THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT FOR THE SDGs

Executive Summary

This Executive Summary presents new data on the **impacts that COVID-19** has had on **stakeholder engagement** in the implementation, follow up and review of the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) at national, regional and sub-national levels. It seeks to catalogue important effects, highlight challenges, and present good practices and innovation for stakeholder engagement. It draws on **survey answers from more than 500 respondents across two surveys** - one for government focal points supporting the 2020/21 Voluntary National Review (VNR) countries and another for all stakeholders. The report offers analysis, reflection, and recommendations across a range of themes, clustered around these key findings:

Key Messages

(1) **Partnerships with stakeholders are vital to SDG implementation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; stakeholders are making important and diverse contributions.**

96% of government respondents identified current or recent partnerships with stakeholders.

Knowledge and expertise are the most common contributions made by stakeholders to such partnerships – as identified by **72%** of government respondents - followed by engagement of "left behind" groups **(57%)** finance, service delivery, and local access (each around **44%**).

New partnerships have developed in response to COVID-19 priorities - especially in the areas of health (seen by **85%** of government respondents) support for small business **(64%)**, access to IT **(58%)** and support for education **(57%)**.

(2) **The need for stakeholder engagement and partnership will increase in response to COVID-19.**

68% government respondents perceived that the need for stakeholder engagement and partnership would increase in response to COVID-19.

However, the same respondents also worry that stakeholder engagement in implementation and follow up of the SDGs will decrease. Surveyed across a range of elements of implementation and review, a significant proportion of respondents predict a decrease in engagement for each element. This was especially so for stakeholder engagement in review processes **(46%)** and awareness raising.

(3) **COVID-19 poses funding, staffing and capacity challenges for stakeholders that, alongside constrained civic space, threaten to undermine their activities and contributions.**

Stakeholders perceive COVID-19 as impacting heavily on funding. **34%** of responses have rated the impact as 'severe', and a further **42%** as 'significant'. **34%** see the effect on engagement of marginalised and vulnerable groups as 'severe'. New challenges for staffing, capacity, and partnerships are also recognised (**20-28%** severe, **30-40%** significant).

Space for 'safe and free advocacy and organisation' is viewed as impacted 'significantly' by **37%** of respondents, and 'severely' by **18%.**

(4) **Countries have adapted how they engage with stakeholders for SDG implementation, follow up and review by moving to online engagement.**

Overall, **94%** of government respondents reported adapting to the pandemic by using online conferencing tools, **64%** by working through shared documents and **38%** through use of online surveys.

The report showcases examples of country responses and innovations.

(5) Both stakeholder and government respondents perceive the COVID-19 crisis impacting heaviest on the most meaningful and inclusive forms of stakeholder engagement.

According to stakeholder respondents, the pandemic is having a significant impact on the availability of resources for overcoming barriers to participation - **77%** of respondents, mechanisms for partnership with stakeholders **(75%)**, and meaningful inclusion of stakeholders in policymaking **(75%)**.

Government respondents, similarly, see the greatest impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic to be on efforts to reach out to marginalised and vulnerable groups (**64%** 'significant' and 'severe'), to make resources available to support participation **(64%)** and to maintain mechanisms for engagement **(61%)**.

(6) Stakeholders see the pandemic setting back progress on the SDGs for all vulnerable and marginalised groups, but especially older people, homeless and slum dwellers, migrants, women and girls, and people with disabilities.

Stakeholders perceive 'severe' impacts from the pandemic across all vulnerable and marginalised groups (over **35%** of respondents in all cases). However, the groups perceived as hit most severely are older people (**52%** of respondents), homeless and slum dwellers **(45%)**, migrants **(45%)**, women and girls **(42%)**, and persons with disabilities **(41%)**.

Government respondents from 2020 VNR countries perceived that changes made in response to COVID-19 had decreased the participation of older people (**57%** of responses), people with disabilities **(52%)**, rural dwellers **(38%),** and children and youth **(39%)**, though respondents from 2021 VNR countries viewed these changes more positively.

(7) Though online participation may have increased the engagement of certain sectors, this is not true for vulnerable and marginalised groups, who risk being 'left behind' in a move to online engagement.

Stakeholders likewise perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as decreasing the participation of these groups around both implementation and review of the SDGs. The groups perceived as most affected were older people (**62%** of respondents) and persons with disabilities **(55%),** but the proportion was above **40%** for many vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Recommendations

Guided by analysis of survey results, the report offers some key recommendations on areas for future work:

1

*Develop **capacity-building and learning activities** to support meaningful and inclusive stakeholder engagement, especially online engagement. **Additional research** could be conducted on current good practices, and these activities could build towards **specific guidelines** that facilitate quality online engagement.*

2

***Develop dialogue, reflections**, and guidance on how to learn from, and build upon, the COVID-19 response partnerships established so far, whilst bearing in mind the overall 'web' of partnerships contributing to the SDGs nationally and globally.*

3

*Facilitate **discussion and learning** on how to employ and promote the SDGs as a framework for "recovery efforts" - drawing on SDG goals and targets but also integrating the principles of 'leaving no one behind' and 'whole-of-society' implementation and review - and **identify steps governments and stakeholders can take** to communicate these systematic links to the SDGs effectively.*

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