The Impacts of COVID-19 on Stakeholder Engagement for the SDGs

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Key messages

This report 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.[1] The report offers analysis, reflection, and recommendations across a range of themes, clustered around these key findings:

(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.**

- 69% 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,[2] 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 (51%).

(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).

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[1] There were approximately 70 respondents to the survey of governments, and 470 respondents to the stakeholder survey. Within these overall numbers, the precise number of respondents varied by question.

[2] These were: *partnerships for implementation*, *policy making*, *review and follow up* and *awareness raising*.

- 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%).

(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.

- 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.
- 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:

- *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.*

- *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.*

- *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.*

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a research project addressing the current and future impact of COVID-19 on stakeholder engagement and partnerships for implementation, follow up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), commissioned by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and supported through a grant with the European Commission. The report is based on two surveys - one distributed to governments of countries undertaking a Voluntary National Review (VNR) of the SDGs in 2020 and 2021, the other distributed to stakeholders worldwide. Drawing data on these themes together across the two surveys, the report highlights key challenges and innovative practice. Stakeholder engagement is vital to SDG implementation, and this report shows that government respondents consider such engagement even more vital in the context of the pandemic and its aftermath. However, stakeholder engagement is at risk of falling away in the face of key challenges, and the mechanisms that might sustain it are especially at risk in the post-COVID-19 world.

There is an urgent need for further research on these themes. Five years after the adoption of 'Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (the '2030 Agenda'),[3] and at the onset of a critical 'decade of delivery' for the SDGs, COVID-19 threatens to reverse years of progress. The seismic impacts of COVID-19 across the SDGs are increasingly well documented (as summarised in section 1), globally and within country contexts. But there is much less evidence of the impact of this crisis on the 'lifeblood' of the SDGs - the *processes* that should accompany SDG implementation and follow up, and on the principles that animate the SDGs – of participation and partnership, interlinkages, and 'leave no one behind'. These elements will be vital if the 2030 Agenda is to become the basis for efforts to "build back better" post-pandemic.

The key findings are that stakeholder engagement has been vital to SDG implementation, follow up and review in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with stakeholders involved in partnerships across key areas. COVID-19 has impacted on stakeholder engagement practices, with states having to adapt their processes in a COVID context. COVID-19 has also spurred new partnerships and innovations in implementation, follow up and review. Nevertheless, the impacts of COVID-19 pose challenges for stakeholders themselves, and for the processes that support the most inclusive and meaningful engagement. Not only progress on the SDGs, but also *participation* of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, is at risk.

The report has four main sections. **Section one** takes stock of key features of the context – the pandemic and its impacts, and the landscape of SDG implementation and review processes it has impacted upon, and the narrative of 'building back better' through the SDGs. **Section two** presents key results on the responses to the survey of governments, focusing on findings in respect of VNRs, implementation, and partnerships. **Section three** presents key results from stakeholders – their perceptions on areas of progress, challenges, and partnerships. **Section four** offers further analysis of key themes, drawing out reflections. Whilst examples of good practice from states are interspersed throughout the report, this section looks in more detail at the key challenges and emerging practice from states and stakeholders, and offers some limited recommendations in response to key questions – the challenges to meaningful and inclusive stakeholder engagement, the challenge of drawing on, and learning from, the partnerships formed in response to COVID-19, and the challenge facing the

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[3] A/RES/70/1 - 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (2015).

SDGs as a framework for 'building back better'. The report concludes with a brief summary of findings and directions for future action.

(1) Context and Methodology

1.1 COVID-19's impacts on the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda, with the SDGs at its heart, is a wide-ranging, interdependent agenda, universally applicable but with different implications for different country contexts. The impacts of COVID-19 on this Agenda have been, likewise, multifaceted and interlinked. COVID-19 has affected every country - but affected different countries and regions in different ways over time - through a combination of medical, economic, social, and environmental impacts.

The scale of the overall impact on progress towards the SDGs cannot be overstated. UN DESA writes: "The global community finds itself in an unprecedented situation where parallel threats of health, economic and social crises left countries struggling to contain the epidemic and provide immediate financial relief for the many people affected by the associated macroeconomic downturns. The pandemic threatens to reverse years of progress on poverty, hunger, health care and education."[4]

Impacts can be tracked for every segment of society, in every part of the world, across every SDG, but these impacts have been uneven within and between countries and regions and over time. The SDGs, through the principle of "leave no one behind", focus policymaking and review towards the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised groups. COVID-19, overall, has highlighted and exacerbated such dimensions of inequality. Not only, for example, have the health impacts been felt most severely by certain sectors of populations, but the economic shock has been greatest for those in the most precarious employment. Women are more likely to be in such low paid and precarious employment, and have also faced increased domestic violence at home. Education has been disrupted for many millions of young people.[5] All this is to highlight just a few of the shocks that have hit particular populations across the world.

Whilst in some respects, the measures adopted in response have – at least in the short run – reduced ongoing environmental damage, pressing environmental problems have not gone away.[6] The world still remains off-track to achieve the targets laid out in the Paris agreement, for example, even if some localities have temporarily seen falls in emissions.[7] The pandemic has emphasised the importance of trustworthy, effective governance but also prompted concerns around the shrinking of civic space – already a global problem - and the human rights of the most vulnerable.[8]

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[4] UN DESA Policy Brief #81: Impact of COVID-19 on SDG progress: a statistical perspective (2020).
[5] UNDP COVID-19 and the SDGs (2020).
[6] The WMO writes: "the reduction in anthropogenic emissions due to [COVID-19] confinement measures will not have a discernible effect on global mean atmospheric CO_2 in 2020 as this reduction will be smaller than, or at most, similar in size to the natural year-to-year variability of atmospheric CO_2". WMO Greenhouse Gas Bulletin (2020) p. 1.
[7] See, for example, NVEDR's recent analysis of Australian emissions - Tracking 2 Degrees FY2020 Q3 (2020).
[8] See IDEA's global map that tracks concerns over COVID-19 and civic space: The Global State of Democracy initiative (idea.int) COVID-19 World Map.

The UN has catalogued and analysed these aspects in a series of briefings and papers that address the diverse impacts of COVID-19 in different contexts and regions.[9] The 2020 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), too, attest to the different impacts felt from the pandemic in different countries.[10]

1.2 The SDGs and the 'Whole of Society' approach

The 2030 Agenda presents not just a set of targets and goals for 2030, but also the essential underpinning elements for the means and processes through which to attain these targets: it is only in this wider frame that the SDGs can correctly be termed a 'roadmap' or 'strategy'. Partnership, both at a global level - the "revitalised partnership for sustainable development" central to Goal 17[11] - and at a range of scales within and across issues and countries, are acknowledged as critical. As the member states of the UN declared in September 2020, "today's challenges require cooperation not only across borders but also across the whole of society".[12] A strand of UN work catalogues initiatives and partnerships,[13] and builds and supports partnerships and the skills needed for successful partnerships, for example through the Partnership Accelerator programme.[14]

These partnerships are a core element of a broader commitment in the 2030 Agenda to a "whole of society" approach to implementation.[15] This idea has three critical components. **First**, it signifies that the SDGs affect all of society, so that all stakeholders need to be involved in achieving the SDGs. However, this leaves open the question of the roles of different stakeholder sectors that make up the "whole of society". Whilst noting the specific responsibilities of governments set out in the 2030 Agenda, participation must be broad, voluntary, and cooperative, with an emphasis on partnership. Thus, **second**, it signifies the 'whole of society's' involvement not just in implementing and delivering the SDGs, but in deciding *how* to do so. **Third**, this in turn reinforces the principle that "no one should be left behind", since it insists not just on 'leaving no one behind' as a matter of data disaggregation and policy design, but also as participation and voice within decision-making about how to achieve the SDGs. The "whole of society" approach, then, rests on meaningful and inclusive participation of all, including vulnerable and marginalised populations, in implementation and review.[16]

Recognising this, UN DESA has worked to support stakeholder engagement in both implementation and review of the SDGs – recent resources include a practical guide[17] and an online course for stakeholders, in cooperation with UNITAR.[18] Focusing on the quality of engagement, UN DESA and UNDP have recently published a tool to facilitate the assessment of stakeholder engagement practices in terms of inclusiveness, participation, and accountability.[19] These ideas inform this report – including

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[9] https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-secretary-general collates these reports. See also, UN United Nations Comprehensive Response to COVID-19 (2020).
[10] See, for example, UN-DESA's synthesis of 2020 VNRs - UN/DESA Policy Brief #85: Impact of COVID-19: perspective from Voluntary National Reviews | Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
[11] The 2030 Agenda, p. 2.
[12] UNGA Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations (2020), p. 4.
[13] Available at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships/.
[14] Available at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/PartnershipAccelerator.
[15] As per the text of the 2030 Agenda - "an Agenda of the people, by the people and for the people", para 52.
[16] The term 'whole of society' is widely used, but seldom clearly defined in the context of the SDGs. The account here is compatible with the approach in Partners for Review, *The Whole of Society Approach* (2019).
[17] UN Stakeholder Engagement and the 2030 Agenda – a practical guide (2020).
[18] Available at https://www.unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/accelerating-sdg-implementation/our-portfolio/2030-agenda-online-courses.
[19] UN DESA and UNDP What is a Good Practice? A framework to analyse the Quality of Stakeholder Engagement in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda (2021)

by influencing the wording of some questions aiming to track different aspects of engagement. The survey also drew on the wording from key sections of the 2030 Agenda that outlined commitments on stakeholder engagement. It is important to emphasize, too, that the 2030 Agenda is recognised as needing a "whole of government" approach to policy coherence and a "whole of world" approach to global cooperation – however, these issues are outside the focus of this study.

