Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

Stocktaking, evolving practices and lessons learned
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

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Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review
Abbreviations

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CSO  Civil Society Organisation
EESC  European Economic and Social Committee
GIZ  Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
HLPF  High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
IAP2  International Association for Public Participation
IGES  Institute for Global Environmental Strategies
LNOB  Leave No One Behind
MDG  Millennium Development Goal
MSP  Multi-Stakeholder Partnership
NGO  Non-Governmental Organisation
OHCHR  Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
P4R  Partners for Review
SDG  Sustainable Development Goal
SDSN  Sustainable Development Solutions Network
UCLG  United Cities and Local Governments
UN  United Nations
UNDESA  United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP  United Nations Development Programme
UNGC  United Nations Global Compact
UNITAR  United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UNOSD  United Nations Office for Sustainable Development
UNSDG  United Nations Sustainable Development Group
VLR  Voluntary Local Review
VNR  Voluntary National Review
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Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

PART 1
Executive summary

The present study examines the stakeholder engagement practices applied in national SDG follow-up and review in 16 countries. The methodology included: desk research, information gathering through self-assessments, individual interviews and focus group discussions, and validation of the findings presented in the case studies by the interviewed stakeholders. The assessment approach reflects the key principles and dimensions for measuring the quality of stakeholder engagement recently developed by UNDP and UNDESA (2021). The case studies offer empirical evidence and a rich description of a multitude of engagement practices and participatory methods. These provide useful insights into complex contextual challenges and success factors that influence the credibility of the review results, the uptake of the identified follow-up actions and the potential for sustainable impact.

For some stakeholders, the engagement activities applied in SDG follow-up and review brought about factual outcomes and technical efficiency. For others, they enabled horizontal power sharing in building inclusiveness, enhancing participation and strengthening accountability.

While the inclusion of stakeholders in the national follow-up and review process, and the information sharing and broad consultations which this involved, are shown to be evolving as common practices across countries, the downward accountability and responsiveness of the process remain prevailing deficits. In most cases, governments and stakeholders applied an engagement model that was specific to national and local realities. Nonetheless they did acknowledge the fundamental guidance provided by major conceptual frameworks on inclusion, participation and partnerships when initiating, implementing and maintaining meaningful and multi-directional engagement dynamics.

In different countries, but also within individual countries, different stakeholders had different perceptions of and metrics for successful engagement, depending on their particular starting point. In some cases, the engagement practices generated more immediate results in terms of actual decisions and enriched the information base for follow-up and review. In others, it laid the foundations for long-term changes and increased the opportunities for institutionalised involvement of stakeholders in these frameworks.

A number of commonalities were identified, which in all cases determined how effective and impactful the engagement of stakeholders was. These included:

1. the individual capacities of the principal actors;
2. the availability of results-oriented and publicly accessible tools;
3. previous SDG-related experiences within an organisation;
4. the experiences with collaboration between primary government institutions and key stakeholders;
5. the organisational, mediation and leadership skills of the main government institution responsible for coordinating the follow-up and review process; and
6. the availability of a system that can encourage the leveraging of resources between stakeholders and promote incentives tailored to the interests and needs of key actors.
Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasises the critical importance of systematic, open and inclusive follow-up and review as an integral component of supporting effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at national, regional and global levels. The 2030 Agenda assigns the primary responsibility for follow-up and review to governments, but also underlines the benefits and added value of engaging a wide range of relevant actors (both state and non-state). It further outlines the key principles of the follow-up and review frameworks founded on ‘robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated’ arrangements supported by collective endeavours of all relevant stakeholders to ‘identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors’ and inform a more evidence-driven policy-making and priority-setting process in line with ‘national realities, capacities and levels of development’ (A/RES/70/1 2015 paras 72-74).

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, a number of reports and studies, informed by practical experiences, have examined the ‘participation architecture’, collaborative arrangements and multi-stakeholder partnerships built around the follow-up and review structures. In most cases, however, they have followed a linear approach without applying clear performance criteria or considering the contextual ‘conditions’, especially in less favourable situations, or dissecting the critical factors that underpin the outcomes and impact from the particular engagement practice. The present study focuses on selected engagement practices (2019 – 2021) of the follow-up and review processes at national level that include governments, local authorities, civil society, academia, the private sector and existing multi-stakeholder mechanisms. It considers the primary role of governments in facilitating the engagement of stakeholders and enabling the collaborative context in the national follow-up and review processes, while recognising the shared purposes as well as the different interests and distinct responsibilities which stakeholders have in these processes.

Using a case study approach, 16 engagement practices were analysed applying the analytical framework for assessing the quality of stakeholder engagement in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda recently developed by the United Nations Development Programme’s Oslo Governance Centre and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDP & UNDESA, 2021). The study investigates specific instances of how stakeholders can meaningfully participate, increase the informed interactions with governments and between stakeholders, and contribute with tangible inputs to the outcomes of the national 2030 Agenda follow-up and review processes by drawing lessons from individual case studies of engagement practices with:

i. civil society (including civil society-led alliances and networks);
ii. academia/universities;
iii. private sector/business associations;
iv. local authorities; and
v. multi-stakeholder mechanisms.

Care was taken to select a balanced set of cases that reflect varying levels of development and geographical realities, in order to showcase engagement dynamics and specific results from different situations and contexts.
The case studies have been divided into two groups:

1. **comprehensive cases** that are appropriate for an in-depth analysis of the quality of stakeholder engagement, due to their multi-disciplinary and cross-cutting nature; and

2. **thematic cases** that offer a rich contextual description of specific instances, which provide useful entry points for addressing major substantive themes or challenges.

Most of the cases included in the study look into the complex causal relationship between the stakeholder engagement activities, assessed against the UNDP and UNDESA criteria for quality of stakeholder engagement with contextual interpretation of the results, and the generation of outcomes that promote a fact-based review process and pathways to systematic impact.

The engagement practices examined in this study focus on innovative approaches, collaborative experiences and supplementary tools designed to enhance stakeholder participation and improve downward accountability in national follow-up and review exercises. These are understood as a continuum of three interlinked categories of activities:

i. monitoring activities designed to provide evidence to better inform the review process;

ii. review activities covering assessments, diagnostic initiatives and measurement of progress on the SDGs; and

iii. follow-up activities that encompass reporting, disseminating findings, crafting recommendations and generating actions resulting from the monitoring and review processes.

### Table 1 List of case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Stakeholder group</th>
<th>Comprehensive case</th>
<th>Thematic case</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Civil society</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>Local authorities</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>Academia/universities</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>Private sector/business associations</td>
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<td>Finland</td>
<td>Multi-stakeholder mechanism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Private sector/business associations</td>
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<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Multi-stakeholder mechanism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>Academia/universities</td>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Civil society</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
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<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>Civil society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Academia/universities</td>
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<td>Mexico</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Civil society</td>
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Depending on the nature of the analysed practice, some of the case studies focus on the engagement modalities for a single aspect of the above mentioned activity areas, while others focus on multiple aspects. While the study explicitly examines the different engagement activities, it also presents some contextual factors. These factors need to be considered in order to capture the nuances of complex local situations in which governments and non-state actors interact in multi-directional processes that involve a shared vision and responsibilities, but also a multitude of different and sometime conflicting priorities. These different priorities result from the variety of interests, mandates, needs and roles of the numerous stakeholders that are relevant for 2030 Agenda follow-up and review. In addition, the objective of the assessment is not to qualify the engagement practices as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but rather to serve as a learning platform that summarises the array of engagement methods, tools and approaches used by governments and stakeholders alike. Here, responsibility is viewed as a shared function, but one with differentiated roles for different actors in which each stakeholder can be held accountable.

The study is organised as follows:

**Part I** provides an overview of relevant theoretical frameworks and existing case studies regarding stakeholder engagement. It also contains a summary analysis of the main results of the self-assessments, and presents key findings and lessons learned from the case studies.

**Part II** consists of the individual case studies clustered by stakeholder group.
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

1 Introduction

The study follows on from a previous publication produced by Partners for Review (P4R) in 2018 on the whole-of-society approach, which examines the different levels of engagement, roles, and incentives for meaningful participation of stakeholders in the 2030 Agenda review process, as well as two collections of case studies on evolving practices in SDG follow-up and review.

P4R is a global multi-stakeholder network for government representatives and stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, academia and other non-state actors involved in follow-up and review processes for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Launched in 2016 on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, the network’s objective is to help foster robust follow-up and review mechanisms at all levels, and ultimately to help achieve the SDGs. It brings together more than 650 key actors from over 90 countries around the globe, as well as from international organisations and United Nations entities.

Links
- Quality of stakeholder engagement in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda
- Partners for Review (P4R)
- Whole-of-society approach
- Two collections of case studies on evolving practices in SDG follow-up and review
2 Theoretical overview

2.1 Provisions for participation, principles of stakeholder engagement and partnership approaches

Participation is a broad concept that encompasses various social, economic and cultural rights, enshrined in numerous international human rights treaties through which the 2030 Agenda is inspired. It directly encourages the involvement of individuals and groups of people in the formation, implementation, review and oversight of political institutions, governance processes, laws and policies on all levels and at all stages. Conceptually, participation in governance and national planning processes has been described as a key principle of the functioning of the 'traditional democratic system'. In practical terms, however, this could mean different things in different contexts, which explains the variety of methods and approaches employed by governments to enable or reinforce participation by non-state actors. Even though the different participation methods might entail nuanced practical implications and have a varied impact on the governance systems, participation should be viewed both as a means to an end and as an end itself (UN.DOC, E/CN.4/1990/9/Rev. 1, 1990, Ch. 7, para. 149). Participation is crucial for the realisation of the right to development, and is connected to other human rights such as the rights to peaceful assembly and association, freedom of opinion and expression, and the rights to education and to information (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; OHCHR, 2020).

If participation in public affairs is to be effective in ‘combating inequalities, discrimination, poverty and exclusion’ (UN.DOC, E/CN.4/1990/9/Rev. 1, 1990, Ch. 7, paras 149-150), it must ensure equal access to resources and decision-making, facilitate broad-based national ownership and yield shared values. Moreover, the meaningful participation of individuals and groups requires a long-term commitment by public authorities to enable ‘an environment that values and takes into account the work and contribution of all members of society, supports and encourages their engagement and ensures that they are empowered and equipped with the knowledge and capacity necessary to claim and exercise their rights’ (Guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs 2020).
Participation, plus the non-discriminatory inclusion of stakeholders, are key to the delivery of the 2030 Agenda and are vital components of the follow-up and review framework. A number of UN reports and experiences from the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) have highlighted the need for an inclusive and participatory process as a means to build accountability and improve transparency of the national follow-up and review mechanism. To ensure the conceptual clarity and practical utility of these well-grounded frameworks, UNDP and UNDESA define

1. **Inclusion;**
2. **Participation;** and
3. **Accountability**

as the *three universal principles whose level of attainment characterises the quality of stakeholder engagement* in 2030 Agenda implementation and follow-up. Each of the three principles encompasses two dimensions:

1. **Inclusion:** the imperative to involve diverse stakeholder groups, especially those representing the most vulnerable and marginalised segments of society, on the grounds of
   i. accessibility and
   ii. non-discrimination.

2. **Participation:** implies continuous
   i. access to information from public bodies, and institutional opportunities for non-state actors to
   ii. influence decision-making.

3. **Accountability:** assumes
   i. transparency in terms of accessibility and availability of information related to the (follow-up and review) processes and the functioning of a redress mechanism, and
   ii. responsiveness to the received feedback, inputs and grievances from stakeholders.

There is general agreement that these three universal principles, alongside their dimensions, play a central role in guaranteeing effectiveness and efficacy that can drive the meaningful engagement of stakeholders in the national follow-up and review processes. Given the complexity of advancing sustainable development through equitable and systematically distributed outcomes, the engagement of stakeholders should be ‘organised as a continuous and integrative process rather than being conducted through one-off or ad-hoc engagement exercises at different points of the policy cycle’ (European Economic and Social Committee; EESC, 2015). This engagement approach highlights the importance of scaling-up ‘a structured process that enables stakeholders as well as governments to plan ahead, to assemble evidence, reports and other material to make well-researched contributions at the appropriate time in the policy cycle’ (EESC, 2015).

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has proposed an adaptive five-level framework that can be useful for categorising stakeholder engagement practices in the 2030 Agenda follow-up and review processes. This comprises:

i. **inform;**
ii. **consult;**
iii. **involve;**
iv. **collaborate; and**
v. **empower.**

The identified categories have been further adapted by UNDESA and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) in *A Practical Guide on Stakeholder Engagement & the 2030 Agenda*. The guide outlines the key elements, alongside a list of practical tools and country experiences, grouped under four of the above-mentioned IAP2 categories:

i. **inform;**
ii. **consult;**
iii. **involve; and**
v. **collaborate.**
These are seen as joint and mutually non-exclusive approaches in strengthening the engagement of stakeholders for the 2030 Agenda.

P4R (2018) also elaborated a four-level framework focusing on the different levels of stakeholder participation in the review process. The first two levels (inform, consult) are similar to the respective levels of the IAP2 and UNDESA/UNITAR. The third level (empower) emphasises the need to empower non-state actors so that eventually in the fourth level (partnerships) they can collaborate on an equal footing with the government.

Gleaned from recent resources on stakeholder engagement, and drawing on survey data, UNDESA has also analysed how COVID-19 has impacted stakeholder engagement in different countries. In this context it has identified innovative practices, as well as challenges that undermine the efficacy of SDG implementation and hinder the provision of valuable contributions in the review process. Overall, the analysis concludes that most countries have adapted online engagement methods for SDG implementation, follow up and review. This, however, has not been sufficient to mitigate the most significant impacts on the availability of resources for overcoming barriers to participation, on mechanisms for partnership with stakeholders, or on the meaningful inclusion of stakeholders in policy-making (UNDESA, 2021).

Based on experiences to date with shared practices for the national follow-up and review processes facilitated by P4R, non-state actors and government institutions from various sectors and levels can play different roles in a rather dynamic and flexible cycle of inter-relationships. Some illustrative examples of the possible roles in contributing to 2030 Agenda follow-up and review include: inform and engage citizens; sensitise and raise the awareness of citizens and stakeholders on national priorities and the review process; build capacities and provide training, especially for smaller and less resourceful stakeholders; provide expert advice, fill data gaps with additional information and statistics, and conduct complementary assessments; work to foster accountability and increase transparency (P4R, 2018). The latter is particularly highlighted by the 2030 Agenda, which outlines the two key functions that stakeholders can play:

1. ‘holding governments accountable for their actions or lack thereof; and
2. making their ‘own contributions’ to implement the SDGs’ (UNDP & UNDESA, 2021).
Building strong partnerships between stakeholders through a collaborative approach is particularly important for implementation of the SDGs. However, it is also relevant for cross-cutting issues in follow-up and review, given the possibilities it creates for leveraging expertise, resources and plans, for example in partnerships for data collection, joint assessments of progress and communication of results. In the 2020 SDG Partnership Guidebook, the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD) and The Partnering Initiative (TPI) studied the key building blocks of successful partnerships. They also identified the underlying steps that can be used to develop the initial stakeholder engagement into a collaborative partnership in which different stakeholders or organisations align interests around a common vision, combine complementary resources and competencies and share risks in order to maximise their contribution towards the SDGs.

Depending on context specificities, these ‘universal models’ – although valid in any circumstances from a conceptual perspective – have been transformed into specific ‘local models’ in many of the included examples, and thus vary in terms of the number of engagement levels, participation modalities and the partnership dynamics. In many of the cases, these universal principles serve as a guiding frame of reference on the basis of which stakeholders advocate for the use of participatory methods and a broader inclusion of non-state actors in the follow-up and review process. When it comes to the operationalisation of these principles, the situation varies widely across countries according to three main factors:

1. the national social-economic and cultural context and the relative openness of the political process and legislation in place;
2. the professional background, skills, knowledge, previous experiences and interests of the stakeholders involved and the main government institution(s) carrying out the review; and
3. access to essential resources and the availability of a system for financial and non-financial incentives.

Many of the case studies highlight the need for incentives tailored to the needs and interests of the different stakeholders in order to ensure uptake of the follow-up actions, buy-in and wider acceptance of the review findings, as well as greater support and collective ownership.
### Overview of case studies

#### 2.2. An overview of relevant case studies

Since 2018 P4R has been documenting different cases reflecting various practices related to the follow-up and review processes (illustrative case study examples). In 2019, for example, the Cameroon Civil Society Forum on the SDGs successfully engaged a wide range of stakeholders and mobilised the support of official government institutions in the preparation of the first Spotlight Report. This completed Cameroon’s 2019 VNR with additional information and further analysis of SDG progress. The approach undertaken by the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) Forum in Cameroon during the development phase of the report was not to merely ‘shame and blame’ the government, but to constructively engage in a dialogue that discusses possible solutions to pressing sustainability issues. Another example from Nigeria highlights that the provision of incentives, such as impact assessments, tax relief for accomplishments, licensing and public recognitions can facilitate private-sector engagement in SDG implementation and review. It showcases how incentives can create enthusiasm and commitment among private entities and support the development of reporting tools to track progress on the SDGs more comprehensively, which in turn are crucial to identifying opportunities for continued collaboration.

The Multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation: A review of Voluntary National Review Reports (2016–2019) and the Civil Society and the 2030 Agenda report provide useful contextual analysis of the rich experiences with creating and sustaining national multi-stakeholder initiatives, understood as a specific form of engagement in the 2030 Agenda framework. Although these reports might not be holistic in covering the full scope and complexity of the ‘quality of engagement’ of stakeholders in the national follow-up and review process, they do offer good practice principles for consolidating partnerships in a wide range of geographical and socio-economic contexts. They do so by providing methods, approaches and particular experiences that are relevant to different situations, actors and activity areas. One example subjected to more in-depth research is the case study involving the Multi-Stakeholder Initiative El día después in Spain. This examines the key ingredients, catalysing factors and transformative potential of a large multi-stakeholder initiative for achieving systemic change. It provides a detailed analysis of the initial phases of a partnership lifecycle, utilising the collaborative value creation framework applied according to four categories:

1. organisational engagement;
2. resources and activities;
3. partnership dynamics, and
4. impact

(Austin & Seitianidi, 2012). The case study also includes practical recommendations on how to accelerate the formation of a multi-stakeholder partnership, build effective working arrangements and enable transformational outcomes of the partnership.

A 2020 comparative analysis produced by the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and UN Habitat explored the direct link between preparation of the Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) and the VNR production process, capturing diverse engagement experiences across national and local levels. The guidance report highlighted the communities of practices surrounding the involvement of local governments in the national 2030 Agenda institutional arrangements and the alignment with strategic priorities. It also shed light on the efforts to improve mobilisation and participation of different stakeholder groups at the local level. Despite the growing number of VLRs, however, understanding of how local reviews can enhance the substance of the VNRs collectively and systemically remains weak. So too does understanding of how the ‘two hats’ role of local authorities as a particular stakeholder group in national follow-up and review mechanisms, and their ‘orchestration/facilitation’ function in managing and responding to the challenges of stakeholder engagement in their respective sub-national territory, can improve vertical coordination and ensure that sub-national inputs can actually influence decision-making. A notable example of the latter is the Bristol SDG Alliance, a sub-national network of organisations from all sectors of society, including academia, businesses, charities and representatives of the Bristol City Council, which jointly oversaw preparation.
of the Bristol VLR report. Furthermore, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) has prepared a narrative report that explores in greater depth

(i) the engagement of stakeholders in the VLRs,

(ii) the format, content and structural alignment of the VLRs with the VNRs, and

(iii) the increasing role of local and regional governments in standing national institutional arrangements and priority-setting, which involves sharing ‘local solutions to global challenges’.

Academia and universities are uniquely placed to support implementation and review of the SDGs with high quality research and invaluable sources of information, especially with respect to the lack and/or low quality of data for important indicators relevant to specific country situations. Intrinsically, academia/universities benefit from a certain autonomy, independence and technical expertise in the provision of peer reviews or the development of tools by which to collect data and conduct impartial evaluations. In promoting constructive science-policy dialogue for SDG follow-up and review, the University of Pretoria, which hosts the South Africa SDG Hub, demonstrates how research and innovations developed at universities and research institutions can create clear societal value and provide practical inputs and tangible contributions to the VNR preparation process.

Links

- Question of the realization of the right to development, UN.DOC, E/CN.4/1990/9/Rev. 1, 1990, Ch. 7, para. 149
- Guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs 2020
- High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)
- Adaptive five-level framework of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)
- A Practical Guide on Stakeholder Engagement & the 2030 Agenda
- UNDESA analysis: How COVID-19 has impacted stakeholder engagement
- The 2020 SDG Partnership Guidebook
- Illustrative case study examples
- The Cameroon Civil Society Forum on the SDGs
- Example Nigeria, facilitation of private-sector engagement
- Civil Society and the 2030 Agenda
- Multi-Stakeholder Initiative El día después in Spain
- Analysis initial phases partnership lifecycle, according to four categories (Austin & Seitani-di, 2012)
- 2020 comparative analysis, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) & UN Habitat
- Bristol SDG Alliance
- Narrative report, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)
- University of Pretoria: Promoting Constructive Science-Policy Dialogue for the SDG Review
3 Methodology

3.1 Assessment approach

Based on a case study methodology, to understand the generic enabling environment the assessment first looked at the inclusion and participation of targeted stakeholder groups in the national 2030 Agenda institutional and coordination mechanisms, including oversight of SDG prioritisation and implementation. It then analysed in greater depth the specific engagement approaches and contributions of targeted stakeholder groups in the national follow-up and review processes in three activity areas where responsibility is shared by different stakeholders, with government institutions having a leading/facilitation function, and stakeholders having differentiated but complementary roles:

1. Monitoring activities and the modalities of stakeholder engagement in defining the applicable indicator framework and benchmarks; identifying/mapping the sources of data (or lack thereof), including opportunities to provide non-official statistics; putting in place methodologies and tools for data collection; and understanding the availability of complementary information and thematic research that may help to generate disaggregated data for relevant indicators;

2. Review activities in which stakeholders are engaged in order to diagnose/analyse the outputs of the monitoring efforts and to elaborate overall findings, including through national SDG and thematic reports; VNRs/VLRs; technical exercises; spotlight/supplementary reports provided by non-state actors (with stakeholders playing an active role and holding responsibility to engage relevant national authorities);

3. Follow-up activities and the role of stakeholders in supporting the identified actions and recommendations resulting from the monitoring and review processes, including in the formulation of specific (follow-up) plans/actions; dissemination of findings (e.g. national forums, collaborative public presentations, outreach campaigns, etc.); allocation of resources/expertise; definition of new indicators and data sources for subsequent review cycles.

