

Partners for Review (P4R): Executive Summary of the second network meeting in Bogotá, Colombia

The second Partners for Review network meeting, which took place in Bogotá in March 2017, was hosted by the National Planning Department of Colombia and co-hosted by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety (BMUB), and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) in cooperation with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

84 participants from 25 countries, of whom 34 were non-state representatives, took part in the two-day meeting. The topic of robust SDG review was addressed through sessions on i) policy coherence and whole-of-government approaches, ii) vertical alignment, iii) the data challenges facing SDG review, and iv) achieving integrated national review mechanisms.

Key messages and results from the plenary and group discussions were:

1. The transformative character of the 2030 Agenda

The importance of the 2030 Agenda as an opportunity to achieve sustainable development through transformative action was highlighted throughout the meeting, despite the great challenges associated with implementing the SDGs. As a key aspect, the 2030 Agenda addresses the responsibility of both the global North and the global South for global issues such as tackling inequalities, changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, and fostering peace. In this vein, the 2030 Agenda was referred to as ‘the vision piece of globalisation (and a) shared vision for humanity’ by Thomas Gass of UN DESA. Furthermore, the attendees urged that review mechanisms should not be taken as ‘beauty contests’ but as an opportunity for countries to illustrate both successes and challenges in SDG implementation.

- ***The 2030 Agenda is of a visionary and transformative nature compared to the MDG era. Despite great challenges, the opportunities for transformative action should be emphasised.***

2. The importance of employing multi-stakeholder approaches

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is a universal endeavour requiring cooperation between all parts of society. Thus, multi-stakeholder approaches play a vital role in implementing and reviewing the SDGs: governments will not be able to achieve this task unilaterally but need to involve stakeholders from civil society, academia and the private sector. Discussions revealed that stakeholders demand to be involved in an inclusive, appropriate, institutionalised, encompassing and sustained manner. Opportunities for engagement include

defining national indicators, developing national strategies to implement the 2030 Agenda, communicating national strategies, supporting implementation, and reporting on progress made (e.g. through VNRs). For multi-stakeholder approaches to be effective, stakeholders need to detach from potentially competing sectoral interests: silos need to be broken down between agencies, agendas and schools of thought at national, regional and global level. The demand for stakeholder inclusion was complemented by the request to involve society at large in order to make the 2030 Agenda a common purpose.

- ***Multi-stakeholder approaches need to be institutionalised in order to be effective. Governments alone will not be able to drive forward the societal changes that implementation of the 2030 Agenda needs.***

3. Data challenges for SDG review

Sound data are essential for tracking progress towards achieving the SDGs. A robust review and follow-up mechanism as stipulated in the 2030 Agenda calls for a data ecosystem that involves not only the traditional data providers – such as national statistical offices and other governmental data-producing entities – but also data sources from civil society and the private sector. Therefore, there is a need to establish strategies and guidelines – at national, regional and global level – to adequately address the ‘data challenges’. These go beyond the production of more data and point to harnessing the so-called ‘data revolution’, e.g. responsible use of data, use of alternative data sources, and increased data literacy to support proper and better-informed use of data.

To be able to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, all government, civil society and private sector bodies need to form new reporting cycle structures. The view was expressed that national statistical offices as the traditional main providers of data cannot provide all the data needed to report on the global SDG indicators as measured by nationally selected and adapted indicators. Other government entities and non-governmental actors collect or have access to relevant information that could fill the existing data gaps. Also, there was a clear consensus among participants that big and open data offers great potential to complement – not replace – official data sources. However, the remaining issues of data quality, confidentiality, consumer protection and the relevant legal framework need to be resolved before non-traditional data sources can be used.

- ***2030 Agenda review faces data challenges. Data gaps can additionally be filled with information from non-traditional data sources. These, however, require robust quality checks in order to serve review purposes and inform policies.***

4. Whole-of-government approaches – horizontal alignment

A key lesson learned from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) era is that alignment between ministries, central government, all government entities, all

communities, CSOs and other stakeholders could be further enhanced. As a result, the opportunities for exploiting synergies, harnessing the resources of non-state actors and achieving results at local level have not been fully exploited. Building on this experience, the SDGs highlight the need for inclusive and integrated approaches within government. Because countries have diverse cultural contexts, bureaucratic systems and historical legacies, effective coordination mechanisms vary from country to country. However, all review processes will benefit from high-level political leadership and inclusion of non-governmental stakeholders. In this context, the whole-of-government approach balances inter-ministerial coordination with individual ministries' stand-alone expertise. Attention was given to the legislative area: it was recommended for robust mechanisms that review should be included in budgeting and fiscal plans and submitted to parliamentary review. Lessons learned in this regard were reported first-hand, in particular by Colombia, Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands and Uganda.