1.3 "Building back better" – the SDGs and COVID-19 recovery

The idea of 'building back better' – widely invoked by governments and stakeholders since the pandemic - encapsulates a recovery that advances economic, social, political, and environmental fairness. Attention has been paid to how the SDGs could offer a strategic framework for such a response and recovery.[20] There is, however, no single account of how the SDGs and local, national, and regional recovery plans should align. There are at least three ways in which such accounts could differ. One dimension reflects the constant question of balance between the *universality* of the 2030 Agenda and the *differentiation* through which countries can adapt it to their national context. The next two dimensions are captured in Figure 1 below. Recovery plans can be 'aligned' to the 2030 Agenda in two ways: either mapped against it, so that the link between the plan, and the 2030 Agenda are identified (termed 'passive' alignment here) or actively *bent towards* the agenda - designed precisely to reflect the content and level of ambition in the 2030 Agenda ('active' alignment). And, in the final dimension of alignment, the goals and targets of the SDGs can be taken as the object of alignment ('narrow' alignment) or also the wider set of commitments and principles within the 2030 Agenda, such as 'leaving no one behind', interlinkages and policy coherence, and implementation through a 'whole of society' approach ('holistic' alignment).

	Passive alignment	Active alignment
Narrow alignment	recovery plan mapped against SDG goals and targets	recovery plan designed to reflect ambition and content of SDG goals and targets
Holistic alignment	recovery plan mapped not just against targets, but also underlying principles - reflecting on 'left behind' groups, interlinkages and 'whole of society' approach	recovery plan designed to reflect ambition of SDG targets, focus on 'left behind groups, reflecting interlinkages and taking 'whole of society' approach

Figure 1

A recovery plan that is actively aligned to a holistic, comprehensive account of the 2030 Agenda is clearly the most desirable option, reflecting the urgency behind a "decade of delivery" for the SDGs and the climate emergency as well as the additional challenge posed by COVID-19. Such a plan, though, needs a range of actions to ensure a "whole of society", participatory approach to implementation,[21] and depends on governments and stakeholders linking recovery planning not just

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[20] At UN level, the UN's comprehensive response to COVID-19 present such a model in outline.
[21] UN *comprehensive response*, p. 6.

to the relevant SDG targets, but understanding 'building back better' in a broader sense that also addresses the strategy for achieving them.

The research presented in what follows speaks to all these aspects of the current context. This project aimed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the involvement of stakeholders in follow up and review – especially, VNR processes – and their involvement in SDG implementation. The research also seeks to identify innovative solutions and good practice from implementation and review in the context of COVID-19 that might serve as models for other countries. This, in turn, is critical to 'whole of society' efforts to respond to COVID-19 in ways that reflect the SDGs.

1.4 Methodology

The results presented in this report are based on two surveys developed and deployed by researchers at Newcastle University, as directed by UN DESA. The overall goal of these surveys was to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected stakeholder engagement in implementation and review, with focuses on VNRs and partnerships. The team deployed two surveys: the first to SDG stakeholders in all countries, and the second to focal points in national governments that either prepared a VNR for the 2020 High Level Political Forum (HLPF) or have committed to preparing a VNR for the 2021 HLPF.[22] The focus on VNR countries reflects the importance of learning from their unique experience of undertaking stakeholder engagement around SDG review and follow up in the context of COVID-19.

***Stakeholders*:**

The first component of the research design was a survey targeting SDG stakeholders. The survey consisted of 25-30 questions, including both open and closed-ended questions. The questions were developed in collaboration with UN DESA. The survey opened on 28 September 2020, with a closing date of 9 October 2020. The survey was announced and available in French, Spanish and English. It reached respondents through emails sent by UN DESA as well as being distributed widely on social media; in order to enable the research team to follow up with requests for more detail and, potentially, permission to use text responses in the report, respondents were asked to give their email address.478 complete or "good partial" responses were received in total, and these are 'broken down' by sector in Figure 2 below. About 50% of respondents were from NGOs or civil society organisations, 13% from academic or think tanks; local and regional governments, private sector organisations and UN entities make up about 7% each; in addition, small numbers of national governments and philanthropic organisations responded.

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[22] The classification of countries and regions used throughout this report is presented in accompanying Annex A. The text of the two surveys are presented as Annex B and C.

Figure 2:
Organizational Type n=478

Civil society 51%

Other 7%

Academic or
scientific 13%

UN entity 7%

Philanthropic 1%

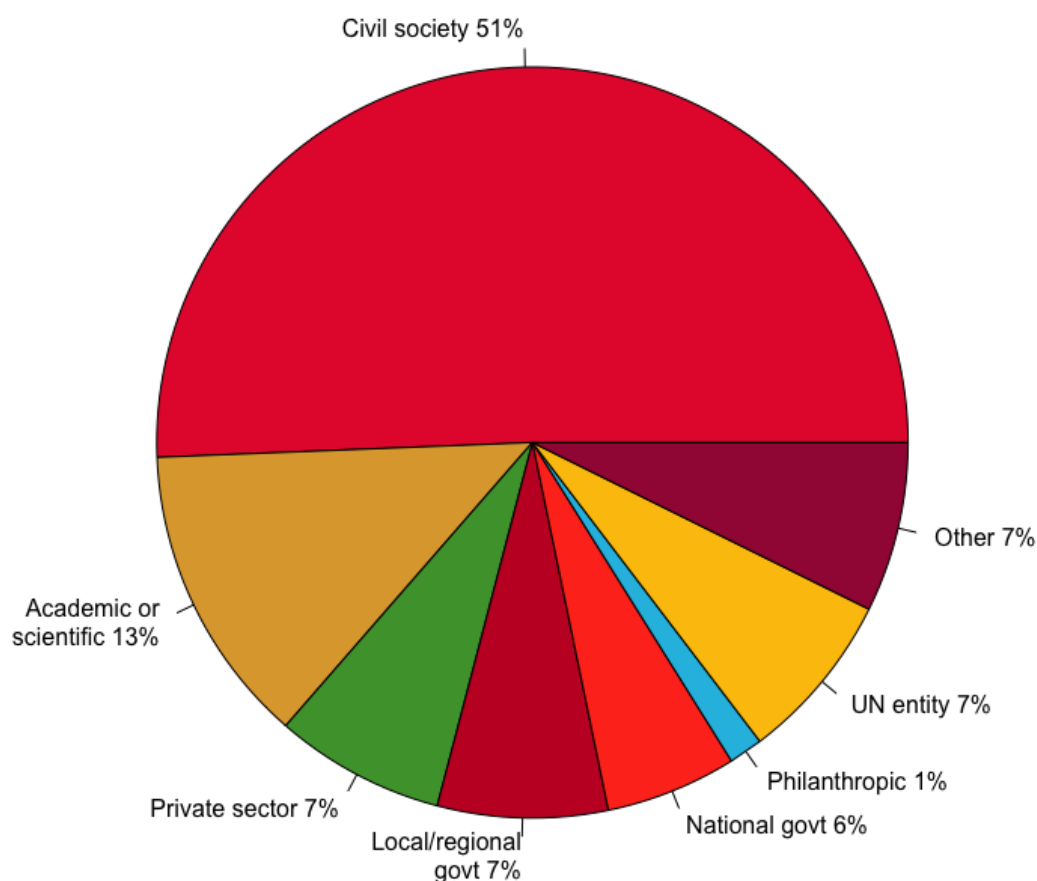Private sector 7%

National govt 6%

Local/regional
govt 7%

Figure 2

The survey reached stakeholders globally, with 28% of respondents from Africa, 29% of respondents from the Americas, 27% from Asia, 15% from Europe and 1% from Oceania[2]. Because the survey was focused on national and local level impacts of COVID-19, the survey asked respondents working across multiple countries to select one as the focus for their answers. The survey therefore captures national level efforts, but not efforts at an international, regional or global level.