The assessment approach applied triangulation of different sources of evidence, in order to identify and justify the selection of the case studies as well as to substantiate the presented findings more robustly. Whenever possible, a combination of perspectives from multiple respondents and sources for each of the case studies was sought as a preferable option.

The study was conducted from February to June 2021 by an external consultant in close collaboration with the P4R team, and reviewed engagement practices during the period 2019 – 2021. This allowed the inclusion of experiences from both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Preparation of the preparation was divided into four key phases and included the following sources of information: reports and documentation related to the three activity areas (e.g. SDG national reports, VNRs/VLRs, monitoring and technical reports, external assessments and tools); observed/documented practices and experiences assembled by P4R; self-assessment questionnaires; online one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions with selected stakeholders for each case study. Finally, each of the case studies was revised and validated by the interviewed stakeholders (often in consultation with other stakeholders and networks in their country).

1 Only the case study from Iceland covers the engagement of academia prior to the 2019 Voluntary National Review.
3.2 Key phases

The method of analysis comprised of four interlinked phases:

1. **Preliminary phase of identifying and characterising case studies**: This involved identifying potential case studies to be subjected to more in-depth assessment. P4R compiled a preliminary list of case studies based on (i) direct observations and experiences collected through the P4R network meetings and other organisations’ workshops and webinars, and in consultation with different partners, such as Action for Sustainable Development (Action4SD), the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), as well as (ii) inputs provided by field/project staff of GIZ. This list included more than 25 engagement practices related to the national follow-up and review processes in different countries, in 16 of which the identified relevant stakeholders confirmed their interest in being included in the study. The final list of case studies comprised a balanced set that reflected a variety of geographical and social-economic realities for five categories of stakeholder group:

   i. civil society organisations, alliances and networks (5 cases);
   ii. private sector and business associations (3 cases);
   iii. academia and universities (3 cases);
   iv. local authorities (3 cases); and
   v. multi-stakeholder partnerships/mechanisms (2 cases).

2. **Phase of mixing methods of enquiry**: Differentiated methods of information gathering were applied either through semi-structured discussions, i.e. one-on-one interviews with the identified stakeholder representative(s)/resource person(s) (targeted groups 1-4); or focus group discussions with key representatives of the multi-stakeholder partnership/mechanism, including government officials (targeted group 5). In total 16 interviews were held with relevant stakeholders, which provided a solid basis for developing the case studies. Prior to each individual or focus group consultation, the interviewees were provided with an adapted self-assessment grid reflecting the key principles and dimensions of the quality of stakeholder engagement framework proposed by UNDP and UNDESA (2021). The self-assessment tool was used to first of all initiate a dialogue under the UNDP and UNDESA analytical framework for quality of stakeholder engagement, and secondly to capture the perceptions of the interviewed stakeholders regarding ‘critical pointers’ for understanding the specific elements of the stakeholder engagement practices in the national follow-up and review processes. The tool provided an analytical base that reflected both personal (organisational) experiences as well as general knowledge about the engagement practices in the country as a whole. The self-assessment included six guiding questions, which respondents were asked to answer by selecting a colour level (scoring scale of 0-3) that best describes the engagement practice for each criterion. In the comments/additional information section, the interviewed stakeholders were encouraged to explain the rationale for their response choices and to provide complementary information (including as separate attachments/or links) on structural barriers (e.g. legal, policy, institutional), capacity issues or resource constraints. The self-assessment grids were filled in either by the resource person(s), or in some cases by a multidisciplinary team within an organisation/institution, or by multiple respondents from the various stakeholder groups (Benin and Finland). Overall, 14 self-assessments by the interviewed stakeholders from 12 countries were completed, including:

   2 from government authorities,
   5 from civil society,
   2 from academia,
   2 business sector representatives
   3 from local authorities.
A specific open-ended questionnaire was used to complement the results from the self-assessments, generate supplementary information and additional useful inputs, gather feedback about problem areas, and guide the interviews with the identified resource person(s) and key representatives of the case studies. This complementary information helped to ‘visualise’ the particular enabling environment, success factors, innovative approaches and challenges of the different engagement practices.

3 Phase of analysing and interpreting the information generated from the self-assessments, questionnaires and interviews: The collected information from the questionnaires, the direct observations from the one-on-one/group discussions and the results of the self-assessment grids were analysed against the UNDP and UNDESA criteria for quality of stakeholder engagement, with due consideration of the engagement practices’ contextual impact on achieving systemic change. The analysis looked at the processes of participation, inclusion, accountability and transparency, and at the outcomes of the engagement practices, including the specific contributions, inputs and tools utilised by stakeholders to support the national follow-up and review process.

4 Phase of synthesising, revising and validating the findings: The results generated from the discussions and the contextual analysis were synthesised in 2-3-page draft summaries either as comprehensive or thematic cases (see Part II), exemplifying the strengths, weaknesses and achievements of the studied engagement practices. The draft case studies were sent to the consulted stakeholders for final revision and validation before their inclusion in this publication. Based on these case studies, the key findings presented in Part I of this report were then identified and summarised.
3.3 Limitations and challenges

One explicit limitation of the assessment approach was the fact that due to time and resource constraints the majority of the conclusions are derived from a single stakeholder perspective, with the exception of the case studies from Benin, Finland, Ghana, Japan, Mexico and Poland. The theoretical frameworks and the assessment criteria used in this study have multiple nuances, and their practical implications depend on a number of contextual factors that have not been subjected to rigorous analysis. Despite the fact that the assessment approach combined different methods of inquiry and information gathering in order to overcome unbalanced or biased inputs into the process, the results are largely perception-based, representing the views of few individuals in a country, thereby implying a certain degree of subjectivity.

In addition, the assessment criteria mostly derive from the recent analytical framework developed by UNDP and UNDESA for measuring the quality of stakeholder engagement, which means that the criteria have not been widely ‘tested on the ground’. Key elements in the preparation of each case study and enabling factors for generating reliable information for the analytical phase were the willingness of the resource person(s) and the key representatives of the multi-stakeholder mechanisms/coalitions to participate in the consultative process (including the provision of the self-assessments and relevant documents and the co-revision of the final version of the case study), and the time they put in.

Finally, the theoretical frameworks had a strong influence on the design of the self-assessment grids and the questionnaires as well as on the subsequent data analysis. However, they only partly served the purpose of understanding the results and impact of the follow-up and review process and the societal and systemic change at national level. Even though the empirical findings from the case studies take account of some critical contextual factors, as observed and discussed during the interviews with the different stakeholders, these factors were not key to a more comprehensive cause-effect analysis.

Links
- Action for Sustainable Development (Action4SD)
- Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)
- United Nations Global Compact (UNGC)
4 Key findings from the case studies

4.1 Self-assessments synthesis: self-reported performance on the UNDP-UNDESA analytical framework for quality of stakeholder engagement

Prior to each interview, the selected stakeholders were asked to self-evaluate, on a coloured scoring scale from 0 to 3 (from ‘worst’ to ‘best’), the respective level that best reflects attainment of the key principles and dimensions of the UNDP and UNDESA analytical framework for measuring the quality of stakeholder engagement (see Figure 1). The self-assessments were sent to each identified resource person of the stakeholder groups included in the interviews for all 16 case studies, reaching an overall response rate by country of 75% (12 out of 16). The guiding questions that were evaluated by the respondents focused on the national (and local) efforts and specific experiences concerning the engagement of non-state actors in 2030 Agenda follow-up and review, bearing in mind the prime responsibility of government institutions to facilitate and coordinate the ‘engagement practice’. The questions in the self-assessment did not cover specific actions and efforts at a regional or global level. The great majority of the self-assessments were completed by a single stakeholder respondent, i.e. the resource person, and in some cases in consultation with peers from the same organisation/institution or network members. Benin and Finland submitted individual self-assessments for more than one of the stakeholder groups participating in the interview. Altogether 85% of the responses (12 out of the 14 received self-assessments) came from non-state actors (see Methodology section) and only 15% of the respondents (2 out of 14) were representing government institutions (Benin and Mexico).

The overall results from the self-assessments are summarised in Figure 1. The biggest shortcomings were identified in the ‘influence in decision-making’ and ‘responsiveness’ dimensions. In many of the cases, the impact deficit on the decision-making procedures in follow-up and review can mostly be explained by the little or no information on how the inputs provided by stakeholders were used to inform the outcomes and follow-up actions of the process. The low score can also be associated with the nature of the consultation exercises in many of the examples, which were often organised as a ‘formality’ in response to perceived international expectations, with no substantial influence in actual decision-making processes.

The ‘responsiveness’ dimension, which relates to ‘reception of feedback, including grievances, on how the engagement process reflects the principles of inclusion, participation and accountability; availability and ability to redress weaknesses, for example by adapting the process’ (UNDP and UNDESA, 2021), also scores below average in comparison to other dimensions. This general pattern across countries was reaffirmed during the interviews with the selected stakeholders. It seems that

the existence of inclusive and participatory mechanisms is no guarantee of actions actually being taken by the responsible authorities in order to redress grievances, respond to complaints or critically discuss the received feedback on the process.

In most cases, stakeholders had direct access to substantive information (e.g. official data, thematic and expert reports, government-led assessments, etc.) informing the review process, which reflects the highest average level reached for this dimension. This is very much in line with the key findings of the case studies, which suggest

1. a better appreciation by government authorities of the technical strengths of stakeholders for contributing to the follow-up and review process with their expertise, skills, and quality inputs (such as complementary data collection tools/methods, assessment reports, thematic evaluations, surveys etc.), and

2. the authorities’ greater willingness to work in collaborative arrangements and share information as a result. It should, however, be noted that the interviewed stakeholders included well-informed experts and organisations with appropriate capacities that might simplify the real situation in terms of access to substantive information.
## Key findings from the case studies

### Figure 1. Overall scoring by key principles and dimensions

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### Figure 2. Results by stakeholder group: civil society organisations, alliances and networks

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Legend:
- **Level 0**: very limited efforts
- **Level 1**: somewhat increased efforts
- **Level 2**: substantial level of efforts
- **Level 3**: highest level of efforts
for organisations with scarce capacities in the same country.

In general, the evaluations of the government representatives were much more homogenous compared to those of the rest of the stakeholders. They indicated only a partial variation in the influence in decision-making (between levels 2 and 3) and high scores (level 3) for all other dimensions.

Responses by civil society actors (see Figure 2 above) provide clear evidence of the ‘weak spots’ of the review process, as indicated by their experiences and perceptions with respect to the influence in decision-making and accountability dimensions. This can be further explained by the important role civil society played in the follow-up and review process, in addition to their complementary ‘technical function’—which in many of the examined cases was to support and oversee the standards and mechanisms of accountability set by governments.

The ratings provided by the private sector, business associations, academia and local authorities (see Figures 3, 4 and 5 below) likewise illustrate a negative prevalence in the two dimensions within the principles of participation and accountability. As outlined above, the meaningful engagement of stakeholders in the review process requires collaborative decision-making and arrangements that are responsive to the concerns, needs and priorities jointly identified through a participatory process. Effectively addressing weaknesses in the follow-up and review process, and proactively engaging stakeholders in strategic agenda setting, were recognised in the self-evaluations as common shortcomings for stakeholders, given the commitments and actions needed on the part of governments.

In many of the cases, alongside CSOs, business associations and academics played a critical role of ‘technical partner’ to the government, in particular with respect to the collection of data and information, but unlike CSOs, less so in the processing and validation of the assessment results. This reflects the perceived lower level of their influence in the decision-making dimension compared to the responses of civil society. In contrast to other stakeholders, local authorities evaluated their experiences with respect to the accessibility and transparency dimensions quite differently (see Figure 5 below). This can be linked to their mandated responsibilities, which frequently include channelling or translating available government information (both on the substantive issues and on the process itself) into accessible local or minority languages that are specific to their territory. Interestingly, the self-assessment of India, which reflects experiences of various vulnerable and marginalised groups, indicates numerous ‘accessibility issues’ for persons with disabilities across provinces, which were related to the inadequate or uneven implementation of policies. Despite the fact that the self-assessments were not designed to allow comparability between contexts, they did provide indications of the multitude of different and sometimes opposing views on the key principles and dimensions resulting from the varying experiences, norms, standards, roles and interests among stakeholders. However, fluctuating stakeholder opinions were also observed within the same country. The self-evaluations of civil society and local authorities in Finland, for example, differ in their perceptions regarding the dimensions of non-discrimination and accessibility, with lower scores provided by CSOs due to their role of holding governments accountable for the inclusiveness of the review process.

Variations in the contextual factors, the relatively small sampling size of respondents, and the largely perception-based character of the self-assessments are all valid reasons for continued discussion about the interpretation of the presented results. The synthesis, however, helps to identify common trends and highlights specific strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in the engagement of stakeholders in the national follow-up and review processes. The overall results suggest a certain ‘gap’ for the dimensions assessing how the provided inputs and different perspectives influence decision-making, beyond simply consulting stakeholders. They also reaffirm the lack of ‘responsive mechanisms’ in many contexts for redressing weaknesses, responding to grievances and accommodating concerns on the process as a whole. A positive trend can also be observed when it comes to the government’s openness to sharing substantive information, which can be a consequence of its ‘appreciation’ of the technical capacities and thematic contributions stakeholders can make in the SDG review process.
4 Key findings from the case studies

Figure 3. Results by stakeholder group: private sector and business associations

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Figure 4. Results by stakeholder group: academia and universities

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Figure 5. Results by stakeholder group: local authorities

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Legend:
- Level 0: very limited efforts
- Level 1: somewhat increased efforts
- Level 2: substantial level of efforts
- Level 3: highest level of efforts
4.2 Examples of engagement mechanisms

What most cases and stakeholders have in common is that they all, in different ways, operationalised either ad-hoc or standing engagement mechanisms that increased access to relevant information, promoted participation and partnerships, and enabled contributions and inputs from various non-state actors in government-led processes. Conversely, these mechanisms also facilitated government engagement in stakeholder-led initiatives. The practices included a wide variety of engagement approaches, ranging from more innovative participatory data collection partnerships and co-creation processes, through which stakeholders gained wider influence in political bodies and strategic decision-making, to more standard communication channels for awareness-raising, information sharing and consultation.

As noted earlier, UNDESA and UNITAR have identified four levels that can describe the different stages of stakeholder engagement in the 2030 Agenda implementation and review process (see Figure 6). P4R (2018) also elaborated a four-level framework focusing explicitly on the different levels of stakeholder participation in the review processes (see Figure 6), where the first two levels correspond to the first two levels of the UNDESA/UNITAR classification and the third and fourth levels differ somewhat.

One key finding of the case studies is that for the first level of sharing accurate and consistent information (UNDESA/UNITAR, 2020; P4R, 2018), governments utilised many common approaches and tools (with due consideration of the organisational challenges discussed in section 4.5). They also included activities such as providing stakeholders with relevant information on the review process through email lists, websites, newsletters, webinars, public meetings, radio programmes and media outlets. This included disseminating information in accessible local languages (e.g. in Mexico). At the same time, many of the non-state actors made a genuine effort to engage government experts and share information for their complementary follow-up and review initiatives, including for the selected priority areas and indicators in their assessment reports (e.g. South Africa, Nepal) and the intended data collection methods (e.g. Bolivia, Malaysia). In Ghana, a coalition of CSOs supported the development of a web portal to catalogue various SDG initiatives and relevant actors.

With regards to the second level of stakeholder engagement, a great number of thematic and specific group consultations (UNDESA/UNITAR, 2020; P4R, 2018) have been held, especially in countries preparing their VNRs. Broadly speaking, in most cases ad-hoc or standing mechanisms have been put in place to collect (substantive) feedback concerning case studies, best practices, or written comments from stakeholders on the review priorities, mostly through (online) meetings and expert discussions. Some governments (e.g. Iceland) also considered relevant scientific research as a particular input to the follow-up and review outcomes. In many instances, the governments acknowledged the received comments and feedback, even though not all inputs provided by stakeholders influenced the review outcomes. But even when the feedback only partially influenced the outcomes (e.g. Kyrgyzstan, Austria, Costa Rica) it did have major significance for the overall review conclusions and follow-up actions.
Figure 6. Levels of stakeholder engagement

Source: Adapted from UN DESA & UNITAR 2020, Stakeholder Engagement & The 2030 Agenda Guide
Concerning the third level of stakeholder engagement according to UNDESA/UNITAR (2020), some stakeholders were involved (UNDESA/UNITAR, 2020) in the official national delegation and co-presented at the HLPF (e.g. India, Ghana, Nepal, South Africa) or regional forums (e.g. Poland), and co-organised side events (e.g. Austria, Ghana). In addition, some non-state actors led national consultations with marginalised and vulnerable groups and facilitated local assessments (e.g. India), jointly with relevant government counterparts or in cooperation with other stakeholder groups and UN entities. When engaged well in advance, governments actively participated and even contributed to parallel stakeholder-led review processes (e.g. Nepal, South Africa).

And concerning the fourth level according to UNDESA/UNITAR (2020), many of the stakeholders have collaborated (UNDESA/UNITAR, 2020) and actively participated in national SDG coordination mechanisms and institutional arrangements. These include for instance permanent inter-institutional committees and multi-stakeholder commissions, strategic 2030 Agenda high-level councils and ad-hoc thematic or VNR-related working groups. In some cases, governments and stakeholders collaborated to provide capacity building support and training to other less-resourceful groups (e.g. Benin, Ghana). In the cases of Georgia and South Africa, governments and stakeholders jointly validated the results of parallel stakeholder assessments. Only few actors, however, confirmed the availability of dedicated government funds (e.g. Japan) to support broader stakeholder participation, and as a result, the vast majority of the interviewed stakeholders relied on (external) donor funding to enable their active engagement.

The degree of empowerment and partnerships, i.e. the third and fourth levels of stakeholder engagement according to the P4R study (P4R, 2018), differed considerably across countries with regard to the number of actors involved, the availability of resources, capacities and experiences and the different roles and responsibilities played by stakeholders in the review process. Some stakeholders (e.g. Ghana, Nepal) took the initiative to align plans, activities and resources between CSO SDG platforms and national multi-stakeholder commissions facilitated by the government. Others (e.g. South Africa) initiated a dialogue among key government experts and stakeholders to explore opportunities for using non-official data and information for SDG monitoring purposes. The dialogue also explored how to further strengthen the accountability mechanisms by building a government-led multi-stakeholder platform mobilising different groups and actors. Some countries, however, managed to consolidate broad-based, diverse and effective multi-stakeholder processes (e.g. Mexico, Finland) where stakeholders are able to directly influence the national development priorities, vision, agenda-setting and decision-making. The long institutional tradition and experiences in Finland combined with a distributed leadership culture in the engagement mechanisms, for example, fostered a multitude of collaborative initiatives and institutionalised a number of small scale and multi-stakeholder partnerships, not only in implementation but also in the 2030 Agenda review processes. This study also looked at a few bilateral partnerships in the review process between the private sector and the government (e.g. Poland) and between the private sector and academia (e.g. Costa Rica) involving the utilisation of SDG-related data through web surveys and reporting tools produced by private enterprises.
Key findings from the case studies
4.3. Linking stakeholder engagement with results and impact

Undoubtedly, the dynamics of engagement practice and national specificities play a major part in the results and impact achieved through the follow-up and review process. The documented experiences illustrate valuable pointers to the perspectives of stakeholders on what can be understood as ‘tangible results’ or a ‘systemic impact’, reflecting their individual circumstances and perceptions. For different stakeholders, and in different contexts, the ‘entry’ into engagement practice usually proceeds from different starting points – a fact that resonates with varying understandings of the achieved results and impact across countries. The case studies (see Part II) provide rich insights into how the contextual factors and technical and organisational capacities of stakeholders can contribute to a results-oriented and impactful follow-up and review process. This section presents some of the concrete achievements that resulted from the various engagement practices included in this study.

While almost all interviewees argued that a key outcome of the engagement process is direct dialogue with authorities and an increase in informed interactions between stakeholders, some suggested that emphasis needs to be placed on systemic (long-term) changes rather than short-term options. These would include for instance creating scope for sustained co-creation processes in SDG follow-up and review, maintaining shared (permanent) working structures, promoting the institutionalised involvement of stakeholders in strategic councils and committees, and even co-facilitation functions (depending on the expertise and knowledge of stakeholders) for particular thematic areas. Some stakeholders pragmatically focused their contributions on what might be ‘realistically achievable’ given the current state of affairs, typically combining technical support with resources to ensure more credible data collection and analysis. One strategy that has prioritised ‘multiple entry points’ framed around measurable results enabled a range of stakeholders to guarantee a more robust and rigorous follow-up and review process, and conveniently increased the interactions and possibilities for partnerships with public authorities. Such is the case in Poland, where a collaborative venture between CRS Consulting (a Polish company specialised in strategic consulting in the field of corporate social responsibility and sustainable development) and Statistics Poland resulted in the development of the Impact Barometer Tool. This is a workable, cost-free and ready-to-use reporting framework designed to support private companies in measuring in a consistent and comparable way their contributions to SDG implementation. Similarly, in many of the cases, stakeholders raised the level and quality of engagement by offering practical (monitoring/diagnostic) tools and supplementary (analytical) methods, applied (individually or jointly) together with government institutions, which enhanced the overall quality of the follow-up and review outcomes. Indeed, evidence from the examined engagement practices suggests that even in situations of political and social-economic pressure, governments are more willing to devote time, share information and participate in initiatives led by stakeholders when the latter are able to provide concrete ‘easy to apply’ tools that would strengthen the objectivity of the review process.
Given the data limitations of official statistics in Bolivia, for example, the Universidad Privada Boliviana (UPB), the co-host institution for the SDSN in the country, decided to concentrate its efforts on developing a publicly accessible diagnostic tool that could be used by different stakeholders to monitor and tackle complex problems of sustainability. The added value and clear benefits for the SDG review process enabled UPB to engage in a focused dialogue and increase interactions with relevant government institutions on the technical characteristics and potential utility of the tool, which resulted in a joint validation exercise. This shows that in situations where there are scarce engagement opportunities for stakeholders, an approach formulated towards actions seeking to address major ‘technical’ gaps in the SDG review process, can directly promote discussions about shared priorities, and indirectly lay the foundations for a systemic change in the inclusion and participation of stakeholders in the future.

