagement and government awareness of the significance of parliaments for a successful process. Since the base year of 2016, parliamentary involvement has doubled; and this year, more Member States have referenced parliamentary involvement in the VNRs than in the past.

Annex: List of survey participants (18 total)

Chad	Namibia
Cuba	Nicaragua
Cyprus	Sierra Leone
Czechia	Spain
Denmark	Sweden
Germany	Thailand
Indonesia	Tunisia
Japan	Zimbabwe
Malaysia	
Mexico	

Complete list of all VNR reporting countries

Afghanistan	Marshall Islands
Angola	Mexico
Antigua and Barbuda	Namibia
Azerbaijan	Nicaragua
Bahamas	Niger
Bhutan	Norway
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Paraguay
Cabo Verde	Qatar
Chad	San Marino
China	Sierra Leone
Colombia	Spain
Cuba	Sweden
Cyprus	
Czechia	Thailand (subcommittee)
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	
Denmark	Tunisia
Dominican Republic	Uruguay
Egypt	Zimbabwe
Germany	
Guatemala	
Indonesia	
Iraq	
Japan	
Lao People's Democratic Republic	
Madagascar	
Malaysia	