The methods for disseminating the surveys will have affected the makeup of respondents. In particular, by being publicised via SDG-related twitter accounts and SDG-focused mailing lists and organisations, the survey is more likely to reach stakeholders actively engaged around the SDGs, with links to national and global umbrella organisations, and with good access to the internet. The survey, being offered online, itself limits accessibility of the survey for some respondents. As discussed in the closing section of the report, the digital divide is a serious problem for any exercise in online engagement. In the context of the pandemic, and the challenges for stakeholders that we note in

section 3 below, those circumstances will have impacted on the ability of some stakeholders to respond. Overall, then, we recognise that the survey respondents cannot be taken as representative of all the relevant stakeholders the research team might have hoped to reach,

Countries

A dedicated survey was shared on 28 September with government focal points for countries undertaking VNRs in 2020, with a deadline for responses of 9 October 2020. This deadline was later extended to 2 November in order to enable responses from focal points from the VNR 2021 countries after these had been confirmed. The survey asked that VNR focal points pass it along to up to 5 other individuals who had worked/would work on the VNR process at national level. Of the 47 countries that presented VNRs at the 2020 HLPF, officials from 28 (60%) responded to the survey. Most countries registered only one response, but a few entered up to five responses; the average number of responses was 1.7. Of the 43 countries that have committed to presenting a VNR at the 2021 HLPF, responses were received from government officials of 13 (30%); there was one response from each of 11 countries, and 2 responses from the other 2 countries. The survey followed a very similar structure to the stakeholder survey, with a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions.

It is important to highlight that the responses to the survey of country focal points are the personal perceptions of individuals, rather than official responses of governments or states. These responses were analysed, and are presented here, anonymously - with the exception of the boxed case studies presented below where approval has been granted for identification of countries in the text.

The survey process poses some key limitations for our use of the results. Had we been able to offer the survey in more languages, this would have allowed more state actors and stakeholders to respond. Another limitation of survey design is the difficulty of accounting for both direction and degree of change, as well as starting level or baseline, in question design (whilst keeping questions simple and being mindful of survey length). This creates challenges for detailed interpretation of some results. For example, a response of "no change" can describe a situation where a flourishing engagement process has remained unaffected by COVID-19, or a situation where there was no process to begin with.

The research design also faced a challenge in presenting the relationship between SDG implementation and COVID-19. At different points, the survey work was aiming to target SDG processes in general, and in others, the specific ways in which actors were addressing COVID-19. However, all action on COVID-19 can itself be mapped using the SDG framework, so that it is hard to separate the two. Notably, principal elements of a response to COVID will have positive impacts on health, wellbeing, hunger, poverty etc. and so 'responding to COVID-19' is inseparable from 'implementing the SDGs in the context of COVID-19'. Similarly, the survey sought responses on SDG 'implementation', 'follow up' and 'review', but (i) there are no hard lines between these elements (for example, SDG review is itself a contribution to implementation, not least of Goal 16) and (ii) respondents might define and perceive these ideas and relationships differently.

At points in the text, the report includes longer responses from states and stakeholders to show examples of country experiences and practices, and to represent themes amongst respondent answers. Clearly, such an exercise involves selection on the part of the research team, but the researchers felt that the voices of respondents make an important contribution to the report.

(2) Findings on States

This section focuses on the findings from the survey of government respondents. It addresses the perceived impacts of COVID-19 on processes of follow up and review, but also on stakeholder engagement around SDG implementation, including the role of partnerships.

2.1 COVID-19 impacts on SDG review and follow up processes

The survey asked respondents to rate the impacts of COVID-19 on Voluntary National Review processes. The results for 2020 VNR countries are presented in Figure 3 below. Overall, respondents saw *significant and severe impacts on 2020 VNRs*. The biggest single impacts were on engaging vulnerable and marginalised groups (60% 'significant' or 'severe') and presenting the VNR at a national level (62%). The *lowest impacts* were perceived to be on drafting, coordination within governments and collaboration with the UN system – 58-65% saw little or no impact in these areas. This general pattern might reflect the timing of the pandemic's effect on a country's VNR preparation: with COVID-19 impacts spreading and widely felt from February-April 2020, but varying across countries and regions, this will have impacted parts of the VNR process undertaken within that timeframe. But it seems clear, too, that certain phases of activity – for example, those that involved travel or gatherings of people - were particularly exposed to COVID-19 impacts.
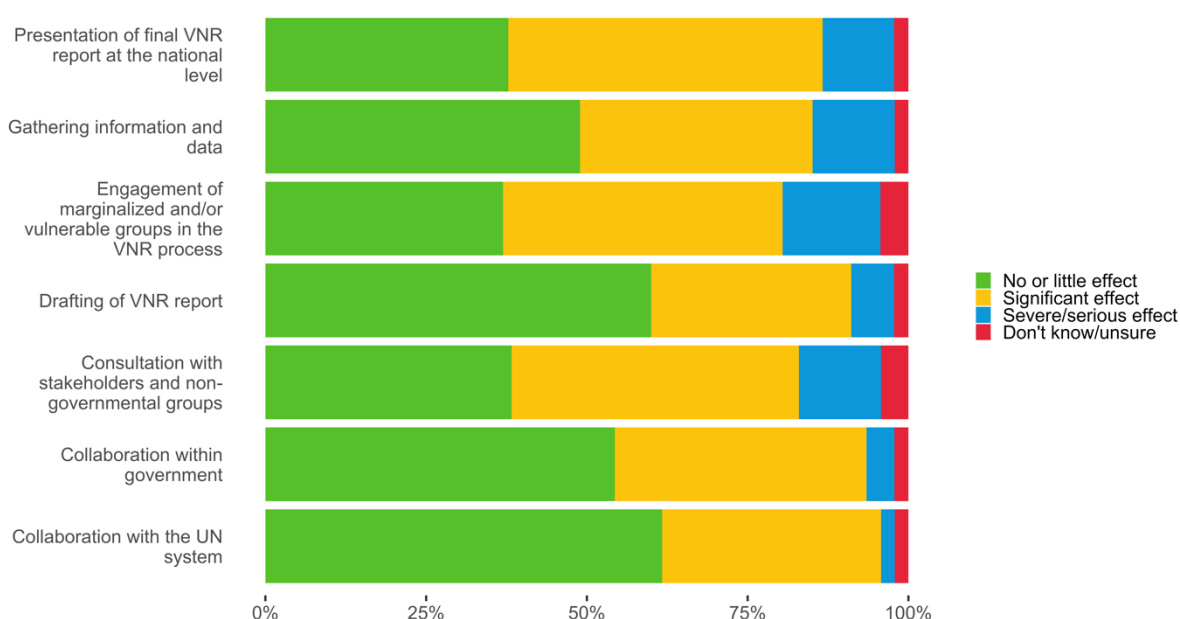

Figure 3: Effects on 2020 VNR

Figure 3

Respondents from the 2021 VNR countries perceive slightly greater impact from COVID-19 overall, with impacts falling on slightly different parts of the process – impacts are significantly greater for data gathering, stakeholder consultation and engagement with vulnerable and marginalised. On the other hand, there is little difference seen between 2020 and 2021 VNRs in impacts on drafting or collaboration within government. Again, this might well be reflective of the nature and timing of

different parts of the VNR preparation process, and also the capacity of countries to move these different elements to an online format.

States have responded to these impacts by moving their engagement online. Responses to the survey give clear evidence of a move to remote, online working. Figure 4 below combines the responses of representatives of 2020 and 2021 VNR countries, since both 2020 and 2021 VNR countries have turned to electronic, remote outreach methods in strikingly similar proportions.

Overall, 94% of respondents (67 of 71) adapted to the pandemic by using online conferencing tools. 64% (51) working through shared documents and 38% of respondents (28) used online surveys. This is very much in line with the picture presented in the 2020 VNR documents themselves, as presented to the HLPF in July.[23]

Figure 4:
Did the COVID-19 pandemic increase your use of any of the following tools for the engagement of stakeholders in your country's VNR process? n=47
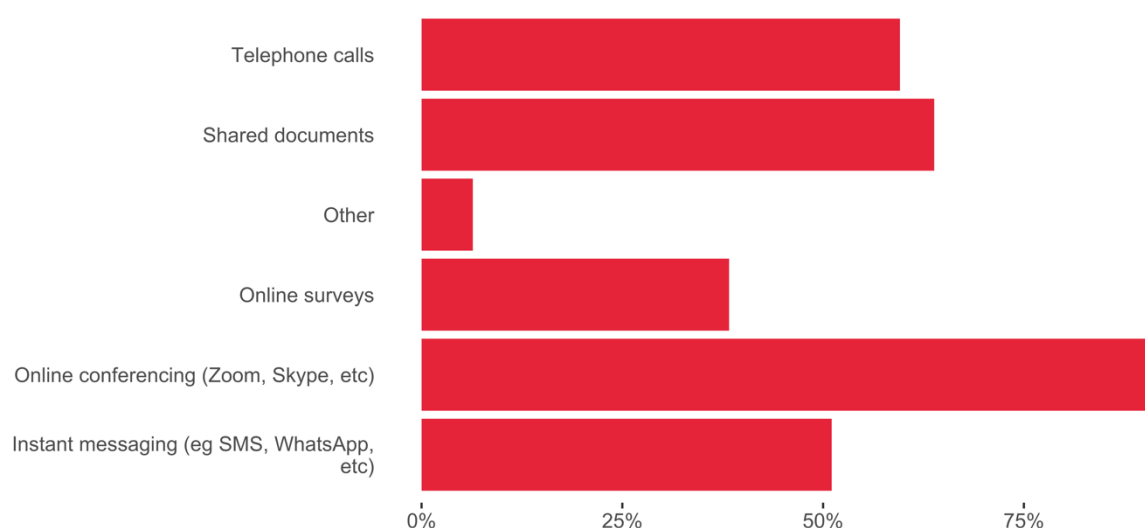

Figure 4

The longer answers, where respondents discussed their changes in practice in more detail, reinforce this trend. Of 84 longer responses to the open answer questions on innovative methods for stakeholder engagement for 2020 and 2021 VNR countries, approximately 70% reference a move to online engagement. The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is presented here as an example of these changes.