Many of the interviewed stakeholders used the preparation of their countries’ VNRs as positive triggers to maximise the political and institutional space for engagement, mobilise partnerships, influence policy initiatives and promote the uptake of follow-up actions. For CSOs in Austria and Kyrgyzstan, their first VNR preparation cycle in 2020 represented, above all, an opportunity for improved dialogue with government officials and a chance for institutional representation of stakeholders in official committees and working groups that had previously been non-existent. By contrast, in countries presenting VNRs more regularly, co-creation processes based on common working structures and trustful relationships have been already consolidated. Here, stakeholders are therefore less likely to be concerned about the engagement methods employed by governments, and more likely to focus on ensuring an integrated multi-sectoral and multi-level review effort that can address systemic and context-specific problems. In the cases of Benin and Mexico, local authorities, alongside other relevant stakeholders, have become an integral part of the national 2030 Agenda institutional arrangements and multi-stakeholder mechanisms. They provide consultative inputs, local data and separate territorial assessments from the sub-national level that have enriched the follow-up and review information base for developing innovative localised solutions to systemic challenges.
4.4. Contextual factors influencing the level of engagement and participation of stakeholders in 2030 Agenda follow-up and review

The interviewed stakeholders pointed to a range of contextual factors that influence the level of their engagement and participation in 2030 Agenda follow-up and review. These factors can be grouped under three categories:

1. The national social-economic and cultural context and the relative openness of the political process and legislation in place;

2. The professional background, skills, knowledge, previous experiences and interests of the stakeholders involved and the main government institution(s) carrying out the review; and

3. Access to essential resources and the availability of a system for financial and non-financial incentives.

Variations in the extent of these contextual elements, or combinations of them, had an impact on the engagement dynamics and outcomes of follow-up and review, and frequently determined the efforts stakeholders needed to ‘invest’ in the whole process. Undoubtedly, in many situations these contextual factors can influence the uptake of the follow-up (results) and its sustainability.

Firstly, the opportunities for engagement in follow-up and review vary significantly based on the national context, policies and legislation. The more the legal and policy frameworks and government institutions are open to engagement with non-state actors, the more likely active participation, interest and ‘investment’ by diverse stakeholders become. The specific political and social-economic landscape and consultative traditions in many of the cases defined the review process in terms of its easiness to initiate and simplicity to maintain. In Finland, for example, since 1993 the National Commission on Sustainable Development has been continuously providing an inclusive platform for engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. This is based on a distributed leadership culture and flexible working arrangements that go beyond decisions of individual governments, and thus possess established collaborative traditions.

The relative openness of the political process also determines the approach and methods applied by the main government institution(s) overseeing 2030 Agenda follow-up and review. The more restrictive policies and laws are, the greater the scope for direct influence by a single entity on the modalities of the review processes. This induces a more limited acceptance of the review outcomes and fragmented uptake of the follow-up actions by stakeholders. In Ghana, national authorities and stakeholders enhanced collective ownership of, and burden-sharing for, the SDG review processes through joint committees/permanent working structures. These combined resources and activities for the implementation of citizens’ awareness-raising initiatives, the organisation of expert workshops and trainings for media representatives.
Secondly, emerging evidence from the case studies indicates that skills and relevant experiences in undertaking large-scale assessment exercises by stakeholders have proven to meaningfully contribute to the review process with tangible inputs. The evidence even suggests that this may help overcome political constraints. The process of data collection, analysis and report writing requires highly specialised skills, technical knowledge and sufficient time, which usually pose an enormous challenge for both governments and stakeholders (even more so in resource-limited situations). In India, the Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA), a campaign alliance of civil society organisations, has been conducting independent annual assessments of government performance. Initially this involved the MDGs and the Five-Year (Development) Plans of India. More recently, efforts have focused on measuring implementation of the leave no one behind (LNOB) pledge in conjunction with the SDGs. These actual experiences and ready-to-use data and instruments positioned WNTA as a credible ‘technical partner’ that co-led (jointly with government agencies) the discussions and engagement of vulnerable and marginalised groups in preparation of the LNOB Chapter of the 2020 VNR report of India. This was irrespective of the administrative hurdles that prevent institutionalisation of WNTA in the national SDG review mechanisms.

Finally, many of the interviewed stakeholders indicated that limited resources and a lack of financial incentives (e.g. funding to enable smaller organisations and stakeholders from the sub-national level to participate in national follow-up and review events, capacity development and follow-up grants for identified ‘problem areas’) and non-financial incentives (such as cross-learning and delivery of recognitions and awards) were a considerable obstacle for successful follow-up and review. Interviewees explained that such incentives are of major significance for the nature of the process, as they help ensure the quality of the assessment and its outcomes and the availability (and complexity) of tools and methods, as well as enabling the active participation of a wide range of relevant non-state actors. In countries with very limited resources, non-financial incentives (e.g. training, public recognition of good practices, awards, competitions) were essential in order to stimulate the interest of key stakeholders and ensure longer-term commitment to the identified gaps. One of the major challenges in the national follow-up and review process in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, has been the general lack of resources and incentives to support the engagement of civil society organisations, which represent the voices of vulnerable and marginalised populations and groups in rural and remote areas. To overcome these limitations, the Forum of Women’s NGOs of Kyrgyzstan mobilised engagement through its local networks and in cooperation with like-minded organisations. It relied mostly on the availability of non-financial ‘assets’, such as time, energy and the members’ commitment to ensuring that the needs and concerns of vulnerable groups, especially women from rural areas, inform policymaking and benchmarking. In Benin, the National Association of Municipalities (ANCB) has been regularly organising competitions to identify best practice examples for SDG localisation and give them awards. This has promoted comparisons among municipalities, created a genuine competitive atmosphere, and facilitated cross-learning and scaling-up of innovative practices that can be replicated across sub-regions. Similarly, the Global Compact Network Georgia (GCNG), and its host organisation the Civil Development Agency (CIDA), have been organising the Corporate Responsibility Award and the SDG Pioneers as measures to galvanise more active participation by the private sector in the 2030 Agenda processes in the country.
4.5. Challenges in practice

From a theoretical point of view, the conceptual frameworks behind the participation, engagement and partnerships of/with stakeholders in governance mechanisms provide useful guidance on how to build an effective, inclusive and participatory follow-up and review process. However, they fall short of accurately reflecting the diverse local realities in sustaining such processes. As discussed in previous chapters, the political space, economic, legal, cultural and social factors, access to resources and inefficient capacities all have an impact on the quality of stakeholder engagement. However, a number of additional challenges were also faced by stakeholders that provide useful pointers concerning the practical implications of those key concepts.

**Constructing meaningful engagement mechanisms** that are able to capture quality contributions from various stakeholders, sectors and levels of governance is an extensive and complex process. With a multitude of indigenous languages and their variants, and diverse cultures, development needs and knowledge gaps, including patchy internet access and technological conditions at the sub-national level, government officials from Mexico, for instance, had little room to directly apply the recommended ‘rules’ of engagement for local and regional authorities. These would have required them to balance the national engagement vision with local specificity, invest additional time and adapt the engagement activities to the particular local situations.

Consensus-building was also identified as a common challenge given the multiplicity of stakeholders, each with different and often opposing interests, purposes and needs. Groups representing vulnerable and marginalised populations might find it difficult to formulate shared objectives in the review process with representatives from the private sector. Therefore, some of the interviewed stakeholders underlined the important leadership role of public institutions in harmonising the variety of purposes and interests, even if that means putting aside some of the received inputs and contributions and risks discouraging certain stakeholders from participating. Regarding the experiences with preparation of the two VNRs of Costa Rica, one key lesson for the Business Alliance for Development (*La Alianza Empresarial para el Desarrollo*, AED) was that the private sector (and other stakeholders) should not explicitly generate pressure by making demands and requests based on mandates. Instead, they should use the VNR process as a driver for a continued dialogue with government authorities. This will ensure a progressive and widening commitment among stakeholders to fostering shared co-benefits through sectoral and multi-sectoral partnerships with clearly defined collaborative objectives.

Some cases highlight that when the government engages stakeholders in response to external ‘best practices’ and does not assume leadership in order to facilitate deeper interactions among different stakeholders, and thereby promote shared goals, the longer-term institutionalisation of non-state actors in the SDG review mechanisms is compromised. The absence of long-term institutionalised involvement of stakeholders was often associated with implications for the operational planning processes for stakeholders, making the engagement dynamics less predictable. It also impacted participation and the outcomes of the engagement. In the case of South Africa, for example, stakeholders were sometimes under the impression that the government tended to ‘re-act’ to demands from stakeholders, rather than proactively creating opportunities for participation. As a result, this constrained the diversity and inclusiveness of non-state actors in the SDG review frameworks. It is important to note, however, that in some cases this inadequate leadership was more a result of the scarce institutional capacities of the main government institutions responsible for coordination of the follow-up and review, rather than any intentional policy discourse.

One major challenge across countries and stakeholders is the lack of data, and disaggregated data, for relevant SDG indicators. Although the lack of data is not a challenge per se for the engagement of stakeholders,
the data collection process, involving the integration of different data sources and the provision of different types of statistics, including those from stakeholders, faced great difficulties. The lack of clear guidance, and concerns regarding the comparability and quality of data provided by stakeholders, prevented a ‘technical dialogue’ on the availability and usability of data with relevant partners in some countries. In others, as in the case of Iceland, the ‘data questions’ brought together university professors, academic researchers, senior students and government experts to jointly identify and evaluate the accessibility and quality of relevant data. The participatory data collection methods not only enhanced access to data and information for the SDG review, but also ensured the collective ownership of the findings and paved the way for joint initiatives to raise public awareness of the SDGs in Iceland. In many of the cases, initial technical discussions, especially concerning the identification, collection and analysis of data, gradually mobilised a broader engagement of stakeholders.

Finally, stakeholders faced a number of challenges with the organisational aspects of the SDG review process. Most of the issues related to: insufficient time, delays in information sharing, unrealistic deadlines for inputs, unclear expectations concerning the respective roles and contributions of stakeholders, vaguely formulated or missing milestones, the period (year) of VNR preparation, and the organisation of various meetings that tended to involve as many stakeholders as possible but which might not have been equally relevant to everyone, thus ‘generating fatigue’ among participants. Multiple stakeholders noted the importance of having accessible information in local languages, which in some contexts greatly increased the required resources and logistics. However, they also noted the importance of using ‘appropriate and simple language’ to enable society at large to understand complex development problems. As observed by the Jeffrey Sachs Center on Sustainable Development at Sunway University (JSC) in Malaysia, the traditional approach of academia, which usually uses scientific language that targets a very narrow audience, might not mobilise the necessary broad-based support for critical development challenges. As a result, despite the fact that different stakeholders are being engaged in the national follow-up and review mechanisms, SDG implementation risks remaining the sole responsibility of central authorities and administrative elites in capitals, while ordinary citizens have limited information, knowledge or opportunities to be involved in these processes.

Despite the fact that neither the interviews nor the self-assessments dealt with the consequences and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the engagement of stakeholders, some respondents expressed concerns about the effectiveness and utility of the switch to remote engagement, given the lack of sufficient time to properly adjust, especially in the final phases of the VNR preparation. It is noteworthy that most of the participating stakeholders in this study still viewed the systemic and bureaucratic challenges as the main barriers to the meaningful engagement of stakeholders in SDG follow-up and review.
4.6. Success factors: putting the engagement framework into practice

Strong governmental leadership and mediation skills, and a more prominent co-facilitation function of stakeholders to lead and coordinate thematic areas in the follow-up and review, were some of the key success factors identified during the interviews. The multi-stakeholder example of Finland (also noted by other stakeholders participating in national multi-stakeholder mechanisms, such as in Georgia) showcased how long-standing mechanisms and formal arrangements with a low-hierarchy working culture, in which different stakeholders took on a leading role based on their respective strengths and thematic experiences, promoted a distributed leadership culture with shared responsibility, and fostered a common sense of purpose. In these cases (e.g. Georgia, Finland) the flexible working arrangements in the multi-stakeholder mechanisms generated more ownership and buy-in among stakeholders, while ensuring a high degree of transparency and credibility of the review outcomes. Having shared responsibilities with differentiated roles in the multi-stakeholder mechanisms, made stakeholders feel more ‘invested and interested’ in the process, and as a consequence promoted a wider acceptance of the review conclusions and follow-up actions.

**For public authorities**, engaging stakeholders through collaborative arrangements has mostly been initiated in order to comply with the essential requirements of the 2030 Agenda follow-up and review framework. In many of the cases, however, it has been successfully maintained by generating shared values and a common working culture. Some government representatives expressed their appreciation of the expertise, technical skills and resources by which relevant stakeholders can complement the review objectives and help address some of the major challenges. Although there were diverging views about the pros and cons of having flexible versus more formal engagement frameworks, a distinct advantage was seen when efforts were directed at promoting responsibility across stakeholders based on competencies. In other cases, however, as highlighted by Statistics Poland, a participatory review process would require going beyond traditional roles and adopting more flexible approaches. For example, the role of Statistics Poland in the Impact Barometer Initiative was that of a substantive partner as opposed to its conventional role of data provider.

**For civil society**, engaging with public authorities from early on with regard to their SDG review activities (e.g. shadow/spotlight reports, thematic assessments, analytical exercises, complementary reports and evaluations, etc.) increased the likelihood of validation and endorsement by the government, including a reinvigorated commitment to the identified gaps and priority areas. For example, key findings from the report of the CSO SDG Forum in Nepal were included in the 2020 VNR, thus reflecting the perspectives of numerous non-state actors on SDG progress. Similarly, the 2019 Citizens’ Report of South Africa was jointly validated with the government, reaffirming the legitimacy of the exercise and the relevance of its outputs for the official SDG monitoring and reporting processes. In India, the independent CSO SDG review report complemented the development of the LNOB Chapter of the 2020 VNR, capturing the ‘on-the-ground’ experiences and efforts of CSOs to advance relevant targets for socially excluded groups, and promote non-discrimination and equity in national policy-making. Many of the interviewed CSO stakeholders directed their engagement activities towards combining sound technical analysis with a ‘quest for political support’, in order to reinforce the credibility and legitimacy of their assessment results.
For business associations, the availability of incentives geared to the interests of the private sector has been identified as the most important mobilising factor. Introducing public recognitions, non-financial rewards for good practices, plus publicity on specific value-oriented activities and operations, and increasing informed discussions with relevant authorities on tax reforms and possible policy changes, were considered critical prerequisites for successful engagement of the private sector in the SDG follow-up and review. The interviewed business sector representatives also underlined the importance of ensuring the clarity of the reporting framework in terms of standardised formats, methodological approach and focus/priority areas.

For academia and universities, the SDG review represented an opportunity to strengthen the evidence base and establish constructive data collection partnerships. Academic and research institutions in Bolivia, Iceland and Malaysia all supported the data collection process with innovative methods, practical tools and empirical research. It was argued that recognising the independent contributions of researchers and academia interested in the SDGs can quickly leverage the available expertise, and yield both quantitative and qualitative information to further strengthen the SDG monitoring framework. In many of the cases, the engagement of the academic sector was among the main factors for maintaining multi-disciplinary consultations in the review process.

For local and regional governments, one significant advantage of being involved in the national review mechanisms was the ‘comparability factor’ and the ‘competitive environment’ that can be strong drivers for municipalities to ‘race to the top’ and accelerate progress on the SDGs across regions. For many local authorities, engagement in the national SDG follow-up and review was an opportunity to voice concerns over particular territorial challenges, and align approaches with national strategic frameworks. In the cases of Benin, Japan, Finland and Mexico, consultative inputs from the local level and VLR outcomes informed the development of the country’s VNR. As was found in the case of Shimokawa municipality, a small town in Japan with a population of about 3,200 inhabitants, even very small towns and municipalities with no substantial resources can play an important role in monitoring and assessment of the SDGs. The Government of Japan has been supporting various awareness-raising activities and capacity-building measures, and has been allocating resources designed to increase the engagement of local authorities. As a result, Shimokawa town, alongside other cities, developed a set of localised indicators, adapted and specific to each territory and context, which enhanced the continuity and sustainability of the engagement process and guaranteed the relevance of local governments for subsequent review cycles.

For all stakeholders, essential incentivising factors were the learning possibilities of the review process for sharing knowledge, discussing practices and exchanging experiences with peers and experts nationally, regionally and globally. Alongside government officials, many of the interviewed stakeholders participated in national forums and regional events, and co-presented at the HLPF. These were contributory factors to recognition of the fundamental role that different stakeholders play in the process. Even though most of the stakeholders reaffirmed the lead responsibility of governments for embracing inclusive and participatory approaches and securing long-term institutionalised engagement of stakeholders, some of the case studies illustrate the array of creative potentials and innovations employed by stakeholders across countries to overcome these constraints.
5 Discussion

This study yielded insights into the engagement practices of different stakeholder groups in different contexts. These provided a better understanding of how the capacities, roles and relationships of a wide range of relevant actors influence the choice of a particular engagement instrument in order to deliver improved outcomes in SDG follow-up and review, or foster systemic change.

Based on the results of the self-assessments, a clear preference by governments for the thematic expertise and technical skills of stakeholders was observed. This was reflected in the highest scores for the dimension of the access to information. At the same time, opportunities for stakeholders to influence decision-making and address grievances through a redress mechanism yielded the lowest scores. This is very much in line with the overall observations, which indicate a common perception among stakeholders that the existence of inclusive and participatory approaches in follow-up and review is no guarantee of a functional redress mechanism. Therefore, many stakeholders pragmatically focused their efforts and contributions on ‘technical support’ – by utilising practical tools and providing tangible inputs in response to ‘realities on the ground’, rather than to strategic agenda setting.

The richness of the engagement experiences enables a further discussion about the roles and responsibilities stakeholders can assume in 2030 Agenda follow-up and review. Some stakeholders had positive experiences with formal arrangements, while others benefited from a certain degree of flexibility and non-hierarchical working structures. In some cases, the engagement practices were characterised as a two-way process in which responsibility was ‘shared’ among relevant actors, with distinct competence-based roles. In these instances, national authorities facilitated a collaborative context that allowed for institutionalised participation and the incorporation of diverse stakeholders and inputs. In others, contributions were limited to what had the most feasible potential for an immediate result. Such endeavours, however, can extend the possibilities for engagement in the medium term.