- ***The whole-of-government approach balances inter-ministerial coordination and stand-alone expertise of individual ministries. It requires political leadership at the highest level to be successful.***

5. Meaningful civil society engagement

Civil society is traditionally a strong stakeholder in processes related to sustainable development and has – at all levels – demonstrated its willingness to engage in implementing and reviewing the SDGs. According to a recent survey among civil society actors conducted by Together2030, many non-governmental organisations do not yet know how to engage in the Agenda review process. Besides knowledge and funding barriers, issues arise from the immense diversity of the civil society sector, which makes it difficult for civil society to speak with one voice. It was stated that some NGOs continue to follow their traditional and mostly sectoral agenda under the 2030 Agenda framework instead of working to understand its universal and integral character. Other accessibility challenges cited for certain civil society segments are language, lack of financial and human resources, and the physical or mental disabilities of their members, factors that make it difficult for people to get to events or read conventional documents.

- ***Apart from government's willingness to include civil society in 2030 Agenda review processes, civil society needs to overcome its own institutional barriers to engagement.***

6. Strengthened private sector engagement

It was stated that many corporations and enterprises are willing to support the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda and have the resources to do so. Their possible contributions range from private sector data to financial resources or in-kind contributions (e.g. ensuring good working conditions and respecting gender issues in the workplace, committing to climate-

smart production, etc.). In return, these contributions could form part of companies' corporate social and environmental responsibility activity. In contrast to the relationship between government and civil society, private sector representatives felt that it is governments that lack knowledge and awareness about what the private sector can contribute to 2030 Agenda implementation and review processes.

- ***Although there are a number of options for private sector engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation, continuous interaction between government, civil society and the private sector needs to be improved.***

7. The role of UN regional commissions

Follow-up and review for the 2030 Agenda provides for national efforts to be complemented at regional level. The benefit of working with regional commissions is that national indicators feed into regional indicator frameworks, which in turn offer information on regional data that are relevant to national reviews. Regional commissions, however, need to balance the different national inputs so that the voices of all countries are appropriately represented while also ensuring that there is enough room at the regional level to adequately reflect countries' rich national experiences (e.g. on review mechanisms). It was also mentioned that countries in each region should share their experiences of preparing and conducting their national review (e.g. on how best to cover regional specifics in each country report). However, regional SDG forums, such as UN ECLAC's first-ever forum held in Mexico in April 2017, should not be seen as a rehearsal for the HLPF.

- ***Working with regional commissions allows governments to use information by regional indicator frameworks for their own national reviews.***

8. Localising the SDGs and urban-rural aspects

Equally important for holistic review mechanisms is the inclusion of the sub-national level. This also applies to cities, towns and rural areas: there is a need to involve these in national-level review as well as to establish genuine regional or local mechanisms to ensure adequate engagement and action at local level. With regard to sub-regional discrepancies between gender, age and population groups, disaggregation of data and localisation of indicators is especially important to effectively measure SDG implementation. Another challenge is spill-over effects between heavily urbanised areas with continuing resource dependencies and rural areas whose resources fuel the national economy. Involvement of municipalities was identified as necessary in relation to effective mainstreaming, broad communication and statistical monitoring of SDG progress.

- ***In order to foster adequate 2030 Agenda engagement and action at the local level, genuine regional or local mechanisms need to be established to ensure participation.***

9. The crucial role of SDG 16

Given that SDG 16 requires parties to ‘Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’, it refers to all goals of the 2030 Agenda and is crucial to the achievement of the Agenda as a whole. The view was expressed that in many countries, civic space is shrinking and human rights achievements are under threat. Participants nevertheless stressed that, even where the political environment makes working on SDG 16 challenging, it is still possible to work on aspects of the goal – e.g. by taking action to end violence against children or to include women in decision-making processes.

- ***SDG 16 is important for SDG implementation in all countries.***

10. Marginalised groups

People with disabilities are among the most marginalised people in society. The challenge is to build the capacity both of civil society, so it can become more active and make itself heard, and that of government, so that it can understand and include people with disabilities. This challenge is equally relevant for review-related processes. At national level, there are significant gaps in the data on people with disabilities, especially regarding certain sub-groups of people with disabilities.

- ***Data disaggregation is an important prerequisite to designing effective policies for marginalised groups.***

The next **Partners for Review network meeting** is scheduled to take place from 24 to 25 October 2017 in Kampala, Uganda.