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[23] The VNRs for all years are collated at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/. In addition to specific examples highlighted throughout this report, many VNRs from different regions of the world reported similar impacts. See, for example, the VNRs for Slovenia, Zambia, Seychelles, Panama, and Liberia.

> ***Trinidad and Tobago:***
>
> *The COVID-19 crisis affected the stakeholder engagement process for the preparation of Trinidad and Tobago's 2020 Voluntary National Review, and stakeholder engagement activities were adapted in response. In particular, the restrictions imposed by the Government to limit the spread of COVID-19 limited the ability of the VNR Team to conduct Focus Groups and Public Meetings which were planned for the island of Tobago. However, within a short timeframe, alternative methods were implemented to ensure meaningful engagement of stakeholders such as civil society, the private sector and the Tobago House of Assembly. The methods adopted included interviews via telephone/video conferencing and the utilization of a data capture form. Also, the use of an Online Survey was another critical component of the Stakeholder Engagement Process. This was identified as the most suitable alternative method for capturing the views of citizens on Trinidad and Tobago's implementation of the SDGs within the COVID-19 context.*

The effects of remote engagement

States were also asked about their perceptions of the effects of this shift. The responses for 2020 VNR countries are below (figure 5) showing the numbers of respondents who perceived this as having *positive effects, no effect,* or *negative effects* on the engagement of different stakeholder sectors.

Overall, findings show that respondents believe the changes to online engagement in response to COVID-19 had a negative impact on participation in the 2020 VNR. These impacts were particularly clear in the case of groups considered vulnerable and marginalised according to the 2030 Agenda and in the UN's recent reports on COVID-19 impacts.[24] Government respondents thought COVID-19 changes had a particularly negative effect on the participation of older people (57% - 24 of 41 - believe this decreased participation), people with disabilities (52% - 22 of 40), rural dwellers (38%), and children and youth (39%).

Some respondents indicate that these methods increased the involvement of certain sectors of stakeholders, particularly those that are highly organised and institutionalised, for instance business and industry (25% of respondents believed participation had increased), local governments (22%) and NGOs (21%). It is also worth noting that the number of 'Don't know/unsure' answers varies significantly between groups, with respondents being more unsure how the shift to more online engagement methods has affected groups like migrants and displaced persons (31% of respondents), homeless people and slum dwellers (32%) and especially LGBTQI+ people (45%). It is also important to note that countries' baselines for an assessment of positive or negative impact, and the magnitude of any increase or decrease cannot be gauged with the data available.

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[24] See, for example, UN Impact of COVID-19 on SDG progress: a statistical perspective (2020), pp. 3-4.

Figure 5: Effects on 2020 VNR

In your view, how did the alternative arrangements for VNR preparations that were implemented due to COVID-19, such as online conferencing or surveys, affect the participation of any of the following groups? n=38-42
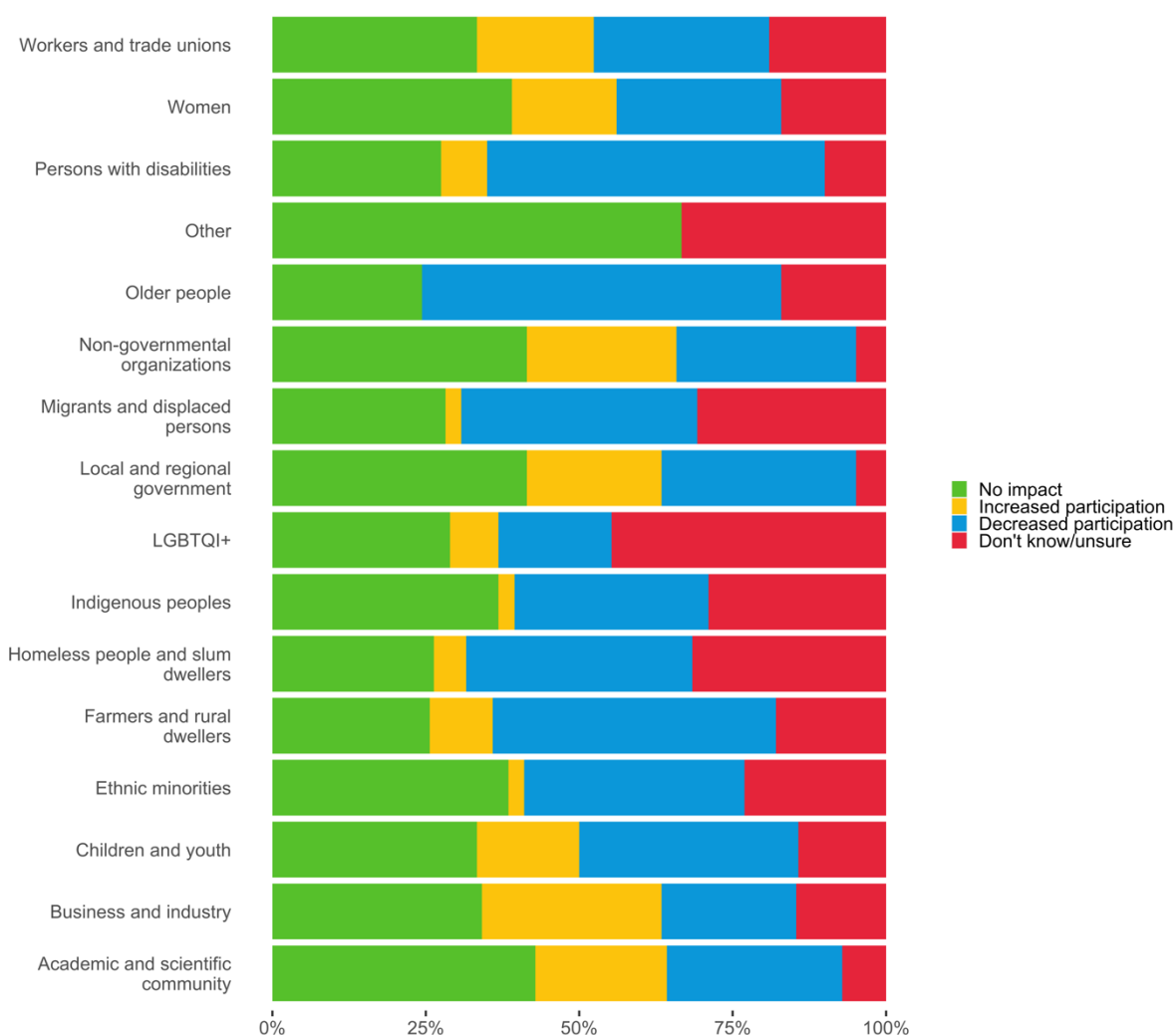

Figure 5

The responses of government officials from the 2021 VNR countries are markedly different. Figure 6 below illustrates this by presenting, side by side, the proportions of responses indicating a *positive* effect on stakeholder engagement. The questions in each case, though comparable, were different in important ways. 2020 VNRs were asked a 'backwards looking' question about their *experience* to date. For 2021 VNRs this was a 'forward looking' question about their *expectations*. Though a significant proportion of 2021 respondents expect a negative impact, the proportions expecting a *positive* impact on engagement from youth, business, academia, trades unions are all 40%+. This contrasts sharply with the experiences of 2020 VNR countries, as Figure 5 makes clear.

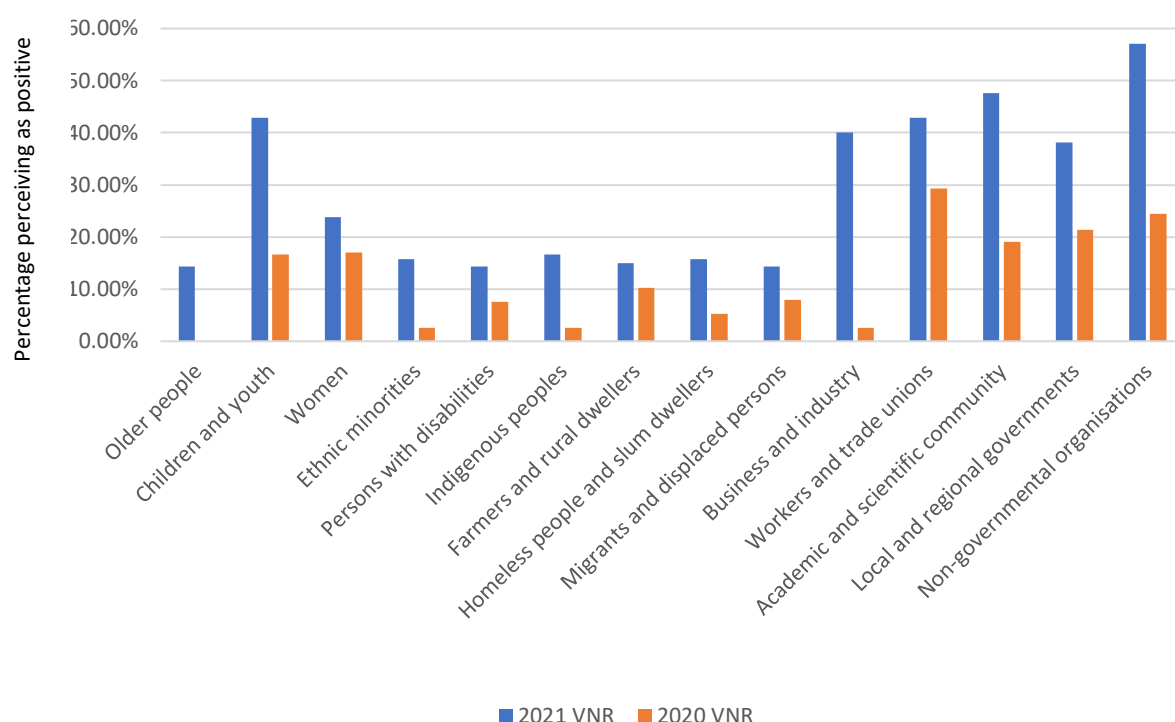Figure 6: Have/will these changes increase participation? 2020 vs 2021 VNR countries