Reluctance to engage stakeholders in government-led processes (e.g. VNRs, SDG official data collection, monitoring reports, peer review working groups, etc.) and vice versa to engage government officials in stakeholders-led initiatives (e.g. shadow/spotlight reports, analytical exercises and in the methodological development of complementary diagnostic or data collection tools), was often associated with a lack of previous collaborative experiences and limited working relationships. Differences were noted in countries that have prepared only one VNR report, for example, and those that have more regularly assembled VNR contributions and inputs from stakeholders. Generally, a greater VNR periodicity promoted trust-building and shared purposes among stakeholders. Ensuring consensus on key topics and procedures in follow-up and review was another challenge. Frequently, governments (and stakeholders) are faced with a ‘sea’ of inter-
Creating inclusive, participatory and accountable national follow-up and review is a complex process and requires both financial resources and non-financial incentives. In this regard, there are some lessons learned from the case studies that may provide useful guidance on how to initiate and maintain such processes:

- The engagement of stakeholders in follow-up and review is a multi-directional process with shared responsibilities and differentiated roles.
- Competence-based functions distributed between government entities and key non-state actors generate broader ownership and wider acceptance of the review results, as stakeholders tend to be more interested and invest more ‘assets’ in the process.
- To a varying degree, contextual factors in countries are important drivers for the engagement dynamics, outcomes and impact. Previous collaborative experiences and active relationships between government entities and relevant stakeholders are all the more so.
- National authorities tend to better appreciate the thematic expertise and technical knowledge of stakeholders for complementing the SDG follow-up and review with practice-oriented tools and methods, especially for data collection and analysis.
- The early engagement of government experts in stakeholder-led initiatives increases the potential for cross-validation and endorsement by public authorities and can ensure subsequent commitment in the follow-up actions.
- In resource-limited settings, and where government capacities are scarce, stakeholders can provide a critical contribution of inputs and fact-based evidence to substantiate the SDG review process more rigorously and strengthen the credibility of its findings.
- Non-financial incentives such as public recognitions, awards, cross-learning and peer exchange, as well as a sustained competitive environment among stakeholders, are of major relevance for both ensuring the quality of the review outcomes and the active engagement of diverse stakeholders.
- The engagement practices examined by this study provide a learning platform for understanding the methods, tools and approaches that governments and stakeholders alike choose to utilise in order to reinforce the effectiveness of the national 2030 Agenda follow-up and review process, and ultimately maximise the possibilities for actual results and systemic impact. The case studies highlight some important particularities as well as similarities in the engagement practices. In some countries, the key principles and dimensions for a meaningful engagement of stakeholders were considered ‘as a means to an end’ – for example, ensuring more fact-based and evidence-driven follow-up and review or supporting a more rigorous and robust analysis. In others, compliance with the key principles and dimensions was viewed ‘as an end in itself’ for achieving long-term goals. A range of context-specific factors influence the engagement dynamics in countries and determine the effectiveness, outcomes and impact that result from these processes. In many of the cases, however, stakeholders ‘operationalised’ an array of creative measures and innovations in order to overcome bureaucratic barriers and systemic challenges.
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

PART 2
Case studies for

- Austria
- Benin
- Bolivia
- Costa Rica
- Finland
- Georgia
- Ghana
- Iceland
- India
- Japan
- Kyrgyzstan
- Malaysia
- Mexico
- Nepal
- Poland
- South Africa
## Summary matrix: main features of the case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Comprehensive case</th>
<th>Theme (thematic cases only)</th>
<th>Stakeholder group</th>
<th>Engagement approach</th>
<th>Key elements</th>
<th>Additional remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Including CSOs in institutional VNR arrangements</td>
<td>Civil society alliances/networks</td>
<td>Official involvement of CSO representatives in the VNR Inter-Ministerial Working Group tasked with 2020 VNR preparation (previous SDG-related engagement between civil society and government has been mostly ad hoc).</td>
<td>CSOs provided good practice examples, formulated key recommendations and co-reviewed the draft chapters of the VNR report.</td>
<td>The 2020 VNR preparation process served as a catalyst for mobilising the engagement of civil society in implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Austria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Local authorities/associations of local authorities</td>
<td>Municipal authorities and representatives of the National Association of Municipalities of Benin are included in the 2030 Agenda national coordination mechanism.</td>
<td>Localised reporting on relevant SDG targets in each municipality informs VNR and national SDG reporting; dedicated SDG focal point in each municipality to ensure more integrated planning, monitoring and reporting.</td>
<td>SDG prioritisation exercise completed in each municipality in Benin to identify the most relevant SDG targets; mechanisms in place to ensure integrated reporting between different levels of governance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Academia can complement the establishment of a system for integrating different data sources.</td>
<td>Academia/universities</td>
<td>Non-formalised engagement with non-state actors; ad-hoc discussions concerning the availability of data for the relevant SDG indicators in Bolivia.</td>
<td>Academia-led initiative for developing the ‘SDG Atlas Tool’ to provide publicly accessible information on SDG progress; leverage academic expertise to support systematic data collection and analysis, including the integration of different datasets.</td>
<td>Verification of the results of the exploratory assessment of the available datasets in Bolivia by the National Statistical Institute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Business associations</td>
<td>Representatives of the private sector and business associations included in the national SDG Advisory Committee.</td>
<td>Business associations partnered with academia to conduct a web-based survey and collect specific information on the practices and contributions of the private sector in connection with the SDGs; results in the form of case studies shared with government for inclusion in the 2020 VNR.</td>
<td>Preparation of a collaborative work plan to further consolidate the engagement of the business sector in the SDG Advisory Committee and associated national mechanisms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Multi-stakeholder mechanism</td>
<td>The Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development has consolidated a broad system of multi-stakeholder representation and partnerships with more than 100 stakeholders.</td>
<td>The Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development has consolidated a broad system of multi-stakeholder representation and partnerships with more than 100 stakeholders.</td>
<td>Low hierarchy and mostly bottom-up engagement approach; flexible working arrangements and distributed leadership culture, independent of political implications and electoral cycles.</td>
<td>Direct involvement of ordinary citizens in SDG follow-up and review through the ‘Citizens Panels’; VLRs and CSO assessments informed the 2020 VNR of Finland.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

### PART 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Comprehensive case</th>
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<th>Additional remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Integration of CSOs platform in national 2030 Agenda coordination mechanisms</td>
<td>Business associations</td>
<td>Business associations included in the national SDG Council of Georgia.</td>
<td>Multiple data collection and reporting tools to facilitate inputs and contributions from the private sector; the SDG report of the private sector was annexed to the 2020 VNR.</td>
<td>Government validated and endorsed the SDG report of the private sector; mobilisation of more active participation by the private sector through public recognitions and awards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Integration of CSOs platform in national 2030 Agenda coordination mechanisms</td>
<td>Multi-stakeholder mechanism</td>
<td>Multiple non-state actors formally included in the 2030 Agenda National Development Planning Commission and other relevant structures.</td>
<td>Alignment of resources, plans and activities between the national coordination mechanism and the CSO SDG Platform, in order to increase impact and efficiency.</td>
<td>CSO shadow reporting informed key conclusions of the 2019 VNR; ToR of the VNR shared by the government for feedback from non-state actors, and vice versa CSOs shared the ToR of the shadow report for comments and inputs from government experts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Academia/ universities</td>
<td>Technical SDG working group involved key government institutions and academia representatives in mapping and assessing the accessibility and quality of relevant data.</td>
<td>Utilise the available academic knowledge, expertise and research to address key data limitations; academia implemented participatory e-surveys and questionnaires to collect information.</td>
<td>The SDG data mapping exercise was the first joint attempt of government institutions and academia to undertake a comprehensive multi-expert baseline assessment on the availability and quality of SDG data relevant to the context in Iceland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Civil society community networks</td>
<td>No institutionalised engagement of non-state actors in national SDG coordination mechanisms, mostly ad-hoc topic-based discussions.</td>
<td>CSO community networks led the preparations of the LNOB Chapter of the 2020 VNR of India; extensive previous SDG-related and pro-poor experience in monitoring and evaluation of development goals for marginalised and vulnerable populations strengthened the relevance of CSO networks in the LNOB consultations; greater engagement through existing networks of local grassroots movements to assemble specific inputs and feedback.</td>
<td>Series of joint national and sub-national events organised and fostered direct dialogue on the needs and priorities of the most vulnerable groups at community level; the LNOB Chapter preparations laid the foundation for the potential accelerated institutionalised engagement of CSOs in national government-led SDG mechanisms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Comprehensive case</td>
<td>Theme (thematic cases only)</td>
<td>Stakeholder group</td>
<td>Engagement approach</td>
<td>Key elements</td>
<td>Additional remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>The role of small towns and municipalities in the national SDG follow-up and review processes</td>
<td>Local authorities (small municipalities and towns)</td>
<td>Non-formalised mechanism for the regular engagement of local authorities in the national 2030 Agenda coordination arrangements, extensive ad-hoc and topic-based consultations, including the allocation of resources from national to sub-national levels to increase participation of local authorities in SDG-related processes.</td>
<td>Municipal and town representatives were actively engaged in revising the national SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles; Shimokawa town, alongside other cities in Japan, prepared city-level progress reports on implementation of the SDGs, multiple initiatives, including a set of localised indicators, were developed that were adapted and specific to each sub-territory.</td>
<td>Small towns and municipalities can play an important role in promoting inclusive SDG progress evaluations with locally driven information, and encourage knowledge sharing, peer learning and sharing of good practices between municipalities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Alliance of women's CSOs</td>
<td>CSOs included in the inter-institutional VNR thematic and cross-cutting working groups.</td>
<td>Critical inputs and contributions provided by CSOs influenced the 2020 VNR content; specific recommendations on women's rights and gender equality promoted the identification of follow-up actions involving sub-national accountability mechanisms.</td>
<td>The 2020 VNR consultations were the first large-scale national engagement initiative between government institutions and non-state actors to discuss development priorities and challenges in the country.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Academia/universities</td>
<td>Academia and other non-state actors are included in the multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder technical working committee responsible for preparing the 2021 VNR.</td>
<td>Academia supports the development of a complementary SDG dashboard, taking into account proxy indicators and non-official statistics, in addition to data provided by the Department of Statistics, in order to ensure more holistic monitoring and reporting; SDG dashboard methodology presented to relevant government agencies; the SDG dashboard will enable users to easily track performance on specific SDG targets, supplemented with scenario assessments.</td>
<td>Since the first 2017 VNR report, a significant shift towards more inclusive and participatory methods of collecting inputs and feedback, as well as the direct involvement of stakeholders in the SDG review processes, have been promoted by the responsible government entities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Comprehensive case</td>
<td>Theme (thematic cases only)</td>
<td>Stakeholder group</td>
<td>Engagement approach</td>
<td>Key elements</td>
<td>Additional remarks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Local authorities (multi-stakeholder mechanism)</td>
<td>Different stakeholders and levels of government are included in the multi-stakeholder National SDG Council and relevant working groups.</td>
<td>Specific engagement approach that reflects ‘local realities’ in the different regions and municipalities; inputs and assessment results from the sub-national levels inform national monitoring and reporting frameworks.</td>
<td>National authorities work closely with local and regional governments to ensure targeted support for awareness-raising activities, trainings and overall SDG localisation in accessible and culturally sensitive formats specific to the situations in the different sub-regions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Key conclusions from civil society-led assessments can enrich VNR findings</td>
<td>CSO networks</td>
<td>Civil society stakeholders are officially represented on the National Planning Commission, and other government thematic committees responsible for SDG implementation, monitoring and reporting.</td>
<td>Supplementary data and reflections from local CSO networks informed key conclusions and follow-up actions identified during the 2020 VNR of Nepal.</td>
<td>Utilise the VNR preparation cycles to promote discussions on critical development issues and accelerate the SDG localisation process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Public-private partnership</td>
<td>No institutionalised engagement of private sector representatives in national SDG-related structures; engagement through the National Stakeholder Forum for SDG achievement.</td>
<td>Public-private partnership (Statistics Poland – CRS Consulting) for data collection; specifically developed ‘Impact Barometer Tool’ to encourage private companies to report and provide inputs for relevant SDGs; non-traditional and complementary roles of the main stakeholders involved in developing the tool.</td>
<td>Prioritisation exercise and multiple consultations with stakeholders organised to identify a list of the most relevant SDG indicators to be included in the tool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Building on VNR conclusions to scale-up institutionalisation of multi-stakeholder processes and platforms for engagement</td>
<td>CSO (focus on grassroots communities)</td>
<td>Stakeholders were included in relevant SDG working groups, and led thematic consultations during preparation of the 2019 VNR.</td>
<td>Parallel independent CSO SDG assessment report, co-validated and endorsed by the government, complemented the 2019 VNR report; active engagement during the VNR process, but weaker long-term engagement of CSOs in related SDG frameworks.</td>
<td>The 2019 VNR facilitated broader consensus on future development priorities and capacity needs, and leveraged resources and expertise to establish shared working culture in the SDG monitoring and reporting frameworks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AUSTRIA

Using the VNR process as a catalysing factor for engagement of CSO networks
**Key considerations**

Civil society organisations (CSOs) as well as governments can use the momentum generated by preparation of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to (i) leverage resources; (ii) improve the participation of all relevant stakeholders; (iii) increase government accountability, and (iv) build multi-stakeholder partnerships, in order to promote more meaningful engagement in the SDG review processes and trigger the long-term and systematic participation of non-state actors in implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

In 2020, Austria presented its first VNR at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), which reflected contributions from different stakeholders. The Austrian Government adopted an ‘SDG mainstreaming approach’ in 2016, meaning that each federal ministry is accountable and responsible for achieving the SDGs. From the point of view of civil society organisations, there was only little political leadership and interest in implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the federal level before 2020, and limited consultation of civil society organisations in implementation of the 2030 Agenda by the federal government.

In order to facilitate a participatory SDG review, in 2019 the Austrian Government’s Inter-Ministerial Working Group tasked with VNR preparation reached out to civil society organisations and other stakeholders, such as academia and private sector representatives, in order to engage them in the process. SDG Watch Austria, a platform of more than 210 broad-based civil society organisations that support implementation of the SDGs in Austria, was also consulted and invited to participate in the process of drawing up the VNR report.

SDG Watch Austria was invited to take part in the sessions of the working group that prepared the VNR, which was led by the Federal Chancellery and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. SDG Watch Austria was then part of the working group meetings, and could therefore articulate their point of view as well as recommendations from civil society at these meetings. Member organisations of SDG Watch Austria could provide short texts on best practice examples, a kind of short summary of their work on SDG implementation at national and federal level, which were then included in the VNR as part of the sections on best practice examples of implementation. In the course of the development of the VNR report by the government’s working group, SDG Watch Austria was also invited to review the draft chapters of the government’s text and was asked to provide recommendations that could be included in the draft text of the VNR.

After finalisation of the VNR report, SDG Watch Austria was asked to prepare a short video statement containing structural recommendations on how to strengthen implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This was created for the specific purpose of including it in the government’s VNR presentation at the 2020 High Level Political Forum. Furthermore, SDG Watch Austria organised and was invited to speak on a panel on CSO engagement and best practice examples.
in the VNR process at a side event organised in cooperation with the European Environmental Bureau, SDG Watch Europe and Austria’s Permanent Mission to the UN in New York.

The experience of SDG Watch Austria showed that it was essential to cooperate with the inter-ministerial working group that prepared the VNR. Furthermore, it was found crucial to continuously build the necessary trust between government and non-governmental actors. While SDG Watch Austria could not review all parts of the VNR, and notably could not review the statistics section of Austrian Statistics used to measure progress on the SDGs, the civil society organisations were able to provide feedback, recommendations and best practice examples for implementation of the 2030 Agenda. These were included in the final text of the VNR report.

For the Austrian Government, the 2020 VNR preparation process was a catalyst for mobilising the engagement of civil society in implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Austria. The VNR represented an opportunity for a constructive dialogue between government and civil society.
stakeholders. Although the long-term institutional arrangements to establish a systemic engagement of stakeholders in the SDG follow-up and review frameworks have yet to be put in place in Austria, the VNR process has laid the foundation for further cooperation between civil society actors and governmental institutions on implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Austria.

Key partners

- SDG Watch Austria
BENIN

Building sub-national capacities through participation in the SDG follow-up and review processes

Highlights

Through the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Government of Benin has established a fruitful partnership with the National Association of Municipalities. This partnership aims to enable local communities to identify localised priority targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that best meet local aspirations, and ensure their active participation in the SDG implementation and monitoring processes in Benin.

Local authorities have actively participated in all three VNR processes of Benin, providing contextual information and feedback gener-
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

PART 2

ated through a structured national coordination mechanism.

- National authorities in Benin have encouraged activities to enable mutual understanding between the different levels of governance on the respective roles and responsibilities of local governments in the SDG follow-up and review frameworks. They agreed on the engagement modalities and expectations regarding contributions and inputs, and regularly shared information, timeframes and milestones.

- The case of Benin exemplifies the fact that in resource-limited settings, partnerships between national authorities and local government associations can mobilise additional resources. These can be used to raise awareness, facilitate knowledge sharing and strengthen the capacities of municipal representatives to engage more meaningfully in the national SDG review frameworks.

Background

Thus far, Benin has prepared three Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs 2017; 2018; 2020), providing a periodic assessment of SDG progress in the country at regular intervals. The VNRs were prepared through collaborative multi-stakeholder arrangements with the active engagement of municipal authorities and representatives of the National Association of Municipalities of Benin (Association Nationale des Communes du Bénin, ANCB). Representatives from ANCB, as well as some of the municipal authorities, are officially included in the institutional and coordination mechanism for the 2030 Agenda. Based on locally driven information and specific inputs from all 77 municipalities in Benin, ANCB prepares the ‘Communal Dynamics’ report, which serves as a contextual source that informs the VNR reports. In addition, in 2020 ANCB prepared the first report on SDG localisation in Benin, which was developed in close consultation with national and municipal authorities. In 2021, the relevant authorities in Benin plan to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of SDG implementation and a review of all previous VNR reports in order to better prepare for future VNRs and improve strategies for implementing the SDGs.

Engagement approach

The Directorate-General for Coordination and Monitoring of the SDGs of the Ministry of Planning and Development, and ANCB, have been providing targeted support to enable the meaningful engagement of various municipalities in the national SDG review frameworks. This has included awareness-raising and training activities, thematic consultations, platforms for the sharing of experiences and good practices among local authorities and support for SDG localisation through bottom-up approaches and local actions. At the national level, Benin conducted a ‘prioritisation’ exercise, identifying 49 SDG targets as the most relevant and urgent priority areas in the Benin context. Drawing from the national development priorities, each municipality selected an average of 10 targets from these development objectives as particularly relevant for its territory. The process of harmonising the national development priorities with the SDGs and the subsequent prioritisation and adaptation by local governments to their specific development needs was undertaken through the localisation of SDG priority targets. This exercise also fostered monitoring of implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and contributed to alignment and relationship-building between the different levels of governance.

The coordination structure for implementation and review of the SDGs in Benin is facilitated by the Directorate-General for Coordination and Monitoring of the SDGs. Local actors are part of the system that was set up by the national development plan and operationalised by the coordinating structure. First of all, each municipality has a dedicated focal point, which leads the integrated local action planning efforts, the SDG localisation and review, and ensures a consistent and systematic in-
formation flow between municipal and national levels through ANCB. The SDG focal points facilitate information gathering through specific questionnaires compiled in consultation with municipal administrations and by engaging relevant local stakeholders. In the city of Avrankou, for example, each year a multi-stakeholder workshop involving representatives from civil society, the private sector and citizens, is organised to assess SDG achievement and plan targeted SDG activities for the next year. Secondly, ANCB, alongside some municipal representatives, is included in the national 2030 Agenda institutional arrangements which coordinate VNR preparation and consultations. Thus, either through ANCB or directly, local governments can contribute region-specific information and insights, and provide feedback during the various phases of the VNR process.

Representatives from ANCB as well as some municipal administrators also participated in the VNR presentations at the 2018 High-level Political Forum (HLPF). They shared some good practices in implementing SDG 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG 13 on Climate Action and SDG 16 on Effective Institutions. Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement

National authorities in Benin helped to maximise the functions and the engagement of local governments and ANCB in the national SDG review frameworks. This involved providing relevant and continuous information to sub-national authorities, encouraging SDG awareness-raising and capacity building initiatives at the local level, and adopting an integrated development planning system which fosters the direct involvement of municipal administrators and stakeholders in prioritising targets and reporting. With participatory methods and tools, municipal authorities enriched the development of the VNRs by providing localised data and reporting on particular achievements. The close cooperation between the Directorate-General for Coordination and Monitoring of the SDGs and ANCB in facilitating joint working modalities, networking, peer learning and exchange of experiences among local governments, promoted a space for co-creating ideas and opportunities. The collaborative context for preparation of the VNRs, in conjunction with the autonomous SDG target prioritisation and bottom-up information generated by local governments, strengthened ownership of the SDG review processes, and thus commitment to the subsequent phases.

Results and impact

The institutionalised involvement of ANCB and municipal authorities in the national SDG review frameworks determined the functionalities and quality of the multi-level structured mechanism for the provision of local information, inputs and feedback. The engagement of local governments in all three VNRs of Benin further strengthened the systematic channels of communication between the different levels of governance, and ensured shared responsibility in the post-VNR follow-up processes. The Government of Benin has developed an SDG review approach that incorporates recommendations made by local governments. Consequently, this links particular local problems with an integrated effort to overcome them – e.g. providing women working in the agricultural sector with pesticides and access to technologies. The multiple tools and frameworks facilitating the contributions of local governments to the VNR reports were not a mere consultation formality. They enabled an informed dialogue, the outcomes of which influenced actual decision- or law-making.

Challenges

While Benin has established an integrated SDG planning and monitoring system, limited financial and human resources are preventing the realisation of more actions designed to improve the living standards and well-being of its population. There are usually only one or two persons at the municipal level working on SDG planning and monitoring. Another challenge is the lack of data disaggregated by multiple dimensions and geographic location or other characteristics, which is required in order to improve monitoring of the situation of the most vulnerable rural communities. Implementation of the 5-year local development plans requires additional resources in order to inform and train the newly elected municipal councils and administrations. In the past, national authorities and
ANCB partnered with civil society to leverage knowledge and resources to support local awareness-raising campaigns for municipal staff and citizens, but some of those mobilisation efforts might need to be repeated.

Success factors and lessons learned

The combined efforts of the government and ANCB to ensure a high degree of participation, complemented by capacity building, peer learning and awareness-raising measures for local governments, secured quality contributions and ownership of the review outcomes, and promoted transparency and accountability. The various locally driven reports and assessments that informed all three VNRs of Benin benefited from the autonomy entrusted in ANCB and municipal authorities to independently measure progress towards the identified priority SDGs in the respective territories. The openness of the national authorities to enabling operationalisation of the inputs and feedback provided by local governments through a structured mechanism, supported uptake of the follow-up actions and a shared understanding of the challenges different provinces face.

ANCB also organises regular competitions to identify and award prizes for the best practice examples for SDG localisation, which stimulates comparisons across municipalities, but also facilitates cross-learning and scaling-up of innovative practices that can be replicated across sub-regions.

Key partners

- Directorate-General for Coordination and Monitoring of the SDGs, Ministry of Planning and Development of Benin
- Association Nationale des Communes du Bénin (ANCB)

Links

- National Development Planning Commission (NDPC)
- CSOs Platform on SDGs

Success factors and lessons learned

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Bonn/Eschborn, 2021
BOLIVIA

Leveraging academic expertise to address data limitations in the SDG monitoring framework

Key considerations

Academia can utilise the necessary technical capacities and provide additional resources to establish a system that integrates different data sources in order to generate disaggregated indicators and information at all levels of governance.

