



Virtual peer exchange: “Meaningful civil society participation in SDG follow-up and review”

*Co-organised by Action for Sustainable Development + Partners for Review/GIZ
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Partners for Review (P4R) and Action for Sustainable Development (A4SD) organized a half-day virtual peer exchange on the topic of “Meaningful civil society participation in SDG follow-up and review” on 2 June 2021. The event was moderated by David Donoghue, Distinguished Fellow, ODI and former Irish Ambassador to the UN.

P4R is a global network for representatives of government, civil society, academia, the private sector and other stakeholder groups who take part in monitoring and reporting on action to achieve the SDGs. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH implements P4R on behalf of Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU).

A4SD is a global platform supporting civil society and citizen action for sustainable development, based on the principle of a world in which no one is left behind, and a model of economic development within planetary boundaries. The platform has a membership of over 3,000 organizations and activists from 155 countries.

This summary provides key insights from the virtual peer exchange.

Opening Session

Welcoming participants, the organizers set out the challenge for the discussion: there is no longer a question of whether civil society should be integrated into SDG follow-up processes, only a question of the best way to do so. Another noted the importance of accountability and making sure all voices are heard in follow-up and review processes.

The chair of the virtual exchange recalled that civil society played a vital role in creating the 2030 Agenda, which resulted in more ambitious Goals than would have been achieved by governments alone. Likewise, the SDGs cannot be met without civil society’s full involvement.

Participants then shared one word each to explain what makes civil society participation meaningful. The resulting word cloud identified “accountability,” independence,” and “dialogue” as critical elements for meaningful participation in the SDGs.

Kick-off Inputs

The discussion began with presentations on trends and good practices in stakeholder engagement. Explaining current trends in civil society engagement at the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and in supporting the 2030 Agenda, an intergovernmental organization representative said:

- The voluntary national reviews (VNRs) increasingly discuss the inclusion of non-state actors in governance mechanisms, SDG implementation, and VNR preparation. In 2021, at least 56% of the VNRs being presented are expected to identify a specific mechanism by which civil society participated in report preparations.
- VNR reports increasingly refer to different types of stakeholders (beyond civil society or the private sector), with more specific references to vulnerable groups.
- Despite these positive reporting trends, the quality of engagement varies widely. While in some cases civil society is engaged from the beginning of the VNR through established platforms, in other instances civil society has only been able to provide written inputs on a draft VNR report.
- In the face of COVID-19, stakeholder engagement and partnerships are needed more than ever, according to 70% of governments surveyed. However, governments noted a challenge with finding the resources to meaningfully engage stakeholders in policymaking.
- To advance implementation with limited resources, recent research found that it can help to use networks and partnerships that already exist, to facilitate quick responses and ensure cooperation.

A case study from Austria illustrated good practices in meaningful engagement in the VNR and at the HLPF. In 2020, the government and civil society worked closely to produce Austria's first VNR. Although it took time to build trust, the collaboration was successful. The speakers suggested starting early and using informal exchanges at different levels of government to create trust.

The stakeholder network in Austria used a strategy of standing together on their big priorities, rather than consulting the entire network on every detail of the report. They created internal conditions for collaboration with the government, and an "exit strategy" in place in case any red lines were crossed; for example, they could end their collaboration with the government and instead prepare an independent shadow report. Subsequent to the VNR, a number of structural and procedural measures to improve Austria's coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda have been taken, such as setting up a steering group that also aims at strengthening future collaboration with all relevant stakeholders including civil society.

A case study on shadow reporting was provided from Ghana. In 2019, when the government of Ghana presented a VNR, the national civil society platform produced a shadow report while also working with the government through a multi-stakeholder process on the official VNR. Due to the partnership arrangement, the government provided civil society with two minutes to speak on the shadow report during Ghana's VNR presentation at the HLPF.

A lesson learned from the experience is that shadow reporting can be resource-intensive. Experts may need to be engaged on a consulting basis and participatory tools such as workshops will need to be organized to ensure inclusiveness and ownership.

The speaker recommended:

- Engaging with the government from the start of the shadow reporting process; winning the support of government technocrats to secure buy-in from the political leadership;
- Working with the media to share messages from the shadow report;
- Making stakeholders' expertise available to the government in the spirit of a true partnership; and
- Engaging government technocrats, whose input may carry more weight with leaders.

Good practices in institutionalizing stakeholder engagement in post-VNR follow-up were illustrated with experiences in Kenya. In this case, Kenya launched a Multi stakeholder Engagement Framework in December 2020 to foster the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach in light of the 2030 Agenda implementation process. In this process, voices from different stakeholders in Kenya, including those left behind, have been deemed core in advancing the implementation of SDGs.

The institutional environment in charge of coordination and integration for SDG implementation is led by the Interagency Technical Working Committee (IATWC) chaired by the National Treasury State Department of Planning SDGs Unit, co-chaired by SDGs Kenya Forum and Kenya Private Sector Alliance. Other members include the SDGs parliamentary caucus, the Council of Governors, Youth Council, academia, and media representatives, as well as development partners including UNDP. Members of IATWC in Kenya have been proactive in ensuring an effective, accountable and an inclusive process. In light of such efforts, formation of SDGs coordination units is also being encouraged in all county governments, and technical capacity building is under way to support this as counties still face numerous challenges in the adoption and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The timing of VNR reports was also mentioned, with a suggestion to produce shadow reports several months before the official VNR, to enhance influencing opportunities.

Discussion Groups

Parallel discussion groups convened to address three questions.