Figure 6

Differences in country contexts, and relatively low numbers of responses from 2021 VNR countries that could magnify the impact of individual countries' contexts, are reasons for caution about these results. It might be, too, that learning from 2020 VNRs is precisely the reason why 2021 VNR countries express optimism about the positive effects. However, these results suggest reasons for caution – certainly, responses received from the 2020 VNR countries suggest that there are more 'losers' than 'winners' from the move to online engagement.

2.2 The importance of stakeholder engagement in implementation and follow up

To get a sense of the need for stakeholder engagement in the context of COVID-19 and the aftermath of the pandemic, respondents to the government survey were asked how they perceived COVID-19's impact on the need for stakeholder engagement in both implementation and review of the SDGs. Figure 7 below presents these results, indicating a clear perception that this need will **increase** in a COVID and post-COVID context (69% of 72 respondents).

Figure 7:

How do you foresee the need for stakeholder participation and support in
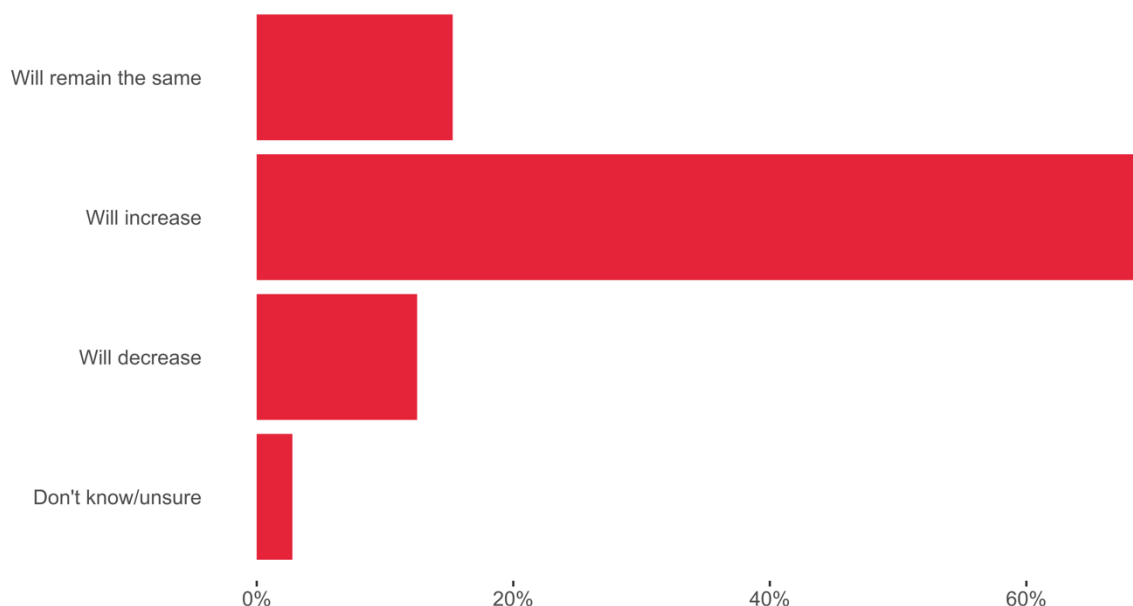the implementation of the SDGs in the recovery from COVID-19? n=72

Figure 7

However, government respondents were also asked whether stakeholder engagement in
implementation and follow up of the SDGs **would** increase or decrease due to COVID. Overall,
respondents thought it would ***decrease***, on balance, across a range of elements – see Figure 8 below.
Despite 24-35% of respondents thinking it would increase in each case, a greater proportion still
predicted a decrease across each of these elements. This identification of a decrease is greatest for
stakeholder engagement in review (46%) and awareness raising (51%).[25]

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[25] It should be noted that the way this question is posed does not take into account the 'baseline' from which
change is perceived. Especially where the baseline is *no* stakeholder participation in these dimensions, any
increase will appear significant, and 'remaining the same' at zero might be viewed differently in the analysis.

Figure 8: Impact on stakeholder engagement

In your view, how will overall stakeholder participation in the implementation and follow-up of the SDGs be affected by COVID-19? n=71
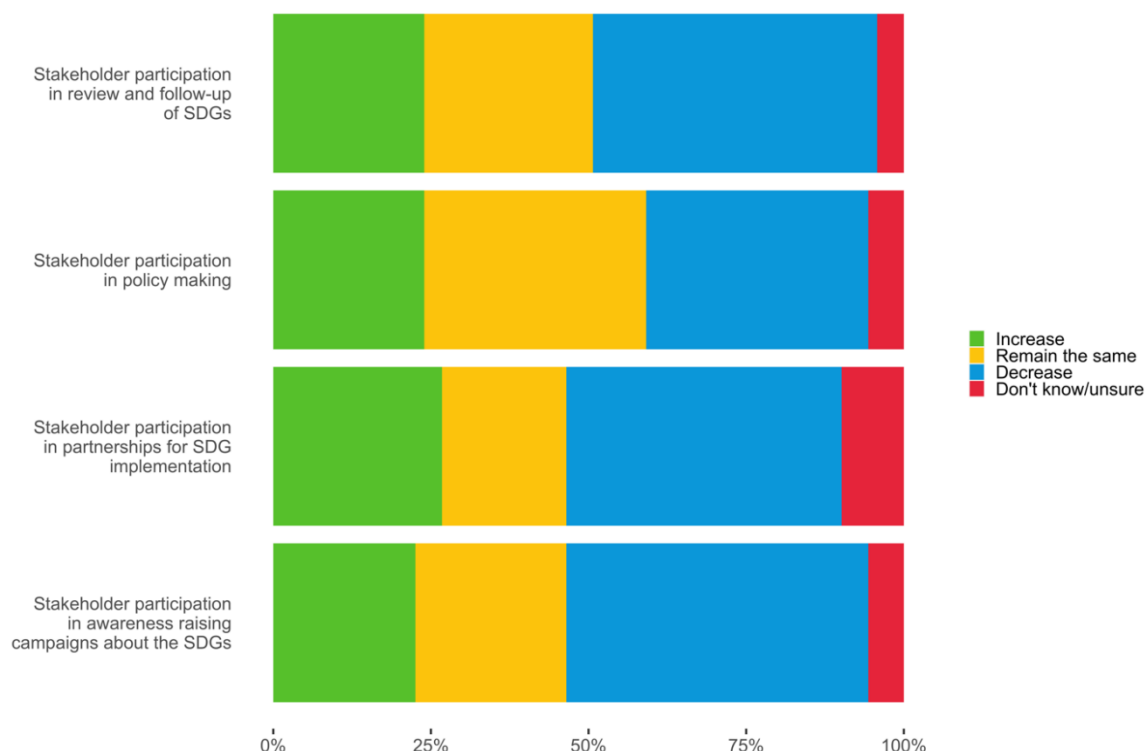
Figure 8

This data suggests a worrying gap between a growing need for stakeholder engagement and the impacts of coronavirus on conditions in which engagement thrives. As outlined in section 1, the kind of stakeholder engagement envisioned by the 2030 Agenda can be understood in terms of how meaningful the engagement is (where meaningful engagement is two-way, responsive, and power-sharing) and who is included within the processes and practices.

Respondents believe COVID-19 will have significant and severe impacts on efforts to engage stakeholders, presented in Figure 9 below, but it is important to highlight that these impacts are not perceived as falling equally. Rather, these impacts are viewed as hitting hardest on element*s most important to meaningful and inclusive engagement*. Thus, they will be greatest in reaching out to marginalised and vulnerable groups (64% 'significant' and 'severe') in resourcing participation (64%) and maintaining mechanisms for engagement (61%). These impacts are discussed in more depth in section 4.[26]

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[26] Because the question was posed in terms of little/significant/serious or severe, it is possible – though very unlikely, on the view of the research team - that some respondents intended to indicate positive effects. If true, this would affect the analysis. It is possible, too, that respondents recorded "no effect" because there was currently no such process underway for there to be impact on.