Prior to the decision of the Bolivian Government to present its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) at the 2021 High-level Political Forum (HLPF), little progress had been made in identifying, systematising, and aggregating available data for the SDG indicator framework. A data mapping exercise facilitated by the National Statistical Institute of Bolivia on the availability of official statistics had been conducted, but it focused explicitly on the official sources of information generated by governmental institutions, indicating numerous data limitations. To help visualise a clearer perspective on this matter while supporting more evidence-informed VNR processes (Eventually, the Bolivian Gov-
The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in Bolivia, co-hosted by the Universidad Privada Boliviana (UPB) and Fundación SOLYDES, compiled the 2020 Municipal Atlas of the Sustainable Development Goals in Bolivia. Initially, the SDG Atlas focused on progress made towards the relevant SDG indicators in Bolivia at the municipal level, but later extended this to also cover also the federal and state levels. At first, the main focus was to provide a format-flexible and publicly accessible diagnostic tool that could help SDSN Bolivia identify sustainable development issues in the country, and inform priority-setting and specific actions. Given the data limitations of official statistics, the tool’s potential effectiveness in addressing some of the information needs, as well as producing data for the relevant SDG indicators in Bolivia, also became clear to the government. The tool combines different data sources, such as administrative data produced by relevant government agencies and ministries, national surveys, registries and geospatial data. During the exploration of the available datasets, the National Statistical Institute and other government institutions closely collaborated with SDSN Bolivia to support efforts to develop a tool that can enable systematic data collection and analysis. Although the government did not officially endorse the SDG Atlas, the National Statistical Institute has verified the results of the assessment.

The demand for information for the (postponed) 2021 VNR report, together with the willingness of the government to rely on the technical capacities, expertise and resources of SDSN Bolivia, have created an enabling environment for the generation of information and indicators by integrating different data sources. The process required collaboration between SDSN Bolivia and key national agencies, and other relevant stakeholders in order to legitimise the results of the assessment, identify the data gaps and understand the strengths and weaknesses of institutionalising joint SDG monitoring and reporting tools.

The lack of data and capacities, and the lack of provision for government mechanisms to engage with non-state actors, represented an opportunity for SDSN Bolivia to initiate a dialogue and frame a collaborative arrangement with key government institutions geared to a shared purpose – i.e. to improve the availability and quality of information and data, and thus strengthen the overall SDG follow-up and review process. The approach for involving a variety of state and non-state actors was carefully designed to ensure transparency, objectivity, collaboration and trust, support engagement with other stakeholders from early on and generate specific solutions to the technical challenges related to the production of reliable data. This allowed SDSN Bolivia to provide a basis for a more rigorous and comprehensive VNR process. The development of the SDG Atlas tool also conceptualised the process of leveraging knowledge and resources through partnerships that might encourage the government to institutionalise the engagement of different stakeholders in the official SDG review frameworks.

The potential political susceptibilities associated with building an engagement culture, and the lack of permanent working...
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review structures between the government and non-state actors, implied an extra challenge when attempting to operationalise a joint monitoring and diagnostic framework for the preparation of the first VNR report of Bolivia. In addition, while there is a large volume of general information available on the SDGs in Bolivia, the technical skills and thematic knowledge vary significantly. Therefore, SDSN Bolivia developed a diploma course on the economics of sustainable development at the Universidad Privada Boliviana that is open to students, practitioners or any interested stakeholders.

The approach of SDSN Bolivia, which is to work proactively with relevant government institutions towards shared priorities, shows that even if there are no institutionalised engagement structures, or if the prevailing political situation might reduce the scope for formal engagement of non-state actors, the latter should not shy away from getting involved and taking actions with regard to the SDGs implementation and review processes. Should it be difficult to interact directly with central authorities at
the national level, one possible medium-term option involving a step-by-step approach might be considered. The actors concerned might try to first engage with the sub-national or local levels, which are often associated with lower political or bureaucratic hurdles.

Key partners

- The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)-Bolivia/Universidad Privada Boliviana (UPB)

Links

- 2020 Municipal Atlas of the Sustainable Development Goals in Bolivia
COSTA RICA
The evolution of VNR opportunities for a more informed dialogue with the private sector

**Highlights**

- Since Costa Rica’s first VNR in 2017, incentives have been provided to the business sector and other non-state actors to enhance direct communication. These have mobilised stronger engagement by operationalising cross-sectoral partnerships to break up silo structures and leverage collective actions.

- For business representatives, the 2020 VNR process represented an opportunity for an impact-oriented dialogue with government institutions and a case for accelerating relationship building and formalising contributions.

- The Business Alliance for Development and other business associations in Costa Rica assumed a proactive role in institutionalising the long-term commitment of the private sector to SDG implementation. It did so with tools designed specifically to contextualise the creation of shared value and an evidence-driven monitoring system using factual information and complementary data on the activities of the private sector and their relevance to the SDG indicators.
**Background**

In 2020 Costa Rica prepared its second Voluntary National Review (VNR) on implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This facilitated deeper stakeholder engagement, including engagement of the private sector and business associations. The process of preparing the 2020 VNR was organised through a series of consultations with various stakeholders that are signatories of the National Pact for the Advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and are represented on the national Advisory Committee. The Committee brings together various state and non-state actors that are responsible for gathering information and inputs for the review process. Overall strategic coordination is supported by the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy, which acts as a Technical Secretariat for implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Costa Rica. Within the Advisory Committee the private sector is represented by the Business Alliance for Development (AED), an alliance of mostly large but also small and medium-sized enterprises and suppliers working to promote responsible and sustainable business models in companies. In addition to its active participation in the regular VNR consultations and meetings, AED was asked by the relevant government counterparts to support the SDG monitoring efforts with contextual information on the extent to which the business sector and its activities are related to a particular SDG indicator.

**Engagement approach**

Initially, AED was approached by the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses to provide information for SDG indicator 12.6.1 on the number of companies publishing sustainability reports. However, to offer more comprehensive information, and thus support more evidence-driven SDG review processes, AED conducted a supplementary target and indicator mapping exercise in order to understand the relevance and applicability of the SDGs among companies.

As a result, AED – in consultation with its members and partners – developed a web-based survey tool designed by students of the Systems Engineering School of Costa Rica’s Technological Institute. The survey tool consists of questions structured around specific issues, on which companies can provide information regarding their practices and contributions to the relevant SDGs. The results of the survey in the form of case studies were shared with relevant government counterparts for potential incorporation in the 2020 VNR.

There are also plans to ensure the periodic utilisation of such exercises, which will allow the private sector to provide additional measurements for the SDG monitoring system.

Using its network of companies and with the support of other business chambers, AED managed to collect more than 50 case studies and good practices. Although only one of the case studies was included in the final version of the VNR (mostly due to page limitations), this did provide a factual basis for continued dialogue with state authorities on how to further strengthen SDG progress tracking, and enriched the VNR discussions with the private sector. Representatives of AED and other business associations were included in the official delegation of Costa Rica to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF). The fact that the 2020 HLPF was held online mobilised even broader participation by the private sector of Costa Rica than in previous years. This allowed additional interaction space for learning and sharing experiences with other countries.

**Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement**

The initial stages of VNR preparation were not characterised by strong interactions with the private sector, as
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

the responsible government institutions faced difficulties in disseminating information on the consultation processes and the VNR structure. Nonetheless, the emphasis on engaging the private sector through activity-oriented and results-driven reporting did enhance the provision of diverse inputs and complementary data. AED and other business associations were officially included in the 2030 Agenda coordination and institutional arrangements, offering a formal mechanism to influence decision-making and participate in the SDG strategic planning processes.

Results and impact

The developed survey tool, and the direct involvement of AED and other business sector representatives in generating official and non-official statistics and information for the relevant SDG indicators, enabled some of the data gaps to be addressed. It also promoted more rigorous VNR reporting and provided fact-based evidence on the contributions of the private sector to SDG implementation. The VNR process initiated a broad discussion between the government and the business sector representatives on how to facilitate a data collection system that is structured, disaggregated and systematised, in order to inform more robust SDG monitoring.

AED is also planning to prepare an analytical study that will further assess the various case studies provided by companies during the VNR process. Post-VNR, AED organised a workshop with businesses and companies to discuss ways of further consolidating the engagement of the business sector in the national Advisory Committee and developing a collaborative work plan (roadmap).

Success factors and lessons learned

One of the key lessons learned is that the period of preparation and assessment (i.e. the customisation of the various inputs and information) should be long enough to enable the business sector and other stakeholders to prepare and tailor the specific support expected from them. Companies and businesses should take advantage of the tools and resources available at the World Business Council for Sustainable Development or the UN Global Compact, and use them to contribute more effectively to the national SDG review processes. It will be advantageous if companies and businesses do not exclusively work on an individual level (i.e. company by company), but within their sector (e.g. food production, tourism, finances, etc.). The business sector should take the opportunity to combine the pos-
itive incentives of a continued dialogue with government authorities, and do so not only to exert pressure concerning concrete follow-up demands. It should also conceptualise its support in order to foster shared co-benefits through sectoral and multi-sectoral partnerships with clearly defined collaborative objectives for jointly addressing the most critical weaknesses and problems in SDG implementation.

Another important success factor is working through results-oriented partnerships based on mutual trust and pro-activity, as opposed to confrontational engagement with the government (given the multitude of different and sometimes conflicting priorities due to the variety of interests among participating enterprises and stakeholders). Post-2020 VNR, AED – in partnership with the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy and the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office – took the initiative to identify the key elements required to move beyond purely consultative engagement and transform the contributions into actual measurable inputs. These include for instance developing tools that can support the creation of an SDG monitoring system based on integrated data sources from government institutions, civil society stakeholders and the private sector.

The VNR process gave AED and other business associations in Costa Rica an opportunity not only to get involved directly in decision-making through the Advisory Committee and associated mechanisms, but also to: (i) participate in technical discussions with the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, (ii) interact with the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy and other line ministries, (iii) leverage resources and partner with other non-state actors such as academia, and (iv) strengthen its position for influencing public policy formulation and implementation.

Key partners
- Business Alliance for Development (La Alianza Empresarial para el Desarrollo, AED)

Links
- World Business Council for Sustainable Development
- UN Global Compact

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Bonn/Eschborn, 2021
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

**Highlights**

- Since its creation in 1993, the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development has consolidated a broad system of multi-stakeholder partnerships (currently including over 100 member and deputy member stakeholder organisations), convened around shared goals and responsibilities and a trust-building culture.

- The 2020 VNR process in Finland was informed by inputs from various committees and levels of government, with direct contributions from sub-national authorities and citizens’ panels. This combined sources of information and complementary assessments, and reinforced interdisciplinary expertise in order to substantiate findings more robustly.

- Identifying common objectives among stakeholders with diverse agendas at the early stages of the SDG review processes is a fundamental element for conceptualising operational multi-stakeholder and multi-level partnerships and generating shared values.

- Balancing a bottom-up approach with distributed leadership within the National Commission on Sustainable Development solidified the engagement of various stakeholders. This allowed space for autonomy (among CSOs and local authorities) and, at the same time, a strong sense of affiliation and common purpose.

- The role of the Office of the Prime Minister in creating flexible and diverse multi-stakeholder co-creation processes and working arrangements fostered innovation and results-oriented discussions.

**Background**

Established as a result of the Rio Conference in 1993, the National Commission on Sustainable Development has continuously provided a broad-based platform for engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including government institutions, local authorities, civil society and youth organisations, academia representatives and the private sector in Finland. For nearly 30 years, the National Commission has been acting as a participatory forum to enable multi-stakeholder dialogue on sustainable development issues, priorities and challenges under the leadership of the Prime Minister. The Commission works closely with the Development Policy Committee, which is a permanent parliamentary and socially representative advisory body on development policy. The Committee is designed to enhance cross-sectoral coherence between
ministries, promote dialogue among stakeholders and further strengthen the effectiveness of development policy planning, monitoring and evaluation. It includes representatives from different parliamentary parties, non-governmental organisations engaged in development cooperation, the business community, researchers, agriculture and trade unions, and society at large.

The Prime Minister’s Office of Finland led the consultations and preparations for the 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR), engaging the National Commission on Sustainable Development and the Development Policy Committee, and organising multiple workshops, seminars and meetings. It also utilised the technical and substantive support provided by key advisory bodies, such as the Expert Panel on Sustainable Development, the 2030 Agenda Youth Group, the Statistical Commission and the Group of Sustainability Elders. In addition, three cities (Helsinki, Espoo and Turku) prepared Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). In so doing they contributed localised information to the national follow-up and review processes, promoted vertical collaboration and improved dialogue with citizens. The VLR of Espoo, for instance, was prepared through a highly participatory and inclusive process involving the entire municipal administration, key partners, non-governmental organisations and citizens. Together, they critically discussed the local development priority areas, challenges and where changes will be most needed.

### Engagement approach

For almost 30 years, diverse stakeholder representatives have jointly shaped and shared responsibility for the 2030 Agenda implementation, follow-up and review processes in Finland. This was thanks to the open and inclusive engagement approach of the National Commission on Sustainable Development, which aimed to facilitate participatory and representative decision-making as a basis for sustainable development planning, monitoring and reporting in the country. The Office of the Prime Minister also prepared an engagement plan and a roadmap for the development of the 2020 VNR. This fostered transparency of the engagement objectives, ‘rules’ and timelines, and allowed for the systematic generation, assessment and incorporation of feedback from stakeholders.

Apart from reflecting local progress through the VLRs and inputs from businesses, industry and finance, academia, youth organisations, regions and Sámi indigenous peoples, the 2020 VNR process and the report itself also included an independent civil society analysis of national progress towards the SDGs. This was attached to Finland’s VNR report next to an assessment provided by the Ministries and other authorities. Each of the SDG goals in the VNR was analysed by both the government and CSOs with one page each. This reflects the full trust and confidence which the government placed in civil society by providing them with space for their reflections on the SDG progress made. The civil society assessment provided the CSOs with a structured way to contribute to the national VNR, and thereby helped to assemble the di-

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**Finland’s Governance for Sustainable Development**

![Diagram](https://example.com/diagram.png)
verse views on reaching the common goal of advancing SDG implementation. In addition, a national follow-up and review system complemented the process by establishing a Citizens’ Panel. This encouraged more than 500 individuals to evaluate and comment on the progress towards sustainable development in Finland in relation to the available national SDG indicators, and provide a summary of the findings. The individuals conducted this complementary exercise through an online assessment tool with a scoring system from ‘bad’ to ‘good’, indicating to decision- and policy-makers which areas and priority issues needed to be improved. Results from the citizens’ assessments were included in the 2020 VNR report.

Another social innovation is the Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development. This functions as a long-term sustainable development strategy for Finnish society up to 2050, and also provides an online implementation tool Commitment2050. Any Finnish organisation can take part in the promotion of sustainable development by making a concrete and public commitment, and thus becoming part of the national community of sustainability pioneers. By 2021, over 1,000 organisations and about 1,500 private citizens have given their operational commitments to sustainable development.

Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement

A low hierarchy, relying mostly on bottom-up engagement approaches, has catalysed a co-creation process. This was achieved through varied and complementary multi-stakeholder initiatives based on mutual respect and flexible collaborative arrangements in which all partners could lead and facilitate relevant discussions. Joint analyses and regular channels for feedback have provided additional information and enabled stakeholders to play their accountability role in the 2030 Agenda review processes more actively. There is a long tradition in Finland of involving, consulting and co-leading a collaborative roadmap on sustainable development going beyond individual governments. Experience with this tradition has institutionalised multi-stakeholder partnerships focused on leveraging capacities and knowledge of a wide range of relevant stakeholders in order to reinforce mutually beneficial goals and better address complex challenges. The engagement modalities within the National Commission on Sustainable Development have managed to balance a high-level political commitment emanating from the Prime Minister’s Office, while at the same time encouraging different stakeholders to take on the role of ‘facilitators’. This has created and sustained a distributed leadership culture in the follow-up frameworks for the 2030 Agenda. The main principle for the engagement of stakeholders in the 2030 Agenda follow-up and review frameworks in Finland is based on the non-politicised understanding of the universal nature of the SDGs. Irrespective of party-political preferences, each of the engaged stakeholders commits to jointly define the principles, objectives and agenda for sustainable development, and is free to decide how they want to get involved and support the implementation and review of progress towards the SDGs.

Results and impact

The long institutional tradition of fostering participatory and inclusive decision-making on sustainability in Finland has progressively strengthened the partnering capacities and levels of engagement of various entities and stakeholder groups. This has enabled these actors to provide high-quality and relevant information, and thus favours more meaningful contributions to the SDG review processes. Multiple initiatives, centred around a partnership- and impact-oriented roadmap, and amplifying different methods of data assessment, thematic agendas and sources of information, have promoted a more rigorous and evidence-driven SDG review process at both national and sub-national levels.
Challenges

One of the main challenges has been to include as many stakeholder voices in the SDG review frameworks as possible, while avoiding any ‘pause’ in the dynamics of the discussions. The level and type of stakeholder engagement have also been based on prior experiences, as well as availability of the capacities required to channel resources into maintaining an equality of representation that includes smaller organisations and those with no particular experience with, or expertise on, the SDGs. Directly involving ordinary citizens in the follow-up and review mechanisms, as well as organisations with no interest in the SDGs but with the potential to help accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda, has also been challenging. This requires additional efforts focusing on targeted awareness-raising and information-sharing campaigns.

Success factors and lessons learned

The broad scope of activities of the National Commission, and the combined inter-institutional interactions with other government bodies (e.g., the development policy commission, parliamentary committees, etc.) and non-governmental expert panels, supported by flexible collaborative arrangements and frequent meetings and workshops, fostered a shared work culture united around common goals and a shared vision. Distributed ownership, where diverse stakeholders with aligned agendas share responsibility for implementation and monitoring of the SDGs, has been a critical factor underpinning the effectiveness and impact of the multi-stakeholder environment in Finland. Balancing explicit leadership with a degree of flexibility has mobilised partnerships and commitments to the sustainable development priorities in Finland, among both organisations and levels of government. Building consensus between diverging views in order to reach agreement, and delivering on shared targets, have been important components for advancing efficacy and achieving systemic monitoring and reporting on SDG progress. Embracing innovative approaches, such as the citizens’ panel to review SDG progress, and including the CSOs’ thematic assessments and the VLRs in the 2020 VNR report, has diversified participation and mainstreamed ownership among multiple stakeholders.

The case of Finland involved more than 500 ordinary citizens and diverse stakeholder groups. It also displayed a long history of collaborative experience in facilitating multi-stakeholder partnerships, and a shared vision and responsibility for the sustainable development agenda. It thus exemplified how participatory and inclusive 2030 Agenda follow-up and review processes can generate significant impact and complementary co-benefits for SDG implementation.

Key partners

- Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development
- City of Espoo, Mayor’s Office
- Finnish NGOs Development Platform ‘Fingo’

Links

- Development Policy Committee
- The VLR of Espoo
- Citizens’ Panel
- Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development
- Commitment2050

Case study: Finland » Effectiveness through low hierarchy in national SDG multi-stakeholder bodies
Highlights

- Business associations can play a greater role in the national institutional arrangements for the 2030 Agenda. This applies in particular to their coordination and facilitation role in disseminating information, collecting inputs, analysing feedback and summarising findings from the private sector in order to enable more rigorous and evidence-based SDG progress review.

- The Government of Georgia's openness to entrusting representatives from the business community to directly lead preparation of the private sector's report on its contributions to the SDGs, in conjunction with official endorsement and incorporation in the 2020 VNR report, reinforced more active participation by different companies and set an engagement standard for subsequent follow-up and review processes.

- The array of tools, resources, targeted activities and thematic knowledge, the availability of sector-specific assessments, and the involvement of business association representatives in the strategic decision-making frameworks, ensured that the latter have the appropriate means, access to information and time they require in order to plan ahead and provide quality inputs to the agreed outcomes of the SDG follow-up and review processes.

Background

Launched in 2016, the Global Compact Network Georgia (GCNG) is a local network for the world's largest corporate sustainability initiative – the UN Global Compact (UNGC). GCNG aims to promote the UNGC Ten Principles for human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among businesses operating in Georgia. As of May 2021, the GCNG includes 86 members, mainly from the private sector but also non-government organisations (NGOs), academia and government entities.

The main
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

PART 2

strategic directions through which GCNG supports SDG implementation are by: (i) raising awareness and providing education to private enterprises and interested stakeholders on corporate responsibility (CR); (ii) promoting public-private and multi-stakeholder partnerships, including through joint projects, and setting and maintaining standards; (iii) engaging in evidence-based advocacy at policy level; (iv) providing individual technical assistance to companies on CR; and (v) by leadership recognition and dissemination of good corporate practices specific to sustainable development.

GCNG and its host organisation in Georgia – the Civil Development Agency (CIDA) – has been actively working with the Government of Georgia to promote responsible business practices among companies and support implementation of the SDGs. At policy level, the organisation has provided recommendations for drawing up the Business and Human Rights Chapter of the 2018-2020 National Human Rights Action Plan.

In 2017, the GCNG, through its host organisation CIDA, was formally included in the national SDG Council of Georgia and its thematic working groups. These are responsible for measuring progress towards achievement of the SDGs, and are comprised of various stakeholders, including relevant sectoral ministries and government agencies, heads of UN agencies and international organisations, private sector representatives and civil society organisations (CSOs). CIDA/GCNG has been representing the private sector on the SDG Council, supporting multi-sectoral dialogue and engagement with enterprises on the SDG implementation and review process.

Engagement approach

During the 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) of Georgia, CIDA/GCNG was approached by the government with a request to prepare and summarise the contributions of the private sector to the various SDGs in a narrative report to be attached to the VNR. The report on the Private Sector Contribution to Georgia’s 2020 Voluntary National Review on Sustainable Development Goals, and the process supporting the deliberation of its content, was the first such collaborative exercise directly involving the private sector in the SDG review process in Georgia. The report combined both quantitative and qualitative information obtained from previous thematic research, assessments and survey questionnaires from large, medium and small-sized companies. This indicated a growing interest and engagement of the business community in implementation of the SDGs in Georgia. More than 1,000 companies provided inputs and feedback during the data gathering phase. These included good practice examples and highlighted specific contributions. CIDA/GCNG and the research companies ACT and Innova collected and analysed the received data and information, coordinated the consultations and wrote the final report. The report was reviewed by the consulted companies and presented at the SDG Council for cross-validation by the government and other key stakeholders.

Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement

CIDA/GCNG played a central role in promoting cross-learning and awareness-raising among enterprises, as well as informed dialogue between the government and the business community in Georgia. The continuous engagement of CIDA/GCNG in the national institutional
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review arrangements of the 2030 Agenda ensured the early involvement in decision-making and clear understanding of the inputs and contributions expected from the private sector and how these will be used to inform the outcomes of the SDG review process. The strong prior experience in facilitating public-private and multi-stakeholder partnerships in response to the interests of a diverse group of companies, and integrating relevant SDGs in operational plans and activities, enabled GCNG to connect its network members to the national follow-up and review processes. The Government of Georgia’s openness to entrusting CIDA/GCNG to lead preparation of the report on the private sector’s contributions to the SDGs, and thus increase the evidence base and analysis for the VNR report, fostered shared ownership of the process and its results, and strengthened the continual support for joint SDG-related initiatives with the business community.

The UNGC and GCNG have developed a number of tools to assess the specific contributions of the private sector and assist companies and other interested stakeholder groups in integrating priority SDGs in business plans and measuring their impact on the SDGs. This gives companies access to useful resources. The specialised knowledge and different levels of engagement (among the network members and within the business community, national authorities, CSOs, media representatives, etc.) supported by formal inclusion in the 2030 Agenda coordination mechanisms allowed CIDA/GCNG to access up-to-date and relevant information. They also enabled it to plan ahead and provide quality inputs to the SDG review, while clearly focusing efforts on the areas applicable to the private sector.

Results and impact

The development phases of the private sector’s report and its alignment with the VNR frameworks facilitated more focused and impact-oriented interactions between the government and the business community. It was the first nationwide initiative directly enabling a wide range of companies to participate in the SDG follow-up and review processes with factual information, case studies and experience from practices supporting SDG implementation. The engagement approach, and the openness of the government to encouraging the provision of feedback and to endorsement of the private sector’s report, have set an engagement standard for subsequent follow-up and review processes. The substantial inputs provided by companies and synthesised by CIDA/GCNG in a narrative report also helped the government to better understand the perspectives of the private sector, and reaffirmed that it can play an important role in measuring SDG progress jointly. The mix of evidence and diverse contributions supplied by the business community helped make the 2020 VNR of Georgia more comprehensive and robust, and reflected the shared commitment to advancing progress on the SDGs.

Challenges

Ensuring the provision of comparable and consistent data from the private sector in relation to the applicable SDG indicators in Georgia was challenging. GCNG is therefore working on the development of an SDG compass website to contextualise the data requirements for companies when reporting on the SDGs. To avoid placing any additional burden on the responsible government institutions, GCNG will analyse the collected information and produce a periodic summary report. The Government of Georgia has been highly proactive and transparent in including diverse stakeholder groups in the thematic consultations and discussions, but this also meant that some of these meetings were less relevant to the scope of work, potential impact and contributions to the SDGs by the private sector. Topic-based meetings (e.g. on the green economy, sustainable production and finance, etc.) will be more effective in further mobilising the business commu-
nity. The 2020 VNR process started with a slight delay, which also meant less time available for preparation of the private sector’s report. Priority should also be given to collaborative initiatives to raise the awareness and knowledge of small and medium-sized companies on CR, sustainability and the enabling policy and normative mechanisms. This will ensure conceptual clarity, added value and relevance of the SDG framework for business activities. The lack of fiscal incentives is another challenge for mobilising stronger commitment to the SDGs among companies. In practice, there are also issues with implementation and effective enforcement of the law, and a major step forward in this direction will be the adoption of the sustainability standards in government procurement processes. These will oblige companies to disclose information and provide more detailed reporting on their impact on the SDGs.

Success factors and lessons learned

The use of particular tools, such as questionnaires with specific criteria to gather information or identify gaps, and the research efforts to analyse and interpret the multitude of contributions and inputs from the business community, facilitated by CIDA/GCNG, created a trustful relationship with the government and with other stakeholders. The methodological reliability, alongside the regular multi-stakeholder interactions, supported the credibility of the findings and the swift endorsement of the private sector’s report by the SDG Council. Although the responsiveness of the SDG Council can be further strengthened, the government’s openness to directly engaging the business community in the outcomes of the review process has motivated more companies to get involved and provide support in the form of information, case studies and activities to progress evaluation of the SDGs. Three things have galvanised more active participation: (i) the array of tools and engagement methods promoted by CIDA/GCNG to provide tailored technical assistance to companies on CR or sustainability; (ii) the focus on awareness-raising and education on the SDGs among operational staff and managers, including organising courses and providing additional resources to various interested enterprises and stakeholder groups under the Corporate Sustainability Academy; and (iii) the delivery of recognitions and awards, such as the Corporate Responsibility Award or the SDG Pioneers. These are important elements in clarifying the expectations and information that the private sector should provide in order to support more rigorous and evidence-based SDG progress reviews. The involvement of media to showcase good practices and different business activities through which companies support SDG implementation has been an additional incentivising factor for maintaining and stimulating private-sector engagement in the medium to long term.

Key partners

- Global Compact Network Georgia
- Corporate Responsibility Award ‘Business for SDGs’
- Civil Development Agency (CIDA)

Links

- National SDG Council of Georgia
- Private Sector Contribution to Georgia’s 2020 Voluntary National Review on Sustainable Development Goals
- Corporate Sustainability Academy
- Corporate Responsibility Award
- SDG Pioneers
GHANA

CSOs platform alignment with national 2030 Agenda institutional arrangements

Key considerations

Drawing lessons from the previous multi-stakeholder experiences with implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Ghana, an interactive and multi-directional process that involves a wide range of stakeholders, committees and platforms from different levels of the government, sub-national authorities, civil society organisations (CSOs), the private sector, academia and development partners has been set up. This is designed to align the critical elements underpinning the participatory arrangements needed to support the transformational nature of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
In 2019, Ghana prepared its first Voluntary National Review (VNR), bringing together different government institutions and diverse stakeholder groups to enable a more objective, balanced and accurate progress review. 2030 Agenda implementation and follow-up is coordinated by the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC). The NDPC serves as a Secretariat for the SDGs Implementation Coordinating Committee (ICC), and works in close collaboration with other policy and technical inter-ministerial committees, advisory bodies, various non-state actors and the CSOs Platform on SDGs in Ghana. The CSOs Platform on SDGs was established in 2015 to ensure coordination, enable partnerships and leverage knowledge and expertise among CSOs in order to advance SDG implementation. The Platform includes more than 300 local and international CSO members, clustered into different thematic sub-groups responsible for each of the 17 goals. The Steering Committee of the Platform serves as the focal point for engagement between the CSOs, the private sector and government on implementation and national review of progress towards the SDGs. Representatives from the Platform are also included either as observers or permanent members on the strategic and technical inter-ministerial committees, including in the ICC and the High-level Ministerial Committee on the SDGs.

Given the lessons learned from the MDGs era in building cross-cutting partnerships to break down work...
in silos, the NDPC and the CSO SDG Platform have aligned plans and activities in order to put together complementary resources and capacities to increase the systematic impact and efficiency that emanate from the partnerships. Working in such an open way allowed relevant authorities and stakeholders to enhance collective ownership of the SDG review processes. It also laid the ground for joint citizens’ sensitisation initiatives, workshops and trainings for media representatives, including the provision of regular briefings and press-releases.

At the start of the VNR process, the government shared the terms of reference (ToR) of the VNR report with CSOs, UNDP and other development partners for comments and feedback, and the CSOs shared their ToR for the Shadow Report to relevant government counterparts. Key findings from the Shadow Report were reflected in the VNR. Furthermore, members of the CSOs SDG Platform, alongside representatives from the private sector and traditional authorities, were included in the official delegation of Ghana to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), and were involved in Ghana’s presentation. They also organised a joint side event. The CSOs and other stakeholders also contributed to the VNR content with written comments, case studies and good implementation practices, in addition to supporting the development of a web portal to catalogue various SDG initiatives and relevant actors.

Since the availability of data disaggregated by category and dimension is key to determining the extent and depth of SDG progress assessment, government authorities in cooperation with stakeholders are exploring how non-official data can be validated and approved in order to complement official statistics. This will help to fill specific data gaps and enable more rigorous SDG monitoring.

Utilising the previous MDG experiences and scaling-up partnership frameworks, the multi-stakeholder mechanism in Ghana has consolidated broad-based engagement and various contributions to SDG progress review. A significant advantage of the collaboration has been the burden-sharing among national authorities and stakeholders in order to tackle complex problems and challenges by leveraging capacities, skills and resources. Involving non-state actors in the 2030 Agenda strategic and technical commissions and committees, and integrating outputs from the stakeholders’ SDG platform to the official follow-up processes, increased not only the accountability and transparency of the decision-making, but also the effectiveness of the working modalities. The direct engagement of stakeholders in the national strategic planning frameworks informing the SDG implementation discourse, as well as in the more operational technical coordination arrangements through the
NDPC, further strengthened the active participation of stakeholders, and improved relationships between actors.

The 2019 VNR report was developed through an inclusive, cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach, which combined resources for collecting and assessing diverse consultative inputs. This has contributed significantly to maintaining a very high level of commitment among stakeholders, the sharing of responsibility for the identified next steps and follow-up actions, and the leveraging of plans and activities to deliver more sustained results. Although one of the main challenges – limited human and financial resources – remains, the decision to closely coordinate the capacity building, trainings and citizens’ awareness-raising measures to avoid overlaps enabled the available resources to be allocated more efficiently by focusing efforts on actions that will potentially have the greatest impact overall.

Key partners/Links

- National Development Planning Commission
- CSOs Platform on the SDGs

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Key partners/Links

- National Development Planning Commission
- CSOs Platform on the SDGs
ICELAND

High-quality scientific research can inform SDG indicators

**Highlights**

- Utilise qualified researchers and available university expertise to help develop a more robust SDG monitoring system.
- Ensure high-quality data and information generated and peer-reviewed by multi-disciplinary experts.
- Leverage expertise and knowledge with experts assigned to different SDG indicators, and complement the identified data gaps with thematic research.
- Facilitate interactive e-surveys and questionnaires applied through participatory engagement, in order to inform the set of SDG indicators.

**Background**

In 2017 the Government of Iceland, in cooperation with the Institute for Sustainability Studies at the University of Iceland, completed a joint exercise in mapping the data availability and expertise for the applicable SDGs in Iceland. An SDG technical working group comprising university professors, academic researchers, senior students and government experts was tasked to identify and evaluate the accessibility and quality of relevant data. The experts of the working group assessed the quality of the identified data for each of the applicable indicators through a survey, which was based on the self-assessment template of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) Steering Group on the availability of statistics for the global SDG indica-
The analysis showed that data was collected fully or partially in Iceland for 98 indicators out of the 137 applicable indicators. The main output of the expert work was a matrix listing the available data and sources in relation to the global SDG indicator framework. One by-product was a list of experts connected to the relevant SDG indicators. The data and expert mapping exercise paved the way for establishing the national SDG monitoring system and preparing the first Voluntary National Review (VNR) of Iceland in 2019.

**Engagement approach**

The first step in the process was to map university and academic experts and to link them to the prioritised SDGs, targets and indicators, thus *utilising the existing knowledge at university level*. The technical working group members reached out to the potential experts through e-surveys, in order to understand the related technical challenges in the availability and quality of data for the relevant SDG indicators in Iceland. After some offline and online reminders, the majority of the contacted experts were able to provide feedback for most of the applicable SDG indicators, or at least point out other relevant experts who might be in a better position to address the questions. In the end, around 100 experts, mainly academics but also some from government institutions, provided inputs to help elaborate the initial SDG indicator matrix. Once the ‘groundwork’ for the data mapping exercise was completed, the indicator matrix was shared and discussed through several rounds of expert consultations, which included other non-state actors.

The second task that the technical working group received from the Icelandic Government was to review and propose a methodological approach for prioritising the SDGs in Iceland based on pre-defined criteria in terms of how achievable the targets are, the availability of data and linkages to national and local development priorities.

**Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement**

The data mapping and SDG prioritisation exercises were the first joint attempts of government institutions and academia to undertake a comprehensive multi-expert baseline assessment on the availability and quality of data for the relevant SDGs in Iceland. The e-surveys, which were part of the identification processes, and engaging with the other organisations and researchers that would support the survey results, provided an opportunity to foster dialogue, develop the initial set of indicators and understand the available expertise for the national SDG monitoring framework. The engagement of the universities and researchers showcased how, with limited resources and time constraints, academia can have a major influence in expanding the active involvement of key expert stakeholders (beyond what is available exclusively within the government), and provide a factual foundation for a more operational and evidence-based follow-up and review process. The fact that the technical work was mostly led by academic and university staff enabled a more robust mechanism that would encourage other academic experts to provide feedback and accept technical responsibility for the individual indicators or complement the identified data gaps with thematic research.
Results and impact

The identified set of indicators and prioritised targets were fed into the SDG working group, which is chaired by the Prime Minister’s Office and is responsible for coordinating preparation of the first VNR. Statistics Iceland was able to use the indicator matrix to design the publicly accessible information portal on the SDG indicators. The participatory data collection methods from both official and non-official sources not only enhanced access to data and information, but also ensured collective ownership of the results and paved the way for joint initiatives to raise public awareness of the SDGs in Iceland.

Challenges

Although the main challenges were associated with the lack of data for the relevant SDGs, it has been also difficult to identify, contact and collect the diverse views of the experts in order to elaborate a comprehensive set of indicators in terms of availability and quality of data. Getting the contacted experts to answer the inquiries was also particularly challenging and time-consuming, and required continuous follow-up.

Success factors and lessons learned

The initial SDG data assessment in Iceland was led by national research institutions in conjunction with national authorities, through an officially institutionalised technical working group that secured the legitimacy and credibility of decision-making on the final list of indicators. The joint identification and bringing together of different university experts ensured the objectivity of the process, promoted dialogue and guaranteed the continuity and usability of the outcomes in the subsequent VNR phases. Although the SDG data mapping exercise in Iceland did not engage students, the involvement
of master and PhD students, and more generally researchers and academics interested in the topic, will allow those responsible to quickly leverage and utilise the available expertise and strengthen SDG monitoring based on high-quality assessments and multi-disciplinary consultations. One key lesson learned has been to enable and encourage the deeper involvement of students as a critical factor for utilising resources (especially when there are time and human constraints) and addressing some of the data gaps with qualitative analyses and thematic research.

**Key partners**

- **Sustainability Studies at the University of Iceland**

**Links**

- **Publicly accessible information portal**

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Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

INDIA
The crucial role of community CSO networks in LNOB assessments

Highlights

- In the absence of institutionalised CSO involvement in the SDG implementation and review mechanisms in India, a highly organised and well-prepared CSO space is crucial to ensure that the voices and concerns of the most vulnerable and marginalised communities are included in the SDG monitoring and reporting processes.

- With limited official statistics and data disaggregated by sub-population group, CSOs can play an important role in facilitating more fact-based SDG reviews, and increase the visibility of certain sub-groups by presenting community-generated, real-time, accurate and reliable complementary information and assessments.

- The previous experiences, contextual expertise and local community networks of CSOs united around a shared vision provided the necessary impetus for formulating a joint partnership. This encouraged a co-facilitation process with the government to inform the development of the 2020 VNR report of India, and in particular its LNOB Chapter.

- The SDG review frameworks and the VNR preparation process mobilised a broader civic engagement and ensured the sustained focus on the furthest behind groups in India.

Background

Since its establishment in 2004 the Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA), a
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

PART 2

campaign alliance of civil society organisations (CSOs), has been actively engaging with various national development review processes in order to promote the government’s accountability for its national and international commitments. With more than 3,500 members and partners across India, including local grassroots movements, international non-governmental organisations, thematic networks and forums, the WNTA has been conducting independent annual assessments of government performance. The campaign initially measured progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and tracked the performance of the Five-Year Plans/the National Development Plans of India. More recently it has been objectively reviewing and monitoring progress with implementation of the leave no one behind (LNOB) pledge in conjunction with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Given the complexity and multiple forms of discrimination which the poorest and most marginalised communities in India face based on their gender, low caste status, ethnicity, minority religious identity and other characteristics, the WNTA has been undertaking periodic assessments through the 100 Hotspots initiative. This provides a snapshot of the situation of the socially excluded and vulnerable communities in India vis-à-vis realisation of the SDGs. In addition, the WNTA carries out an annual progress evaluation of the development commitments as stated in the national development plans and review of the government’s electoral promises in the Citizens’ Report on the Promises & Reality. These CSO-driven initiatives aim to support the government in ensuring more inclusive national follow-up and review processes based on the leave no one behind principles of respect for human rights. This includes a focus on the most vulnerable and furthest behind groups in the country, such as women and children, Dalit and tribal people, migrant workers, LGBTI communities, religious minorities, persons with disabilities, etc. The essential work of mainstreaming the LNOB commitments in national SDG reporting has been also reflected in the WNTA’s stand-alone evaluation report on SDG progress. This captures the perspectives and efforts of CSOs to advance the relevant targets for socially excluded groups, and promote non-discrimination and equity in national policy-making. The independent CSOs’ SDG review report complemented the development of the 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) of India.

Engagement approach

During the 2020 VNR report preparations, the National Institute for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog, the nodal government body main-streaming the SDGs in India, approached the WNTA CSO network with a request to co-facilitate the consultations and information gathering for the LNOB Chapter of the VNR. The UN in India, coordinated by the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office (UNRCO), supported the process of consultation, documentation and finalisation of the civil society report. A series of joint national and sub-national events was organised to foster direct dialogue on the needs and priorities of the most vulnerable groups at community level, going beyond national averages. The consultations reflected a wide range of insights and in-
puts from more than 1,000 CSOs and community-based organisations. These provided additional evidence for analysing the factors and finding solutions for those invisible sub-populations affected by intersecting deprivations and discrimination. These consultations and meetings were supplemented with a contextual analysis of complementary non-official data (through the 100 Hotspots initiative and the independent CSOs SDG review report). They generated substantial information on the socioeconomic status and structural disadvantages which the furthest behind groups in India face. These combined efforts provided a solid factual base on which to mainstream the LNOB principles in the VNR report, and overcome the serious data limitations and lack of data disaggregated by sub-population group in order to track and reach those furthest behind.

WNTA members were also actively engaged in regional SDG forums, and were included in the official delegation and recording of the 2020 VNR presentation of India at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF).

Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement

The LNOB Chapter of the VNR report was developed through a co-creation process in which the WNTA CSOs network played a clear facilitation role. This helped to step up the engagement of broader stakeholder groups, thus increasing the diversity and quality of the inputs and the subsequent outcomes. The involvement of community-based organisations, and the lead function of WNTA in facilitating the information sharing, consultation, collection of community feedback and overall assessment encouraged participation and strengthened the empowerment of citizens by giving voice to the marginalised and vulnerable segments of society. The co-creation process jointly fostered with the UNRCO and government ensured responsiveness towards the various contributions provided by the non-state actors. At the same time it enabled the utilisation of multiple information sources and complementary CSO assessments in order to better inform the SDG progress review.

The development of the LNOB Chapter, and more generally the role of the CSOs in the SDG review frameworks in India, illustrate that it is also possible to have inclusive interactions on an equal footing with stakeholders in a setting of rather informal practices, engagement rules and relationships – even in the absence of any specific or structured follow-up and review mechanism with a formal role for the CSOs. By co-sharing responsibility for the LNOB Chapter and reflecting key findings from the CSO thematic reports and assessments in the VNR, the government recognised the contextual experiences of the CSOs. It also acknowledged that these inputs, derived from extensive community discussions and feedback from local networks and stakeholders, can support more evidence-based reporting processes in compliance with the LNOB principles and the national development commitments.

Civil society organisations held consultations with 16 vulnerable communities including women, children, young adults, homeless and urban poor, farmers, Dalits, tribals, nomadic communities and religious minorities, to name but a few. Given the geographic spread of the country and the high proportion of the population accounted for by each vulnerable group, multiple consultations were held by each LNOB group across the country.

Results and impact

The involvement of the WNTA network in the VNR report was important for examining and understanding the key barriers preventing the most vulnerable and marginalised communities from participating in the national development agenda. It gave additional visibility to the problems faced by those communities, and increased the informed dialogue among government representative and stakeholders on how to fill gaps in essential data and data disaggregated by sub-population group, and discuss options for using community-driven data and non-official statistics in reporting. The participatory process of informing the LNOB Chapter enriched the provision of factual inputs regarding previously overlooked sub-groups living in extreme poverty and facing multiple forms of discrimination. The structured engagement of the WNTA/CSOs in the official SDG review mechanisms with people-centred data, thematic analyses and community-level outreach promoted direct communication with national authorities on the need to take targeted actions on the pledge to leave no one behind.

Post-VNR, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, WNTA supported the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in measuring the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable and marginalised groups in India, using community-driven data to inform specific policy recommendations. WNTA also plans to assess progress on the identified next steps and follow-up actions of the 2020 VNR.
Challenges

In addition to the lack of disaggregated data, one major challenge is the ad-hoc role of CSOs in the national SDG review frameworks. The absence of institutionalised stakeholder engagement mechanisms makes it difficult for the CSOs to determine how to get involved, what kind of inputs and feedback are expected, and how to facilitate transformative joint partnerships with relevant authorities in order to more efficiently leverage resources and expertise, and address the identified bottlenecks systematically. There are many administrative hurdles which hamper the consistent and increased engagement of CSOs and their meaningful engagement with the government, which would include the regular provision of information to ensure that interventions, policies, monitoring and reporting processes are informed by the voices and perspectives of the furthest behind groups.

Success factors and lessons learned

The combination of prior experiences, local community networks and thematic expertise with pro-poor and vulnerable groups enabled WNTA/CSOs to co-design a space for multi-stakeholder interactions, participation and collaboration in order to consolidate mutual trust and a shared vision for accelerating progress towards the national development priorities and the SDGs. That said, institutionalisation of the CSOs’ engagement in the national SDG follow-up and review frameworks in India remains a ‘work in progress’. VNR preparation drew on a wide array of stakeholder contributions, thus strengthening downward accountability. The existence of efficiently organised and well-prepared civic systems of multiple stakeholders united around a common purpose maximised the credibility, legitimacy and usability of the inputs and assessment outcomes.

