



**United  
Nations**

Department of  
Economic and  
Social Affairs

**Voluntary Local Review Series: Stakeholder engagement  
Division for Sustainable Development Goals**

**26 October 2020**

**SUMMARY**

The first thematic workshop of the DESA Voluntary Local Review Series was held on 26 June 2020 from 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. EDT virtually by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) of United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). The workshop focused on stakeholder engagement in the context of SDG implementation and the Voluntary Local Reviews. The peer learning workshop was attended by over 80 participants representing cities, regions and national governments as well as United Nations entities and other international organizations and consisted of a panel discussion, breakout group discussions and a report back session.

**Mr. Amson Sibanda, Chief of the Capacity Building and National Strategies Branch** at DSDG gave the opening remarks of the workshop that was moderated by Ms. Riina Jussila, Sustainable Development Officer at the Division. In his opening remarks, Mr. Sibanda stressed that the SDGs themselves are the result of not only negotiations between Member States but of intensive public consultations and engagement with stakeholders around the world. The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development calls for “participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people” and stakeholder engagement is truly at the core of the Agenda. Mr. Sibanda noted that stakeholder engagement is one of the areas that has seen most progress in the Voluntary National Reviews over the years. This highlights the notion that stakeholder engagement can be incrementally built to be more open, inclusive and effective. He encouraged cities and regions to include a wide variety of stakeholder in their implementation efforts and the VLR process itself and to be open about the criteria why certain actors are invited to contribute at a certain stage of a process.

To close, Mr. Sibanda stressed that stakeholder engagement is strongly reflected also in the recently published DESA Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews. These Guiding Elements draw from the Secretary-General’s common voluntary guidelines for the VNRs and aim at enhancing peer learning and contribute to the robustness of the reviews. The elements merely aim at providing a proposed shared structure for the reports, and at minimum, give a checklist of issues that could be reflected in the process, even if they are not showcased in the VLR report itself. The elements are not meant as restrictions to the process, but rather as a tool and perhaps a starting point for anyone interested in the VLRs.

**Ms. Naiara Costa, Senior Sustainable Development Officer at the Division for Sustainable Development Goals**, made an introductory presentation on stakeholder engagement and lessons learned from the Voluntary National Reviews. In her presentation, Ms. Costa stressed that stakeholder engagement is an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Local and regional authorities have a dual role: as stand-alone stakeholders of national SDG implementation and also as duty bearers, therefore responsible for engaging stakeholders in

their own SDG efforts. She noted that a VLR is a strategic opportunity to engage a variety of stakeholders fully not only in review but also in SDG implementation actions. Ms. Costa referred to the Division's initial review of 24 VLRs, of which almost 30 per cent did not refer to stakeholder engagement in their report. The review did highlight that several cities were referring to stakeholders' contribution to SDG implementation as well as target groups of local policies and programmes. Several cities and regions have also referred to their efforts towards raising SDG awareness among a number of stakeholders.

Ms. Costa encouraged participants to utilize DESA research on stakeholder engagement in the Voluntary National Review processes as well as a practical guide and a Massive Open Online Course on Stakeholder Engagement (information below) that have been provided. Ms. Costa encouraged all cities and regions to report on stakeholder engagement in detail in their reviews: what, why, who, when, and with what impact and, whenever possible, discuss the quality of that engagement. This will enhance peer learning between entities conducting reviews.

### Engaging stakeholders in the VLR process

During the opening panel discussion, four experts shared their experiences on stakeholder engagement.

**Mr. Allan Macleod, SDG Research and Engagement Associate at the Bristol City Council, United Kingdom** noted that Bristol has utilized both bottom-up and top-down approaches in its SDG implementation. In Bristol, SDG work started in 2015 with the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goal Alliance, an advocacy network with over 150 stakeholders. This group has been challenging the city council and local organizations to adopt the goals and implementing efforts. At the same time, Mayor of Bristol has been corralling stakeholders to support the implementation of the One City Plan which includes a governance structure for stakeholder engagement with thematic boards. Mr. Macleod showcased several modalities Bristol has adopted for its engagement, such as the City Leadership breakfasts which bring together city leaders from anchor entities with communities to discuss challenges faced by the city.