Figure 9: Practices for stakeholder inclusion

In your view, to what extent will the COVID-19 pandemic affect your country's ability to implement the following practices for including stakeholders in the SDG implementation process?
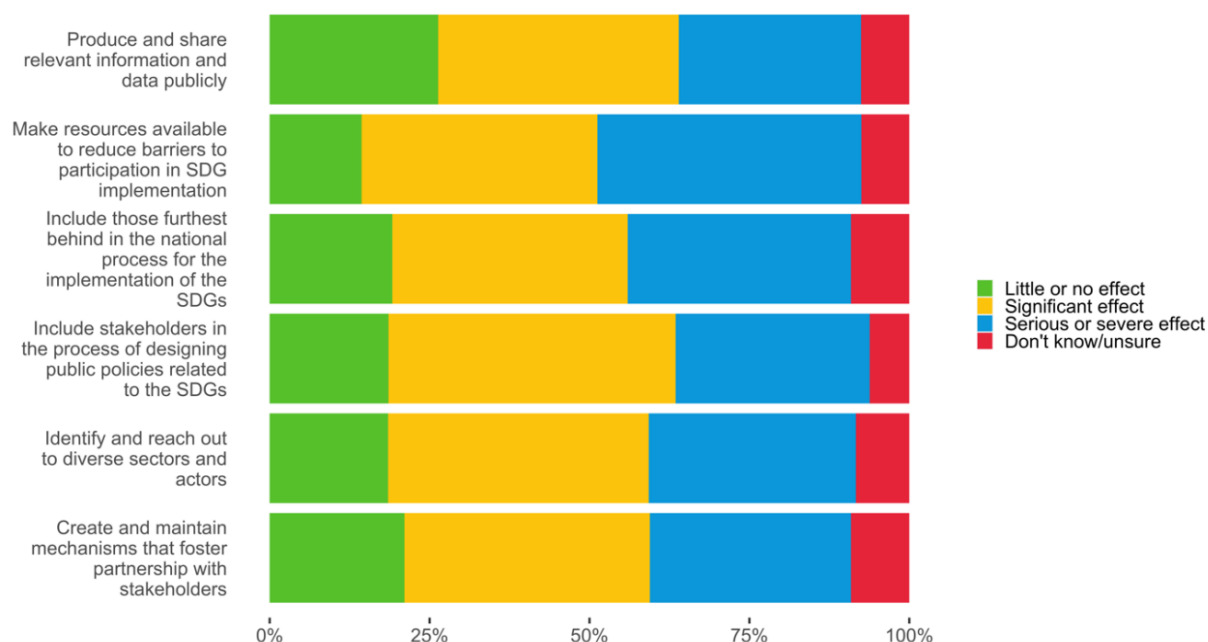
Figure 9

2.3 Partnerships as vital to SDG implementation in the context of COVID-19

Given the importance of partnerships as a vehicle for stakeholder engagement, and an important foundation for implementation, the survey offered a set of questions focused on respondents' experiences of the value of partnerships in implementing the SDGs in the context of COVID-19.

First, the survey asked, "Who have governments partnered with to implement the SDGs in the context of COVID-19?" The results are presented in Figure 10 below. The partners (in SDG implementation in the COVID context) most commonly identified by government respondents are civil society (90%, 62 of 69 respondents) followed by the private sector (75% - 52 of 69).

Figure 10:

Which of the following types of stakeholders has your government partnered with for achieving the SDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic? n=69
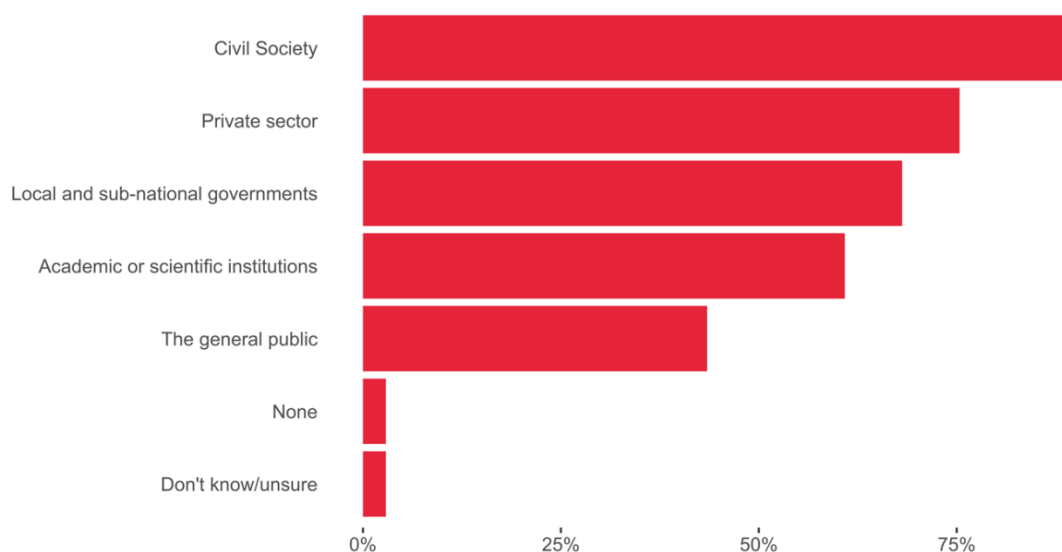
Figure 10

Almost all respondents were aware of partnerships for SDG implementation in the COVID-19 context. Of the 67 respondents who were aware of partnerships, the average number of stakeholder sectors per respondents was 3.7. This could indicate either multiple partnerships, or partnerships with multiple different kinds of stakeholder sectors. Either way, partnerships between governments and stakeholders are present in almost all responses.

The survey also asked what valuable functions and resources these partnerships have contributed, with the results presented in Figure 11 below. Knowledge and expertise are the most common contribution of these partnerships - 72% (50 of 69) respondents - followed by supported engagement of "left behind" groups – 57% (35 of 69), providing finance, service delivery, and local access (all at around 44% of the 69 respondents).

Figure 11:
What kinds of contributions have stakeholders made to implementing the SDGs since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic? n=69
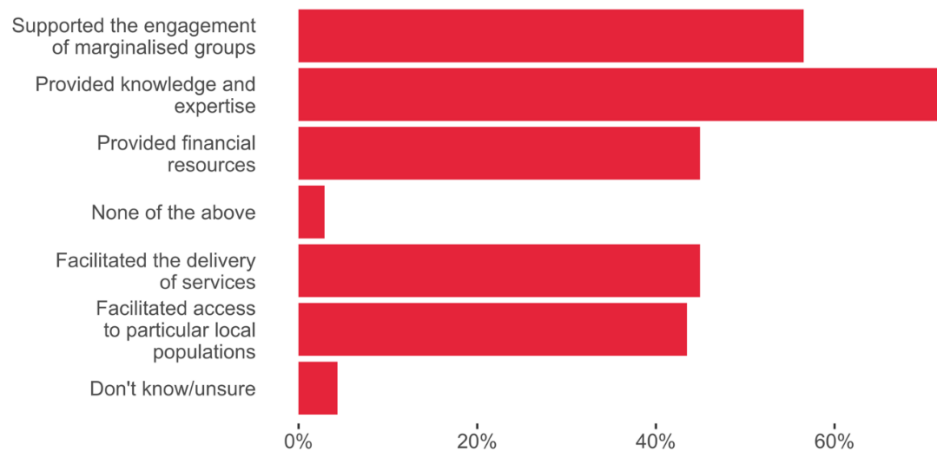
Figure 11

The value of partnering with stakeholders is illustrated by the following case study from Uganda. Uganda's VNR catalogues the problems posed by COVID-19 and describes the move to remote working.[27] Nevertheless, as outlined below, continued partnership work with other stakeholders around the SDGs has raised awareness, and localised the SDGs for the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Uganda

The Government has partnered with various organisations and groupings such as for persons with disabilities, youth and women in the preparation of the 2020 Voluntary National Review report. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most engagement activities were carried out through online platforms, with the UN-Country team instrumental in supporting the establishment of the SDG secretariat and its activities that led to the finalization and submission of the report. The government has also partnered with CSOs to generate and promote awareness campaigns. "Tondeka Mabega" meaning "do not leave me behind" is Uganda's campaign to raise awareness of the SDGs at the local level and amplify the voices of marginalized people.

At a regional level, 'listening and solutions sessions' between community members and decision makers and civil society partners are held in these communities through local platforms called barazas (held quarterly) and Local Voluntary reviews. The conveners explain the SDGs in local terms, and community members can then be able to share their stories, concerns and local solutions Deliberations bring decision makers and representatives of the marginalized groups together to reflect on how the issues from the community level will be documented, recorded and taken up in the national development processes.

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[27] Government of Uganda Voluntary National Review Report 2020 – e.g. p. 3.

To identify the place of partnerships in responses to the pandemic in particular, respondents were asked where they had seen new partnerships being formed in response to COVID-19. As Figure 12 below shows, partnerships in response to COVID have developed especially in the areas of health (seen by 85% - 45 - of 53 respondents) support for small business (64% - 34 of 53), access to IT (58%) and support for education (57%). These areas of partnership reflect some of the urgent health, social and economic impacts of COVID-19, indicating the responsiveness of partnership formation in the context of COVID-19.