One key asset for the co-creation process in generating evidence for developing the LNOB Chapter and the VNR report has been the ability of the WNTA organisations to work as reliable partners to the government, and provide a wider space for carrying out activities to examine, empower and enact changes to support more inclusive and accountable SDG implementation. The UNRCO also played an important facilitative and supportive role in the entire process.

Key partners

- Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA)

Links

- 100 Hotspots initiative
- Citizens’ Report on the Promises & Reality
- WNTA’s stand-alone evaluation report

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Bonn/Eschborn, 2021
The role of small towns and municipalities in national SDG planning and monitoring frameworks

JAPAN

Key considerations

Regardless of the scope of available resources (human and financial), and with the support of national authorities and through partnerships with other stakeholders, Shimokawa town in Japan has proactively participated in the national SDG follow-up and review framework by contributing actual information, local experiences and ideas.

In 2018, Shimokawa, a small town in the north of Japan with a population of about 3,200, prepared the first city-level progress report on implementation of the SDGs in close
cooperation with the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES). This collaborative partnership was a result of the ‘SDGs FutureCity’ Initiative supported by the Government of Japan, and the selection of Shimokawa town as an SDG model project to promote integrated planning and enable the active participation of local authorities in the national SDG review framework. Along with four other pilot city-level assessments, the preparation of the Voluntary Local Review (VLR) of Shimokawa town and the participatory approach to engage local stakeholders and citizens, and align with national development priorities, has set a standard for sub-national SDG monitoring and strengthened the mechanisms of local accountability that can subsequently be replicated by a larger group of cities. This will encourage cross-city comparisons, horizontal cooperation, peer learning and exchange of good practices among municipal authorities. With IGES support, a further 19 local reviews have been planned. These will explore in greater depth the diverse local contributions, and gather inputs from sub-national stakeholders on local mechanisms and practices relating to sustainable development.

Similar to other countries, Japan faces challenges with regard to the availability of sub-national data. Therefore, Shimokawa town, alongside other cities, is working to develop a set of localised indicators that are adapted and specific to each territory and context. Such a contextualised approach will enrich the national SDG monitoring processes by incorporating local factors, and foster discussions and interpretations of the collected data that are particular to the different situations at the sub-national level. Shimokawa town has already elaborated a set of specific local indicators through interactive workshops organised by Shimokawa’s SDGs FutureCity Committee. The committee comprised 15 citizens and 15 local officials. Its purpose was to incorporate citizens’ perspectives into indicators, and gather ideas/opinions to better inform SDG implementation, monitoring and reporting in ways that are specific to the town’s circumstances and needs. Under the patronage of the mayor of Shimokawa, the town administration has also been promoting the SDGs through various initiatives to help local citizens better understand how local actions can contribute to SDG achievement. So far, Shimokawa has drawn up the ‘Shimokawa SDGs Map’ together with young local officials, the SDGs FutureCity Committee, and university students from Keio University.
Municipal representatives from Shimokawa town and other cities, as well as a wide range of other stakeholders (government agencies, civil society organisations, experts, private sector representatives, international organisations, etc.), have participated in the process of revising the ‘SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles’. This is an initiative chaired by the Office of the Prime Minister, which is designed to promote a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to SDG implementation, monitoring and reporting. In addition, the Government of Japan has been supporting various awareness-raising activities and capacity building measures, and has been allocating resources designed to increase the engagement of local authorities. At the same time, it has encouraged the mobilisation of partnerships with and among sub-national representatives and other stakeholders. This is designed to enhance diversity and knowledge-based participation, and ensure representative decision-making at all levels in the national SDG mechanisms. This enabled Shimokawa town and other municipal authorities to provide inputs and contribute to the revision of the SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles, thus promoting structured dialogue on the role and responsibilities of local governments in achieving the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. Although local governments have only been involved on an ad hoc basis in the preparation of the 2021 Voluntary National Review (VNR) of Japan, the findings of the city-level SDG baseline assessments will inform the VNR report.

Participatory methods for conducting local level SDG assessments are very important for accelerating progress on the SDGs, but pose challenges for local governments (more so for small cities and rural municipalities) which may not have the required resources, capacities and...
relevant information. To overcome these constraints, the collaborative partnership between Shimokawa town and IGES leveraged skills and expertise, aligned priorities and, with targeted support provided by national authorities, showcased how small towns and municipalities can play an even more significant role in promoting inclusive SDG progress evaluations with locally driven information and incorporating individual citizens’ perspectives. Building on the pilot experiences of the city-level assessments, IGES is examining the options which can operationalise the process and provide structured mechanisms to ensure that local achievements and results are recognised and included in the national SDG progress monitoring and reporting frameworks.

For this purpose, IGES is developing customised guidelines for preparation of the Voluntary Local Reviews, and plans to support more cities and municipalities in conducting city-level SDG assessments and identifying relevant indicators that are specific to each territory. The engagement of Shimokawa town in the national SDG institutional arrangements and similar platforms, which involved providing contextual information and localised progress assessment results capturing diverse local stakeholders’ and citizens’ ideas, fostered peer learning among local governments. It also set a performance criterion that encourages other cities and municipalities to reinvigorate their contributions to the national SDG monitoring and reporting processes.

Key partners
- Shimokawa Town, Hokkaido, Japan
- Sustainable Forest Future Community ‘Ichinohashi’ Bio-Village of Shimokawa town
- Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)

Links
- Progress report on implementation of the SDGs
- Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)
- SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles

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Bonn/Eschborn, 2021
KYRGYZSTAN

Ensuring gender accountability in the follow-up and review processes

Highlights
- The first VNR process in Kyrgyzstan enabled civil society organisations representing vulnerable and marginalised groups to be officially engaged in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. This fostered better transparency of the review frameworks.
- Although the COVID-19 pandemic situation had negatively impacted the overall quality, level and diversity of stakeholder engagement, it did not prevent stakeholder groups from accessing information, participating in virtual consultative meetings, making recommendations and influencing decision-making.
- The Forum of Women’s NGOs of Kyrgyzstan consistently and systematically engaged in the VNR and related processes, serving as an effective accountability mechanism between government institutions and their constituencies.

Background
In 2020 at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York, Kyrgyzstan presented its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The VNR preparation process was informed through the active participation of a variety of stakeholders, including human rights and civil society organisations representing the voices of the vulnerable and those left furthest behind groups in the country.
The Forum of Women’s NGOs of Kyrgyzstan took part in the thematic consultations and provided substantial inputs for preparation of the VNR. The participatory and inclusive approach towards VNR preparation in Kyrgyzstan was also reflected at the HLPF presentation, with multi-panel delegates from the government, civil society and youth groups.

The VNR consultative process in Kyrgyzstan is the first such catalytic engagement initiative. It involves a holistic outreach approach that is rather new for the country. This is designed to actively involve the broadest possible representation of key stakeholders, to create shared responsibility and leverage expertise, and to accelerate progress towards the SDGs that will guarantee the continuity and inclusiveness of the follow-up and review process.

At the same time, the Forum of Women’s NGOs was coordinating preparation of the first Shadow Report. This was designed to complement the official VNR report, and provide an alternative perspective to the national follow-up and review process. The Shadow Report has not been formally finalised and endorsed by the government. However, the consultations accompanying its preparation did provide additional entry points for joint CSOs advocacy initiatives and partnership engagements. It also drew the attention of authorities to particular areas where bottlenecks are occurring, and strengthened downward accountability towards marginalised populations. The preparation of the Shadow Report helped to holistically and independently review several goals, and the process itself became a learning space in which to review SDG implementation in Kyrgyzstan, and better understand complex development challenges as well as the methodologies used to collect data for the SDG indicators. It also facilitated partnerships, etc. Based on the knowledge sharing and learning that took place during preparation of the Shadow Report, CSOs strengthened their inputs to the indicators and discussed the need to institutionalise the engagement of CSOs in the SDG implementation and review mechanisms. Recommendations from CSOs identified during preparation of the Shadow Report were submitted to the official VNR working groups.

The Forum of Women’s NGOs of Kyrgyzstan also conducted a series of meetings to address the trend towards underinvestment in women’s rights and gender equality, and support realisation at that national level of the global SDG indicator 5.c.1, which promotes public allocations for gender equality and women’s empowerment. Furthermore, the Forum of Women’s NGOs of Kyrgyzstan organised discussions on the adoption of a multi-stakeholder partnership approach in planning and implementation of the SDGs, including the lack of policy coherence caused by weak multi-stakeholder partnerships.

**Engagement approach**

The VNR process in Kyrgyzstan built upon the existing MDG mechanisms, with the aim of further strengthening the formal inclusion and engagement of various non-state stakeholders in the national review of progress towards the SDGs. To institutionalise ‘bottom-up’ monitoring and review mechanisms, a Coordination Commission was established that reported directly to the Vice Prime Minister. The Committee had five working groups, which were divided into three thematic areas (economic, social and environmental dimensions) and two cross-cutting areas (governance and security, and monitoring and evaluation). It was entrusted to guide the engagement process during VNR preparation and draft the report. The working groups were comprised of relevant experts from ministries, agencies and state institutions, plus civil society representatives and UN observers. The groups held workshops and consultative meetings with various stakeholders in order to collect, analyse and
consolidate data, feedback and inputs. The Forum of Women’s NGOs was formally included in the working group reviewing the social dimensions of the SDGs.

During preparation of the Shadow Report, the Forum of Women’s NGOs of Kyrgyzstan organised thematic consultations with various stakeholders at sub-national level in order to discuss the integration of SDG5 on women’s rights and gender equality into local development strategies and plans. This led to specific recommendations on women’s rights and gender equality being integrated into local development strategies and plans. The VNR of Kyrgyzstan included only one of these recommendations on SDG 5 – ‘introducing a course of women’s rights and gender equality as a compulsory subject in training programmes for civil servants’.

**Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement**

*Open and regular information and documentation sharing ensured the transparency of the VNR process. This enabled the Forum of Women’s NGOs, and the CSO representatives in general, to engage more meaningfully in the discussions concerning the SDG progress reviews, as well as to provide complementary data and verify contested information. During the official VNR consultative meetings the CSOs made multiple recommendations that helped to increase the quality and diversity of the inputs and expand the evidence base for the subsequent stages of the drafting process. Results from CSO projects and surveys directly informed relevant chapters of the VNR report, with the Forum of Women’s NGOs actively contributing to the content development and progress review of SDG 5. One of the concrete inputs was on the need to report in the VNR on indicator 5.c.1, which tracks public allocations for women’s rights and gender equality issues in national and local budgets.*

At the same time as actively engaging in the official VNR working group discussions, civil society organisations were also busy meeting and coordinating their feedback and inputs to the VNR.

**Results and impact**

Out of eleven official (written and oral) recommendations provided by the Forum of Women’s NGOs, only one was incorporated in the final version of the VNR. Nonetheless, the inputs and critical overview generated by the CSOs during the preparation process did influence the content of multiple chapters, and thus the overall credibility and robustness of the VNR report. The official involvement of the Forum of Women’s NGOs and a wide range of other CSOs in the VNR inter-institutional working groups ensured the inclusiveness of the review process. This highlighted the challenges, successes and experiences in advancing the SDGs for the most vulnerable sectors of Kyrgyz society. The ability to provide non-official data and the practice of encouraging regular feedback during the various VNR phases motivated stakeholders, strengthened direct dialogue with government institutions, and informed shared actions to address the jointly identified and most pressing societal issues.

**Challenges**

One of the major challenges is the general lack of resources in the national follow-up and review pro-
cesses in the country. There are neither government nor donor-specific funds available to support the engagement and capacity building of civil society organisations, especially those representing the voices of vulnerable and marginalised groups and groups in rural and remote areas. Although the VNR engagement process has been characterised by the participation of diverse stakeholder groups, this has been mostly concentrated in the capital, thus failing to properly engage with stakeholders and groups at the sub-national level. Recognition of the inputs and views provided by non-state actors in the VNR has been uneven, and therefore the Forum of Women's NGOs plans to conduct an in-depth analysis in order to understand the reasons for incorporating the stakeholders' diverging views. The exact role of the CSOs in the post-VNR process, including the involvement of the private sector and wider representation of non-state actors in the SDG coordination and decision-making mechanisms, is still unclear.

**Success factors and lessons learned**

The VNR process captured the perspectives, needs and progress of and for the vulnerable groups in Kyrgyz society, and in particular women. This is a critical factor not only in informing policies relating particularly to these groups, but also in promoting the development of new statistics, enhancing participation and building greater inclusiveness at the national level. The strong leadership by the government and the official inclusion of non-state actors in the inter-institutional VNR working groups maximised the public space for voicing concerns, debating challenges and influencing the sustainable development discourse of Kyrgyzstan. The proactive engagement in related advocacy initiatives, the close strategic cooperation with like-minded organisations, the participation in regional and global forums and the SDG outreach programme of the Forum of Women's NGOs of Kyrgyzstan all made it possible to enhance the quality of VNR involvement and related contributions.

**Key partners**

- Forum of Women's NGOs of Kyrgyzstan
MALAYSIA

The role of academia and universities in co-revising and co-validating VNR content

**Highlights**

- Since the first VNR report of Malaysia in 2017 there has been a significant increase in the institutional opportunities for non-state actors to participate in, contribute to and influence the outcomes of the SDG review process.

- For the academic sector in Malaysia, the 2021 VNR preparations represented an opportunity for more informed dialogue with the government and other stakeholders and a possibility of participating in multi-stakeholder initiatives organised around shared goals and priorities.
The broad and formal inclusion of academics and other stakeholders, also for co-revision and co-validation functions of the final version of the VNR report, yielded shared ownership of the process. This is a key driver for ensuring the proper follow-up and uptake of the identified challenges and next steps.

JSC-SDSN Malaysia is planning to develop an analytical tool that will combine official statistics with proxy indicators and non-official data. This will enable the fact-based assessment of progress towards the SDGs and interpretation of findings to substantiate projections and trends.

Background

In 2021, Malaysia will present its second Voluntary National Review (VNR) at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF). The coordination of the report and engagement of relevant stakeholders has been facilitated by the Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister’s Department, which chairs the multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder technical working committee (TWC) responsible for VNR preparation. Various government institutions, UN agencies, stakeholder groups and alliances are represented on the TWC, including, among other academic networks, the Jeffrey Sachs Center on Sustainable Development at Sunway University (JSC). The JSC is also the local host for the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in Malaysia.

Even though multiple stakeholders were invited to provide inputs during the first VNR report of Malaysia in 2017, there were limited opportunities for an inclusive and participatory review of the report before its final release. The 2021 VNR process did allow for such an interactive and multi-directional engagement approach. This was facilitated by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and involved a broad range of relevant stakeholders, with several meetings held to discuss the draft version of the report and consolidate feedback before its finalisation. The drafting, including inputs and feedback collection as well as the analysis, is again tasked to external consultants, but this time with a clear engagement strategy supported by the government, which is designed to solicit diverse contributions from non-state actors.

Engagement approach

Under the leadership of the Economic Planning Unit, multiple thematic meetings, seminars and discussions with different stakeholder groups have been organised to gather consultative inputs and provide guidance on the content of the VNR. After each round of consultations, the facilitating external consultants summarise and analyse the received inputs based on their quality, reliability and relevance for inclusion in the VNR report. JSC-SDSN Malaysia, together with other members of the TWC, are jointly responsible for the revision and validation of the final version of the VNR report before its official endorsement by the government.

Besides actively participating in the government-led consultations and providing comments and feedback during the varied VNR phases, JSC-SDSN Malaysia has engaged in partnership activities facilitated by the civil society sector. One of these partnerships supported the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the SDGs (APPGM-SDG) in finding practical solutions to pressing socio-economic or environmental problems and preparing joint project proposals for
which government funding could be mobilised. Moreover, JSC-SDSN Malaysia has supported and participated in initiatives to raise awareness on the SDGs, advocacy campaigns (e.g. on deforestation and biodiversity, promoting sustainable city models, etc.) and consensus-building activities on future development priorities.

Although the 2021 VNR report will be informed predominantly by official data and statistics produced by the Department of Statistics, JSC-SDSN Malaysia has been building its own SDG dashboard, which includes proxy indicators and non-official data in addition to the Department of Statistics’ data. The collected data and information will be analysed by leading experts and an aggregated summary will be developed for each of the goals. The SDG dashboard will be an interactive tool, allowing the visualisation of statistics, including disaggregated data at the sub-national level, and dissemination of results. The tool will enable users to interpret the results of the analytical process in a publicly accessible format. They will then be able to track performance on specific SDG targets, supplemented with scenario assessments of the interventions required to steer development priorities onto the right path for 2030. JSC-SDSN Malaysia has discussed the SDG dashboard plans with the EPU and the Statistical Department, in order to ensure the consistency of the methodology to be applied, and establish whether the SDG dashboard statistics and thematic assessments can address some of the limitations of the current set of official data and projections.

Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement

since Malaysia’s first VNR report, a significant shift towards more inclusive and participatory methods of collecting inputs and feedback has been promoted. This involves directly engaging various stakeholder groups in the SDG review processes. JSC-SDSN Malaysia and other non-state actors were then able to play an active role in shaping the VNR debates and to co-revise and co-validate content, with a focus on actual achievement of the SDGs. The decision of the Malaysian autho-
ties to include stakeholders not just to provide inputs, but also to formally review the various stages of the report, strengthened transparency, and thereby fostered wider acceptance of the committee’s decisions. The contribution of academia was particularly beneficial, as this group of stakeholders has valuable information, data and global best practices that could enrich the discussions on the various SDG-related issues highlighted in the report. The committee provided regular access to information, documents and updates on the VNR progress, and proactively facilitated the exchange of ideas and viewpoints during the preparation process.

Results and impact

The proactive engagement of JSC-SDSN Malaysia in SDG priority-based partnerships, bringing together diverse stakeholders around shared problems, reinforced the legitimacy of designing actionable advocacy and outreach campaigns that have influenced the uptake of relevant policy initiatives. The plans of JSC-SDSN Malaysia to continuously support a more factually-oriented SDG review process with practical tools and analytical methods to resolve data gaps and enable specific analysis of trends and projections, improved its credibility with relevant government institutions and partners.

Challenges

The political implications associated with the electoral cycles of the government, and alternating priorities and approaches, are among the critical factors that underpin the longer-term inclusiveness and effectiveness of the SDG review framework. The lack of sufficient resources to respond to the multitude of ideas and feedback on specific problem areas, and to generate solutions to accelerate progress on the SDGs, poses an additional challenge for non-state actors. The traditional approach of academia, which usually uses scientific language that targets a very narrow audience, has not gained the necessary support of society at large. Nor has it enabled society to understand complex development problems. Despite the fact that different stakeholders have been included in the national follow-up and review mechanisms, SDG implementation remains the sole responsibility of central authorities and administrative elites in the capital, while ordinary citizens have limited information, knowledge or opportunities to be involved in these processes.

Success factors and lessons learned

One key lesson learned from Malaysia’s first VNR report has been the need to ensure a greater inclusiveness of the SDG review process that is sensitive to the various contributions and skills that non-state actors can deliver. This resulted in the active participation of academia and civil society in the process. The leadership of the EPU promoted a trust-building culture in the working sessions of the TWC, where relevant stakeholders and government representatives interacted on critical issues and limitations in the progress review. A significant advantage has also been the openness on the part of the government to seek the co-revision and co-validation of the final VNR report before its official endorsement.

Key partners

- Jeffrey Sachs Center on Sustainable Development at Sunway University/SDSN Malaysia

Links

- Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister’s Department

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Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review practices to local realities

**Highlights**

- The meaningful engagement of sub-national authorities in Mexico in the follow-up and review frameworks of the 2030 Agenda showcases the advantages of having an innovative strategic vision and holistic approach to identifying and prioritising multiple entry points by which to inform, consult, collaborate with, build capacities of and empower federal state and municipal representatives.

- Under the leadership and guidance of the Office of the 2030 Agenda of the Ministry of Economy, mutually reinforcing frameworks have been consolidated and aligned so as to directly involve local authorities in the national institutional arrangements of the 2030 Agenda. At the same time these will also strengthen sub-national mechanisms.

- Without incentives geared towards the needs and interests of sub-national authorities and stakeholders, it is difficult to ensure long-term commitment, support and ownership. Such incentives may include both financial and non-financial support, capacity development and training programmes.

- Developing culturally sensitive activities is an important means to customise support, adjust implementation of the 2030 Agenda to the diverse local realities and facilitate the creation of space for citizens’ engagement and empowerment of local populations at risk of being left behind. Such targeted activities will be part of the platform for local action (2021 – 2022), which includes three components: i) social mobilisation activities for citizens at the municipal level; ii) educational programmes on 2030 Agenda governance for municipal authorities; and iii) programmes for schools, museums and the private sector at the municipal level. Additional activities will include the development of ‘Biocultural Heritage Territories’, which seek to promote a culturally appropriate path to sustainable development.

**Background**

Since Mexico’s second Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2018, the role, responsibilities and levels of engagement of local authorities in the national institutional arrangements and review frameworks of the 2030 Agenda have been strengthened to enable the systematic, well-struc-
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review development activities in Mexico. The Nat-2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which leads and coordinates the multi-stakeholder National Council (Conferencia Nacional de Municipios de México) are included on a rotational basis in the National Review (VSR), in order to obtain a more contextual perspective on the ‘state of the art’ at sub-national levels. In 2021, Mexico will present its third VNR at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF). This will further consolidate the active engagement of local authorities and the adoption of diverse forms of participation, such as: involvement in the national 2030 Agenda institutional mechanisms; the co-chairing of thematic committees and working groups; support for the provision of localised data to inform a more comprehensive review of SDG progress; assessment and incorporation of inputs from the voluntary sub-national and local reviews, and the inclusion of sub-national representatives in the official delegation to the HLPF, including support for the organisation of and participation in side events.