Regarding the Bristol VLR, Mr. Macleod noted that the whole-of-society approach adopted for SDG implementation at large allowed for a shared vision. By grounding the SDGs in local activities and initiatives, the VLR process was able to showcase the tangibility of the SDGs to a wider community. Utilizing the mechanisms already in place allowed for speed and efficiency in consultation process and data gathering through online consultation mechanisms. Skills and the expertise of the SDG Alliance were harnessed to shape the engagement mechanism, review gaps, and to target new organizations that were not yet engaged. Bristol is planning on presenting another VLR in 2021. Mr. Macleod highlighted that SDG implementation and VLRs are benefitting from an iterative process. The aim is to deepen engagement year by year across the board and also to increase stakeholder interest towards implementation through a true partnership mechanism.

**Mr. Sami Pirkkala, Chief Specialist at the Prime Minister's Office of Finland** noted that Finland has presented two Voluntary National Reviews, in 2016 and in 2020. Finland has a long tradition of consulting stakeholders, and the multi-stakeholder National Commission on Sustainable Development was established in 1993. Hence, the “infrastructure” for stakeholder engagement has existed before the SDGs.

In Finland, the civil society contributed to the baseline study conducted for the first national implementation plan and also contributed to the first VNR. They provided comments to the process and drafts while the Government “held the pen” for the report itself. In late 2019 for the second VNR, the Government focused on progress and what had been achieved since the first VNR in 2016. The report provided an SDG-by-SDG analysis of progress, and the pen was given also to stakeholders. The 2020 VNR report hence includes a page of stakeholder prepared analysis for each SDG.

**Ms. Junko Ota represented the Kitakyushu City Council in Japan** and the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES). She noted that the Kitakyushu VLR was co-authored by the city and IGES without stakeholder engagement. However, in the process of producing a VLR, the drafters identified key stakeholders and mapped their activities and also developed the structure for a more institutionalized mechanism for stakeholder engagement.

Currently, Kitakyushu has several different stakeholder engagement mechanisms, such as the SDGs Club open all stakeholders which also provides funding for projects proposed through its new SDG project team mechanism. Through this mechanism, stakeholder can propose projects to solve local sustainability challenges. Support for SDGs Corporate Management initiative links larger corporations with resources with smaller businesses to provide guidance on sustainability practices. SDGs Award initiative acknowledges good practices of efforts conducted by stakeholders. Ms. Ota also noted that cities engage in the national Government's public-private platform on SDGs where members can propose topics for thematic discussions consultations. The national Government is also supporting cities through its SDG Future Cities initiative.

**Mr. Juan Ferreiro, Secretary of Institutional Strengthening of the Province of Córdoba in Argentina** explained the stakeholder engagement process used in the province for policy formulation. While Córdoba has not conducted a VLR, utilizing the SDG framework, the province wished to identify regional sustainable development strategies, focusing on six SDGs. As part of this pilot project, a number of consultations were conducted in three stages with different stakeholder groups.

According to Mr. Ferreiro, in the first stage, targets were prioritized together with stakeholders. Consulted stakeholders were given four options to respond to target formulations prepared by the Provincial government: approve the proposed target; propose adjustments; decline the proposal; or propose another target. In the next phase, the prioritized 42 targets were linked with the main six priority SDGs at the provincial level. In consultations, groups analyzed the linkages between policy targets to determine whether pursuing a said target would have a

positive or negative impact on the overall SDG implementation in the local context. In the final stage, stakeholders devised action plans for the priority goals and targets. In this phase stakeholders developed ideas for projects that could support at least one of the six priority goals.