Figure 12:
In which of the following SDG-related areas have you seen multi-stakeholder partnerships being built as a response to COVID-19 in your country: n=53
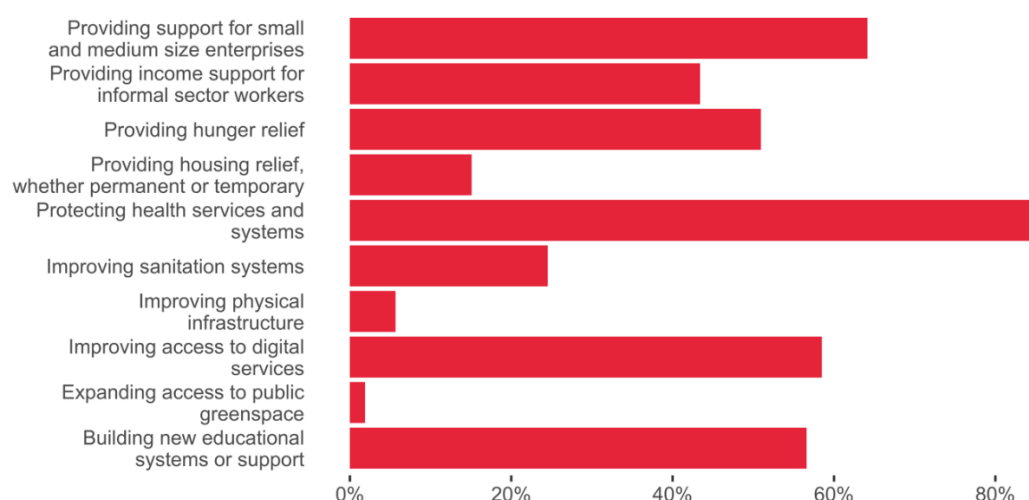

Figure 12

Taken together, these results underscore the vital importance of partnerships for SDG implementation in the context of COVID-19. Almost all respondents indicate that their governments do partner; those partnerships provide a range of valuable contributions; and the partnership landscape in these countries is responding to needs arising from COVID-19 impacts.

The box below gives an example of partnership working in response to COVID-19 on SMEs and marginalised groups from Mexico's experience.

Mexico:

An alliance was forged with the private sector, civil society organizations and the states of the Republic to begin the creation of the "Solutions Factory", which seeks to support the digitization of businesses with an impact on the wellbeing of the poorest people – the 'base of the pyramid'. Work was done with civil society organizations, the Ministry of the Interior and international cooperation in a "Hackathon" to promote new funded projects that would address the increase in gender violence in the face of confinement measures that sought to mitigate COVID 19 infections. Training and strengthening activities for these projects are underway, with implementation beginning in February 2021.

Some further examples of partnerships given by states illustrate the diversity of partners, contributions and impacts involved:

"business associations, subnational governments, the central government, the Church and civil society as a whole partnered to generate funds and implement oxygen generating plants".

"partnership between the Government, civil society and the private sector companies in collecting huge amounts of money in one place to help the most vulnerable people affected by the pandemic and informal workers".

"Alliances have been generated between mayors (municipalities) and civil society to create soup kitchens".

"A joint team of Government and private retailers for multi-national shops to discuss the way forward in strengthening local produce and supply".

"partnership between the High Commissioner for the United Nations system in our country and the World Bank aimed at developing a strategic roadmap to face the health crisis".

(3) Findings on stakeholder perceptions

Complementing the first survey focused on the experience of VNR countries, the second survey was circulated to a full range of stakeholders to evaluate their perspectives on COVID-19 and its impacts. This section presents the data around three key themes. First, stakeholders' views on how they have been involved in the response to COVID-19 and who they have partnered with; second, the key challenges currently facing stakeholders because of the pandemic, and third, the effects they have seen from the pandemic – on SDG implementation, and especially on the SDG progress and participation for vulnerable and marginalised groups.

It should be noted that 5% of respondents identified their 'organisation' as a 'national government'. This was not felt to be a difficulty for an analysis – governments are after all vital stakeholders with important perspectives. Overlap with the VNR country respondents was minimal. The small size of the 'national government' set, and the fact that responses – on detailed analysis – did not tend to differ markedly from other sectors, mean that this did not generate any significant impact on the overall trends identified in this section.

3.1 Stakeholder perspectives on activity and partnerships in response to COVID-19

One objective for the survey work was to get an overall sense of stakeholder activity around the SDGs and the response to COVID-19. An initial question for stakeholders asked about their level of involvement in their country's response to COVID-19. 52% of 417 stakeholder respondents said they had been involved to some extent in COVID-19 response, with an additional 38% 'seriously involved'.

Responses also show that stakeholders have made important contributions to SDG implementation in the context of COVID-19. Here, responses on the kinds of contributions made reflect the dimensions outlined by government respondents asked a similar question, addressed in section 2.3 above. Knowledge and expertise were the most identified contribution (66% of 270 respondents), followed by advocacy and mobilisation (51%), engaging vulnerable and marginalised groups (48%), and service delivery (33%).

Considering the perceived increased need seen by respondents to the survey of governments, and their worries about future stakeholder engagement, 43% of respondents forecast that their involvement with the SDGs, both in implementation and review, will **increase** post-COVID-19 (compared to 20% who foresaw a decrease).[28] Clearly, there remains an appetite for stakeholders to engage around the SDGs.

To gauge how far COVID-19 had led or encourages stakeholders to form new partnerships – perhaps with a wider range of different sectors and organisations - respondents were asked about whether they had formed new partnerships, and if so, with who. 66% had formed new partnerships in response to COVID-19. The most common partners are shown in Figure 13. These are overwhelmingly NGOs/civil society (75% of 270 respondents) with other sectors at 30-35%.

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[28] The data presented here is an average of responses on the implementation and review components, which were addressed separately. There were 383 responses on 'review' and 353 on 'implementation.

Figure 13:
What kinds of organizations/entities have you formed partnerships with to implement the SDGs in the context of the COVID-19 crisis n=270
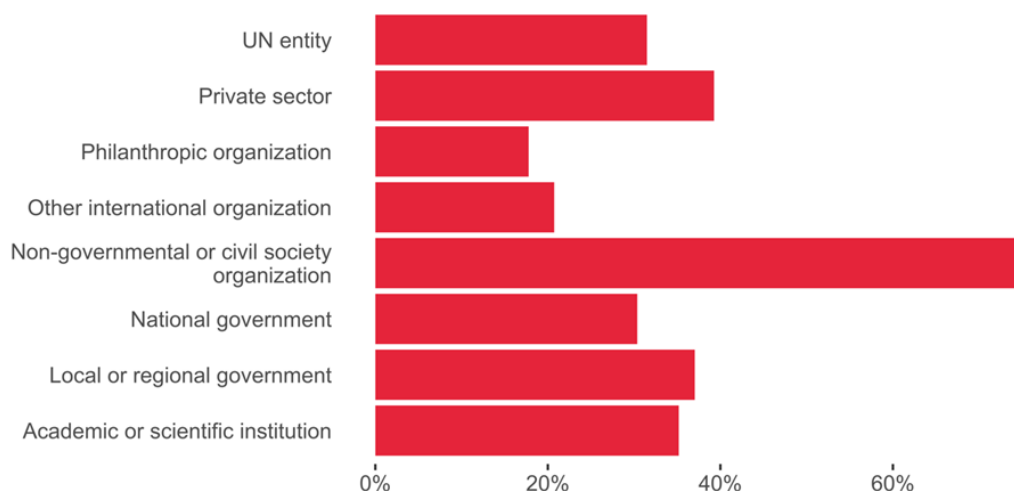
Figure 13

On average, respondents had engaged with 2.9 new 'sectors' of partners. These results underscore the important presence of CSOs in partnerships. Though further research is needed, the evidence above suggests that CSOs have been central to many of the new partnerships formed in response to COVID-19. By contrast, national government plays a more limited role as a partner – with academic institutions, the private sector, UN entities, and local and regional governments all more prominent.

In some cases, the longer answers from stakeholders indicate the perception that governments are not being open to partnerships. Especially in such cases, the UN system is highlighted as an important source of support:

"the government does not believe in external actors to its government and cut all kinds of support to NGOs. We need to work for those who need it most but directly with the UN".

"the government took the lead in action and refused the participation of civil society organizations in terms of dealing with them as partners or even allowing them to access information and statistics. My organization works according to its capabilities, away from the support of the government".

"The only real initiatives have been carried out by us thanks to UN support".

The proportion of different partner sectors is strikingly similar to the proportions found in a much larger UN survey of 900 partnerships in 2019.[29] This might suggest that the core of COVID-19 partnerships reflects the existing SDG partnership ecosystem – perhaps even that in some respects that the systems and dynamics that underpin partnerships have not *needed* to shift dramatically in response to COVID-19.