Engagement approach

Six state representatives, two representatives of the states that preside over the Alianza Federalista and the CONAGO (Conferencia Nacional de Gobernadores), six municipal representatives, plus one representative from the INAFED (Instituto Nacional para el Federalismo y el Desarrollo Municipal) and one representative from the CONAMM (Conferencia Nacional de Municipios de México) are included on a rotational basis in the multi-stakeholder National Council, which leads and coordinates the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development activities in Mexico. The National Council connects the different branches and levels of government, involves other stakeholders from civil society, the private sector and academia, and is responsible for gathering, measuring and reviewing inputs and data to monitor and follow-up on SDG progress in the country. The Secretariat of the National Council is the Office of the 2030 Agenda. Previously attached to the Office of the Presidency, it is now located at the Ministry of Economy.

Municipal authorities and state delegates are also involved in the thematic working groups and committees, and thus directly operationalise sub-national views and contributions to the national follow-up and review processes. Bearing in mind the multitude of local realities in the federal states and municipalities, and the diversity of educational backgrounds and spoken languages of the participating municipal and state representatives (there are 364 languages and variants, besides Spanish), a range of targeted actions are planned under the platform for local action (2021–2022). These include: raising awareness through downloadable spots for local radios; working with media outlets to create audiovisual educational materials that will offer a step-by-step approach to SDG localisation in a language that is accessible to the non-specialist citizen; downloadable programmes for the local private sector, museums and schools; an SDG citizen mobilisation programme at the municipal level. Besides the platform, the Office of the 2030 Agenda also plans to offer a culturally appropriate development model for indigenous peoples based on the creation of ‘Biocultural Heritage Territories’ (given that the platform will not reach many indigenous communities due to the lack of universal internet access and linguistic diversity). Currently, the Office of the 2030 Agenda is evaluating options for extending the involvement of indigenous community radio broadcasters and museums for various C4D SDG outreach activities with a bottom-up approach. There are also plans to work on SDG capsules with TV Educativa (the Ministry of Education’s TV channel) to complement the 2030 Agenda compulsory booklet for 6th graders launched in 2020.

The Office of the 2030 Agenda is also present in all 32 states through the coordination of the 2030 Agenda offices at state level (Órganos de Seguimiento e Instrumentación, OSI). This is designed to foster better connectivity between the different layers of government and enable a more integrated approach which aligns the state and municipal mechanisms with the national 2030 Agenda institutional arrangements. Furthermore, in cooperation with United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), federal state and municipal authorities are planning to pilot a Voluntary Sub-national Review (VSR), in order to obtain a more contextual perspective on the ‘state of the art’ at sub-national levels (both state and municipal).
In addition to the previously submitted three Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs for Mexico City, Oaxaca and Yucatán), seven more VLRs in four municipalities and three states will be prepared through a ‘Help Desk’ and hosted at the platform for local action, with support provided by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. Both processes will complement the preparation of the 2021 VNR with localised data and context-specific assessments.

Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement

Since the 2018 VNR, the engagement strategy of the Government of Mexico has utilised active sub-national involvement and meaningful contributions from local authorities to enable more comprehensive and evidence-based SDG review processes. Combining universal principles of engagement with context-specific initiatives to inform, consult, collaborate and eventually empower state and municipal authorities has increased the number of actors, discussions and the quality of inputs that will inform the preparation of the 2021 VNR. Relevant national authorities have made systematic efforts to continuously inform and consult sub-national stakeholders using a clear communication strategy that takes account of the diverse state and municipal realities. In conjunction with targeted capacity-building support to strengthen these stakeholders’ knowledge and competences for effective participation in the national follow-up and review frameworks, this has institutionalised their long-term interest, and thus their commitment to SDG implementation. Over time, the independence entrusted to sub-national authorities to provide direct contributions to the VNR and other national SDG planning, monitoring and reporting processes has consolidated the expertise of sub-national governments and their self-confidence in becoming pro-actively and autonomously involved, also in regional and global initiatives on implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Given the growing interest and activity of state and municipal authorities in showcasing their diverse experiences at regional and global SDG forums, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated a programme to facilitate their international involvement and meet the need for intensified cross-country knowledge sharing. This included publishing a book that provides suggestions and tools for designing and implementing strategies and public policies to internationalise the work of local authorities.

Results and impact

The step-by-step phases of the engagement modalities designed and developed by the Office of the 2030 Agenda in close cooperation with relevant state and municipal representatives enriched the informed interactions. They also improved dialogue between the different levels of government and generated complementary quality inputs to better inform the VNRs and other SDG review processes. The two-way involvement of local authorities in the 2030 Agenda institutional arrangements, combined with support for the development, consistency and alignment of state and municipal-level mechanisms, ensured an integrated multi-level effort to address systemic and context-specific problems which recognised the tangible contributions local authorities can make to SDG implementation and moni-
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review

Case study: Mexico » Adapting engagement practices to local realities

of localised statistics and disaggregated data to further support the development and local stakeholders – is planning with INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía) experts, partners and mechanisms has been an important lesson learned for capturing the rich diversity of stakeholder opinions, ideas and contributions to the follow-up and review processes.

Challenges

Constructing meaningful engagement mechanisms that can produce quality contributions from the sub-national levels is an extensive and complex process. The complexity and nuances of the available capacities at the state and municipal levels is one of the main constraints requiring clear action planning, training and resource considerations. With 364 indigenous languages and variants, diverse development gaps and variable internet access in the sub-national regions, there has been little room for the Office of the 2030 Agenda to pursue a one-size-fits-all engagement and awareness-raising approach. This highlights the importance of planning the necessary time and allowing for adjustments to the engagement activities depending on the local situations. The lack of data disaggregated by geographic location is another limitation in securing more effective SDG progress monitoring. Consequently, the Office of the 2030 Agenda – together with the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) experts, partners and local stakeholders – is planning to further support the development of localised statistics and disaggregated data.

Success factors and lessons learned

One key success factor for the effective engagement of the sub-national levels has been the holistic concept utilised by the Office of the 2030 Agenda. This covers the full scope of the roles and responsibilities local authorities can play and have in national SDG review frameworks. It also incorporates and adapts many universal and good practice principles, and pursues a carefully defined and systematic engagement approach that seeks to inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower meaningful participation at both national and sub-national levels. The favourable legal and policy environment, and the degree of alignment between national and sub-national planning and budgeting, are further key enablers that have mobilised strong engagement. Combining financial resource allocations with training opportunities and possibilities to share experiences and learning with peers in other countries have been critical incentivising factors. A significant advantage has been the cooperative atmosphere created, which acts as a driver for states and municipalities to inspire each other. Balancing national leadership with the independence of locally-driven alliances and mechanisms has been an important lesson learned for capturing the rich diversity of stakeholder opinions, ideas and contributions to the follow-up and review processes.

It is also important to continuously strengthen the vitality of the strategic and operational vision of national authorities with specific plans to further develop and design culturally appropriate approaches to sustainable development. These include awareness-raising activities using local radio, and media outlets, and partnering with cultural institutes and indigenous groups in order to disseminate accessible information on the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, in what is perceived as a two-way process of consultation and communication with jointly constructed outcomes. Finally, the inclusion of local authorities in the official delegation to the HLPF will not only support peer learning and knowledge management, but also enhance the inclusiveness of, and commitment to, the subsequent stages of the SDG review process.

Key partners

- Office of the 2030 Agenda
- Ministry of Economy
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Links

- Book: suggestions and tools for designing and implementing strategies and public policies to internationalise the work of local authorities
NEPAL

Capitalising on the engagement of CSOs in national follow-up and review to accelerate SDG localisation

Key considerations

The collaborative structures and participatory methods used to reflect the civil society perspectives and recommendations for the 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) of Nepal provided an opportunity to align operational plans and activities for accelerating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) localisation process in Nepal.
The Nepal SDGs Forum is a platform of networks of non-governmental actors, local and international civil society organisations (CSOs), private sector representatives, cooperatives, media, UN agencies, bilateral and multilateral development partners and major groups and stakeholders which jointly support implementation of the SDGs in Nepal. The Nepal SDG Forum and its members are also actively engaged with the government and are officially represented in the National Planning Commission (NPC) and other government thematic committees responsible for institutionalising a robust SDG implementation, monitoring and reporting mechanism.

During the 2020 VNR preparation process, the Nepal SDG Forum participated in the e-meetings and e-discussions (most of which were remotely organised due to the COVID-19 situation) in order to gather information from its constituency groups and provide comments and inputs to the SDG review process. The CSOs also reflected critically on the missing or misinterpreted information by conducting an independent parallel assessment to measure progress on the SDGs using supplementary data. Key conclusions from the CSOs’ assessment were included in the VNR report, and summarised in a comprehensive complementary report of Nepali CSOs reflecting the perspectives of non-state actors on SDG progress. CSO representatives were also included in the official delegation of Nepal to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), and presented the main findings of the complementary CSO report as part of the VNR presentation.

The outcomes of the VNR process further demonstrated the need for a broad engagement of stakeholders that have attained expertise in the review frameworks, and an inclusive coordination mechanism as a means to address the lack of official national and sub-national data and accelerate progress on the SDGs at sub-national levels. The high-level political support provided through the 2030 Agenda institutional arrangements has been important in generating the strategic value of the national review process, but has fallen short of fostering co-creation processes that support sub-

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**Case study: Nepal » Capitalising on the engagement of CSOs in national follow-up and review to accelerate SDG localisation**

**TYPE**
- thematic case

**STAKEHOLDER GROUP**
- civil society organisations

**THEME**
- Capitalise on the national follow-up and review processes by mobilising strong support from civil society organisations for defining collective actions to accelerate SDG localisation.
Engaging non-state actors and local authorities in SDG follow-up and review national reviews. Measuring sub-national SDG progress should include both formal local collaborative mechanisms for enabling representative, transparent and accountable review frameworks, as well as ad-hoc processes for reflecting experiences and mobilising local partnerships. Thus, to combine evidence from multiple governance levels and substantiate the SDG review findings with local perspectives, the CSOs utilised contributions from their local networks and structures to support more objective monitoring and to enrich the VNR consultations. One of the gaps identified during the VNR process was the need to strengthen the role of local authorities and promote locally driven voluntary reviews in order to accelerate SDG localisation. To carry out these activities, the network of CSOs in Nepal plans to partner with relevant national and local authorities, in order to combine competencies and resources and address more effectively sustainability issues that are particular to specific sub-national regions.

Participatory and inclusive ways of conducting the VNRs, and more generally national SDG progress follow-up and reviews, are important for capturing diverse views and enabling the integration of different datasets and sources, but are challenging to carry out in practice. In Nepal, some CSOs lack the necessary capacities and resources, and with limited financial support, especially following the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the need to re-prioritise the development needs in the country, the entry points for in-
Increasing the quality of CSO engagement in the SDG review processes are narrowing down. An additional burden is the enabling policy environment, which is hampering the meaningful engagement of non-state actors. Although the lack of data is a common challenge in SDG monitoring, the possibility for non-state actors to provide additional information and disaggregated data represents an opportunity to mobilise diverse stakeholder groups in order to support a more factual basis for the follow-up and review processes. With the formal involvement of different stakeholders in the 2030 Agenda institutional arrangements, CSOs and other non-state actors have convenient entry points to influence strategic decision-making, and thus participate in the formulation of joint solutions to address these issues.

Key partners
- Nepal SDGs Forum
- NGO Federation of Nepal

Links
- National Planning Commission (NPC)
- Report of Nepali CSOs

Case study: Nepal » Capitalising on the engagement of CSOs in national follow-up and review to accelerate SDG localisation
Mobilising private sector contributions through practice-oriented SDG reporting tools

**Highlights**

- The Impact Barometer Tool provides companies with a workable, cost-free and ready-to-use reporting framework to measure in a consistent and comparable way the contribution of the private sector to SDG implementation.

- The engagement process during the development phase of the tool for prioritising the applicable SDGs and selecting the indicators prompted broad-based and participatory consultations with a diverse range of stakeholders beyond the government and the private sector. This enhanced dialogue and consensus-building among different actors.

- The tool supplements the national 2030 Agenda follow-up and review of progress with complementary (non-official) data owned by the reporting businesses, thus securing ownership and uptake of the reported results.

**Background**

Given the growing need to contextualise and provide clear guidelines for the engagement of the private sector in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda, CSR Consulting (a Polish company specialising in strategic consulting for corporate social responsibility and sustainable development) in cooperation with companies, academia and civil society organisations (CSOs) established the Impact Barometer Tool under the honorary patronage of the Pol...
ish Government and with the substantive support of Statistics Poland. The Impact Barometer consists of six SDGs, consultatively identified as the most relevant to the Polish businesses, and thirty adapted indicators to support the private sector in measuring and reporting on their contribution towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda. The tool is one of the enabling components of the 17 Goals Campaign, which is designed to mobilise more broad-based and inclusive engagement of the private sector and other stakeholders in the SDG follow-up and review processes.

Launched in 2017, the 17 Goals Campaign is an initiative under the patronage of the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology. It aims to facilitate cross-sectoral partnerships among a wide range of actors from the private sector, national authorities, academia and civil society, in order to more effectively and coherently support the implementation and review of progress towards the SDGs in Poland. As a nationwide discussion on the role of the Polish businesses in implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the 17 Goals Campaign has become a starting point for the private sector to begin work on including the SDGs in their strategies and practices.

**Engagement approach**

To provide businesses with tangible tools to measure their impact on the SDGs, a multi-stakeholder expert task force identified and prioritised the most important SDGs for the private sector. It also sequenced

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**How to use the tool in 6 steps**

1. **plan your activities**
   - to improve your results next year!

2. **analyze the data**
   - check your strengths and weaknesses, compare your company’s performance against the market’s benchmark

3. **show off**
   - your company’s performance in a non-financial report or on the web

4. **calculate ratios**
   - and check your contribution to the 2030 Agenda

5. **download the tool**
   - from the 17 Goal Campaign

6. **send results**
   - so that we can calculate the collective output of Polish businesses

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*Source: Barometr wpływu | Kampania 17 Celów (kampania17celow.pl)*
a list of thirty customised indicators to be included in the Impact Barometer, for which companies can provide complementary (non-official) data. To ensure wider acceptance and ownership of the prioritised goals and indicators, and enable standardised reporting amongst companies, Statistics Poland partnered with CRS Consulting and organised multiple thematic and cross-cutting consultations, workshops and expert meetings with various stakeholders involved in the 2030 Agenda implementation and review frameworks. The purpose of these activities was to finalise the set of indicators and operationalise the Impact Barometer tool.

Principles and dimensions of quality of engagement

The early involvement of the private sector, the expert support provided by Statistics Poland and the inclusive and participatory approaches used in the public consultations on the conceptualisation and utilisation of the Impact Barometer generated inputs from a diverse range of stakeholder groups. It also ensured ‘buy-in’ of the outcomes (i.e. the prioritised SDGs and the set of applicable indicators) amongst companies and stakeholders, as the latter were more actively invested in the discussions leading to the development of the reporting framework. The fact that the private sector was the driving force behind the tool, and the quick technical leverage with relevant government institutions and other stakeholders, enhanced the transparency and accountability of the peer review process during identification and prioritisation of the relevant goals and indicators. It also underlined the importance of shared-responsibility in decision-making for ensuring uptake and sustainability of the tool. Mutual trust, knowledge sharing and the quality of the relationships between all involved stakeholders were identified as important factors for ensuring that the methodological approach of the tool is robust and credible, and facilitating the potential integration of the results from the businesses’ reporting into the national 2030 Agenda follow-up and review processes.

Results and impact

The Impact Barometer was finalised in 2019. Due to the COVID-19 situation it has not yet been possible to pilot it widely. It is expected that at least 30 corporations will report on their contributions towards realisation of the SDGs in Poland in 2021. CRS Consulting, in consultation with Statistics Poland, will regularly provide a synthesis results report reflecting key findings from the individual reports submitted by companies. The aim is to encourage companies to take actions, also through broad partnerships, in those areas where the results show that they need improvement. Opportunities for integrating the findings into the preparation of the next Voluntary National Review (VNR) are also being explored.

The Impact Barometer tool was presented at the 2019 UN SDG Summit as a short film illustrating how representatives of stakeholder groups got involved in the development of the tool at the 2020 UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, the 2020 European SDG Summit and the Virtual Networking Days of Partners for Review (P4R) in 2020. The tool is hosted on the 17 Goals Campaign interactive webpage, alongside additional information regarding the workshops and consultations and thematic publications.

Challenges

One of the challenges is to involve as many medium and large companies as possible in the reporting ini-
This will support the factual basis and fill in any gaps in SDG information that is currently unavailable through the official statistics. Balancing the objective and subjective data collected through the tool has also been challenging. Consequently, CRS Consulting and Statistics Poland are planning a joint results analysis exercise to further validate the reported information. Statistics Poland is also planning to complement the Impact Barometer findings with some relevant background information on the macroeconomic situation of the whole country. The potential inclusion of a diverse range of participating companies in terms of size, scope of work and impact on the SDGs is also a challenge, hence the set of proposed indicators may not be applicable to all companies. Depending on the interest of the private sector, and in view of the increasing number of participating companies, there are plans to gradually extend and redefine the list of indicators, in order to allow flexibility and adaptations based on the scope and the areas of business activities. There is also a need to further develop/ elaborate standard definitions for the indicators so that concepts are clearly understood by different companies consistently.

Success factors and lessons learned

The Impact Barometer tool was developed through broad and public consultations not only amongst interested companies but also with government institutions, academia and civil society representatives. The project sometimes required going beyond traditional roles and adopting more flexible approaches, e.g. Statistics Poland’s role in the initiative was that of a substantive partner as opposed to its conventional role of data provider. The process of identifying and prioritising the goals and impact indicators was carried out under the leadership of relevant government institutions and in collaboration with a wide diversity of stakeholder groups, thus fostering broad-based ownership and more robust methodology. The approach used to define realistic benchmarks as a starting point for engaging as many companies as possible in order to review their impact on the SDGs should ensure the sustainability of the tool in long-term.

The government’s endorsement and the technical support it provided in response to the growing interest by the private sector in contextualising and adequately measuring their contributions towards SDG implementation have been important factors for the legitimacy of the tool. Clear communication and an engagement strategy on the results of the planned next steps to synthesise the reporting by individual companies and elaborate standard definitions for the indicators might increase the likelihood of uptake by a larger number of companies and outline multiple additional entry points through which different stakeholder groups can influence and potentially endorse the results.

Key partners
- Statistics Poland
- The 17 Goals Campaign
- CRS Consulting
SOUTH AFRICA

Ensuring CSO SDG reporting informs official review findings

Key considerations

CSO working groups can lead the thematic consultations on SDG implementation and preparation of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in order to help raise awareness among stakeholders, facilitate consensus on future development priorities, identify capacity gaps and scale-up the institutionalisation of multi-stakeholder processes and platforms for engagement.

Since 2006, the African Monitor has been monitoring the impact of development policies at a grassroots level in South Africa. This has included bringing together local non-state actors, ensuring the objectivity of national development review processes, promoting dialogue with relevant government authorities and collecting supplementary data and citizens’ perceptions, in order to enable more rigorous analysis of progress on development commitments. The African Monitor coordinated the CSO SDG Working Group, providing inputs and feedback and leading thematic consultations with non-state actors and partners for the development of South Africa’s 2019 VNR.
To ensure inclusive reporting and a holistic approach to assessing sustainable development, African Monitor, as well as being involved in the VNR, also supported the CSO SDG Working Group in preparing the 2019 Citizens’ Report of South Africa. The group’s work involved measuring progress on the implementation of six priority SDGs under the theme ‘Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality’. This parallel exercise fostered partnerships and cross-sectoral learning among diverse stakeholder groups. Different task teams comprising CSO experts on the respective topic were responsible for scoring (using the Toolkit for a People’s Scorecard on national delivery of the 2030 Agenda), assessment and reporting on the selected SDGs. The findings of the Citizens’ Report complemented the VNR process, and the report itself was validated by the government (multiple government agencies and officials participated in a three-day validation workshop). This reaffirmed the legitimacy of the exercise and the relevance of its outcomes for official SDG monitoring. Representatives of CSOs were included in South Africa’s delegation to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) and its VNR presentation there.
The independent CSO assessment of priority SDGs and its alignment with the VNR process, supported by the coordination function of the African Monitor, were important factors in enabling greater scope for direct influence on policy formulation. Regular communication designed to keep relevant authorities informed on the progress of the CSO SDG review and its preliminary findings added to the validity of the report and its eventual endorsement by the government. Although on an ad hoc basis, the government did promote active participation during VNR preparation by assigning specific roles and responsibilities to the CSOs involved. These included for instance leading and coordinating specific thematic consultations, and complementing the quality of the report with additional information and review findings. The VNR process and the independent CSO assessment initiated a dialogue between key government actors and stakeholders on how to

i. address the lack of progress on particular development priorities,

ii. explore opportunities for collecting, analysing and using non-official data and information for SDG monitoring purposes, and

iii. further strengthen the accountability mechanisms by building a government-led multi-stakeholder platform mobilising different groups and actors.

It should also be noted that government officials have indicated their interest in a joint roadmap for the next VNR process to ensure increased civil society participation.
One of the main challenges for institutionalising a broad-based engagement of non-state actors in the SDG review mechanisms is the lack of explicit government self-initiative to activate participation by various stakeholders. The government engages with CSOs and other non-state actors in response to demands or requests received. It does not assume leadership proactively, and promote deep interactions among different stakeholders in order to leverage expertise and facilitate a shared working culture in partnerships.

The structural issues of lack of data and capacities are further aggravated by the limited resources available to/provided by the government to CSOs, which poses constraints in terms of the diversity and inclusiveness of the non-state actors involved in the SDG review frameworks. The absence of a long-term multi-stakeholder mechanism makes the CSO planning processes on how to meaningfully engage less predictable. It also affects the overall effectiveness and outcomes of the engagement.

Key partners

- African Monitor

Links

- toolkit for a People’s Scorecard on national delivery of the 2030 Agenda
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