### **The Voluntary Local Review preparatory process: overview of approaches, milestones and deliverables**

During the breakout group discussions, each of the six groups was chaired by an entity that had already conducted a review of their SDG implementation. At the feedback session following the breakout group discussions, each Chair shared one main lesson learned, challenge or finding with the plenary:

- There is a need to bridge the gap between local action and the global framework and the language utilized in the SDGs. In some cases, stakeholders can be supported to understand their value for the global effort and see how their concrete actions link with the SDGs. Stakeholder engagement can also bring hope and newly found energy for SDG implementation.
- Stakeholder engagement should not be seen as a one-time effort and one strategy does not work for all different stakeholders. It should be seen as a continuing long-term effort. Building trust among all actors is key in ensuring effective results.
- The importance of conducting a thorough stakeholder mapping and assessment of the key actors city or a region wishes to engage with was highlighted. This will allow also for utilizing different methods to engage with different stakeholders.
- Tapping into existing arrangements and mechanisms for stakeholder engagement can make efforts more efficient but also reduce the “engagement fatigue” sometimes felt by stakeholders.

## Materials and resources shared by the participants during the workshop:

UN DESA's Multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation: A review of VNR Reports (2016-2019) -

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26012VNRStakeholdersResearch.pdf>

UN DESA's Synthesis of Voluntary National Reviews Reports:

2020:

[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27027VNR\\_Synthesis\\_Report\\_2020.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27027VNR_Synthesis_Report_2020.pdf)

2019:

[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/252302019\\_VNR\\_Synthesis\\_Report\\_DESA.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/252302019_VNR_Synthesis_Report_DESA.pdf)

2018:

[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/210732018\\_VNRs\\_Synthesis\\_compilation\\_11118\\_FS\\_BB\\_Format\\_FINAL\\_cover.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/210732018_VNRs_Synthesis_compilation_11118_FS_BB_Format_FINAL_cover.pdf)

2017:

[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17109Synthesis\\_Report\\_VNRs\\_2017.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17109Synthesis_Report_VNRs_2017.pdf)

2016:

[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/127761701030E\\_2016\\_VNR\\_Synthesis\\_Report\\_ver3.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/127761701030E_2016_VNR_Synthesis_Report_ver3.pdf)

UN DESA's Stakeholder Engagement and the 2030 Agenda: A Practical Guide -

- English: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/StakeholdersGuide>
- Spanish: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/StakeholdersGuideEspanol>
- French: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/StakeholdersGuideFrancais>

UNDESA and UNITAR's Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) Strengthening stakeholder engagement for the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda -

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/MOOCstakeholders>

Orlando's project to hosting monthly SDG-focused workshops called the "IDEAS Hive" -

<https://ideasforus.org/theideashive/>

City of Ghent's first VLR -

<https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/media/documents/Ghent%20SDG%20Voluntary%20Local%20Review%202020.pdf>

Asker's Youth Conference: <https://www.local2030.org/event/view/306>

Espoo's localized online course on understanding the SDGs on a local, regional, national and international level - <https://funzi.mobi/learn/a-en-sustainable-espoo-2025?language=en>

Kitakyushu SDGs Award 2019 page - <https://www.kitaq-sdgs.com/>

NYC's Junior Ambassador's program - <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/international/programs/nyc-junior-ambassadors.page>

Guangzhou Awards for SDG-related achievements - <https://www.metropolis.org/projects/guangzhou-award-award-cities>

Córdoba's platform for sharing actions related to the SDGs - [www.gestionabierta.cba.gov.ar](http://www.gestionabierta.cba.gov.ar)

The UNSG's 2017 message to Japan's SDGs Award Ceremony - <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/sdgs/pdf/000321355.pdf>

Buenos Aires' report on the adaptation process of SDG 16 - [https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/sites/gcaba/files/sdg\\_16\\_report.pdf](https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/sites/gcaba/files/sdg_16_report.pdf)

Buenos Aires' 2019 and 2020 VLR Reports - <https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/jefedegobierno/objetivos-de-desarrollo-sostenible/documentos>

Los Angeles' new Activities Index platform to gather information on activities being led by various sectors of society - <https://sdg.lamayor.org/activities-index>