Group 1 considered how civil society can be meaningfully engaged during the VNR process. The discussion highlighted that meaningful civil society engagement takes time, and it can benefit from clear roles about leading/coordinating. Participants said some governments presenting in 2021 will include civil society assessments directly in their official report – not edited by the government and not simply attached as an appendix. They added that dialogue between civil society and government should be institutionalized in various processes, and civil society can provide institutional memory between government administrations.

Experiences in a European country that is preparing a VNR in 2021 included:

- The coordinating ministry has created a mailbox for civil society and private sector to submit suggestions.
- In addition to its inter-ministerial working group, the government set up a 2030 Panel consisting of civil society, business, academia, and experts.
- Each ministry consults relevant stakeholders on the SDGs for which it is responsible.

- An umbrella organization for civil society is involved in the report and is ensuring national awareness of the process.
- The report will have a chapter on each SDG that includes an unedited assessment from civil society groups. After the VNR, the civil society input will be embedded in the national action plan.
- Civil society will be part of the country's presentation to the HLPF.

Experiences in another European country included:

- Civil society was represented on each of the 17 working groups for the SDGs.
- However, limited information was shared about the process, and stakeholders in the country have a low level of awareness of the SDGs.

Experiences from a Latin American country included:

- Preparing for its third VNR in 2022, the government is aiming to improve civil society inclusion, possibly by converting the Economic Development Council into a Sustainable Development Council that includes stakeholders.
- Stakeholders also will be involved in data collection on the SDGs.
- At present there is no umbrella organization for civil society, which makes stakeholder engagement challenging for the government.

The discussion highlighted the challenge of institutional memory from one VNR process to another and from one government administration to another. A participant said that while government practitioners move, CSOs stay, and they provide institutional memory. Another participant said the sustainable development councils that resulted from Agenda 21 could help to institutionalize stakeholder engagement in national processes beyond the VNR.

Group 2 focused on the steps following the VNR presentation, discussing ways to institutionalize civil society engagement in post-VNR follow-up. Participants said:

- In a country in Latin America, multisectoral committees are being set up at the sub-national level, and they will try to engage local civil society.
- In a country in Africa, a civil society platform plays an ongoing liaison role with the government. The platform is a member of the national implementation coordination committee, enabling civil society to stay informed and collaborate. However, there is little funding for this ongoing work following the VNR. Technical support would be especially valuable, along with support to negotiate with the government to institutionalize engagement.
- In another country in Africa, stakeholders reached out to ministries immediately after a change in government, which facilitated involvement from the beginning of the process.
- In a country in Europe, the government does not have a specific process for following up on the VNR. The VNR is based on a national sustainability strategy, but civil society comments were not adequately reflected in the strategy.
- In another country in Europe, specifying next steps within the VNR provides stakeholders with leverage to call for action after the HLPF.

Group 3 looked at the benefits of shadow reporting. They said some governments understand the added value of shadow reports, realizing that inclusiveness leads to a truer reflection of life for stakeholders and positively affects SDG implementation. The discussion also highlighted the role civil society can play in collecting data that can complement official statistics.

Participants pointed to recent practices and experiences, including:

- Stakeholders formally introduced their shadow report to the government's VNR task force and discussed how to make use of the report. The government and stakeholders agreed that in the future, the shadow report will use data standardized for the national framework.
- One government used findings from shadow reports to complete its VNR. This was easier for the government to do because the shadow report used data generated according to the national protocols and standards. One speaker said a shadow report is more likely to be received well by the government if CSOs discuss the methodology with government institutions before writing the report.
- One country's national statistical office has a 2030 Agenda section that seeks common ground with data from civil society.

Participants also recommended aligning civil society indicators with those used in the VNR.

Open Discussion

Participants underlined the following major insights that had emerged from the discussions:

- Often a country "wakes up for nine months" to produce a great VNR, but then no action follows. It is an important challenge to institutionalize and localize review, to keep governments' attention on the SDGs.
- There is value in mapping stakeholders and landscapes for civic participation. Such maps would not only make creating synergies among CSOs easier, but also help governments with the complex task of reaching out.
- Wherever countries have more organized or institutionalized relationships between governments and stakeholders, their SDG implementation seems to go better. The relationships help ensure that action can continue from one administration to another, and provide a central mechanism to discuss follow-up and next steps.
- With nine years remaining until 2030, it would be useful for countries to create a road map of their national implementation and the VNRs they still plan to conduct; this could help ensure the gains from each VNR process are carried over until the next one.
- A methodology developed by the UN Development Programme suggests three steps for monitoring before VNRs: 1) collect data and develop national indicators; 2) engage stakeholders; and 3) conduct a scorecard exercise to institutionalize monitoring in a way that is accessible to stakeholders.

A final intervention from a participant stressed that the main audience for a VNR should be the people in a country, not the HLPF. He said the biggest merit of a VNR is to generate a conversation, and reports need to be actively disseminated to the public.

Closing Remarks

In closing remarks, the chair recalled that at the outset of the 2030 Agenda, some governments expected civil society engagement to be hostile and create constant pressure. Instead, civil society has generally engaged in constructive dialogue.

The chair also observed that the role of civil society partners is to hold governments accountable in a constructive way for the action needed between now and 2030, and to bring fresh approaches. He suggested that even in undemocratic contexts where it is difficult for civil society to engage with the government, shadow reports can be a constructive tool that supports, rather than embarrasses, the government.

He also echoed the message from the group discussions that “governments come and go, but CSO partners tend to remain.” He expressed hope for more formalized involvement between civil society and government, both at national and global levels. He said civil society should be part of governments’ VNR presentations, ideally as a part of the official delegation with costs covered by the government.

Concluding the meeting, the organizers expressed hope that the virtual exchange would lead to follow-up activities. They noted that a VNR Lab will take place during the 2021 HLPF with a focus on stakeholder engagement.