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[29] See the graph on page 13 of Clough, Long, Rietig *A Study of Partnerships and Initiatives Registered on the UN SDG Partnerships Platform* (2019).

3.2 Key COVID-19 challenges for stakeholders

Respondents were also asked about the key challenges that COVID-19 had posed for their activity around the SDGs. Figure 14 below presents the breakdown of responses to this question, offering a visual picture of proportions who saw significant (yellow) and severe (blue) impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. The scale of impacts identified – the preponderance of yellow and blue – is clearly visible. Overall, COVID-19 has had the biggest impact on funding - 34% (126 of 343 responses) 'severe', and 42% (156 of 343) 'significant', but engaging marginalised and vulnerable groups is most widely perceived as *severely* impacted -35% of 359 respondents identifying this as 'severe'. New challenges for staffing, capacity, and partnerships are also recognised (20-28% severe, 30-40% significant).

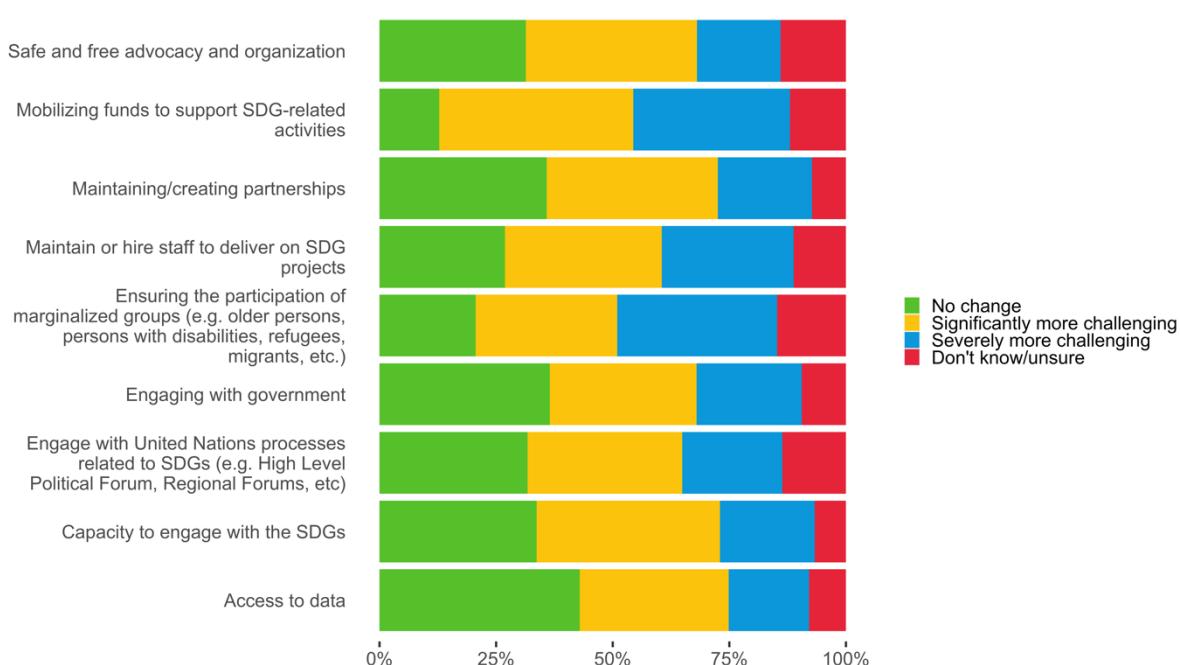Figure 14: Challenges for the organisation

Figure 14

The concern about how the COVID-19 pandemic might be shrinking civic space is given voice in responses. It has become more difficult for stakeholders to engage with government - 23% (81 of 359 respondents) rating this impact as severe - but much more significantly, respondents to the stakeholder survey see effects on space for civil society advocacy and organisation. 'Safe and free advocacy and organisation' is viewed as more challenging by 37% (131 of 357 respondents), and severely more challenging by 18% (64 respondents). The survey did not allow for further investigation of this data. The research team cannot say, without further investigation, how far this space has been disrupted by the pandemic itself, and how far by the social measures adopted by governments in response – nor can it investigate whether such measures have been necessary and proportionate in the context of the pandemic in individual countries.

28

This question also offered respondents a chance to provide additional longer answers on other challenges. The 'word cloud' below (Figure 15), is an effort to present and reflect this data. The centrality of 'Funding' in the graphic reinforces the financial challenge presented by COVID-19, but other commonly seen words – 'community' 'access' 'participation' - reinforce the range and diversity of challenges experienced in different contexts.

Figure 15

3.3 Stakeholder views of the pandemic and its impacts on vulnerable and marginalised groups

Though much has been written on the impacts of COVID-19 on progress across the SDGs, the diversity of stakeholders and the range of roles they play in pandemic response means that stakeholders also have valuable perspectives on the impacts of COVID-19. When asked to identify the SDG impacts of COVID-19, stakeholders see widespread impacts of COVID-19 across all SDGs, with the most perceptions of severe impacts on SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) (55% of responses) SDG 1 (no poverty) (49%) SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing) (47%) and SDG 4 (quality education) (47%). To an extent, these results confirm a picture of the pandemic that presents its impact on human economic and social systems as most damaging.

As identified by both government respondents, and stakeholders' own views, a significant portion of stakeholder activity from respondents is concentrated around their role in reaching and representing vulnerable and marginalised groups. Stakeholder perspectives on how these groups are impacted by COVID-19, then, offer important insights.

Figure 16 below shows these perceptions of impacts on different populations. Severe impacts from the pandemic are seen for all vulnerable and marginalised groups, especially older people (52% - 158 - of 327 respondents) homeless and slum dwellers (45% - 140 of 316), migrants (45% - 138 of 316), and women (42% - 131 of 320) and persons with disabilities (41% - 134 of 322), but the proportion of respondents identifying 'severe' impacts is over 35% for all groups.

Figure 16: Impact on groups

In your experience, to what extent has COVID-19 impacted on progress towards the SDGs for the following marginalized and/or vulnerable segments of society? n=320
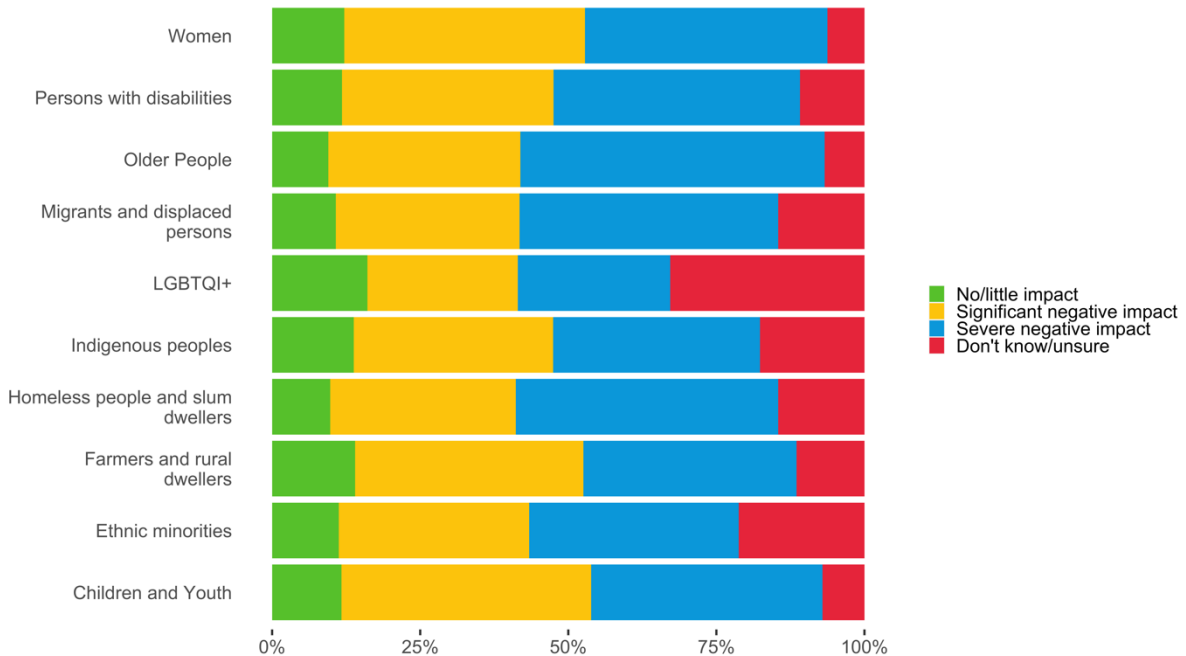

Figure 16

Importantly, stakeholders saw COVID-19 impacts not just on progress for such groups, but also on their participation in implementation, follow up and review – shown in Figure 17 below. Responses from stakeholders here largely confirm the findings of the survey for governments in Section 2, that the COVID-19 pandemic has decreased the participation of certain groups in implementation and review. The groups perceived as most affected were older people (62%, 213 of 343 respondents) and persons with disabilities (55% - 186 of 339 respondents), but as Figure 17 shows, the proportion is above 40% for many vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Figure 17: Effects on participation of groups

In your experience, how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the participation of the following groups in SDG implementation and review? n=320
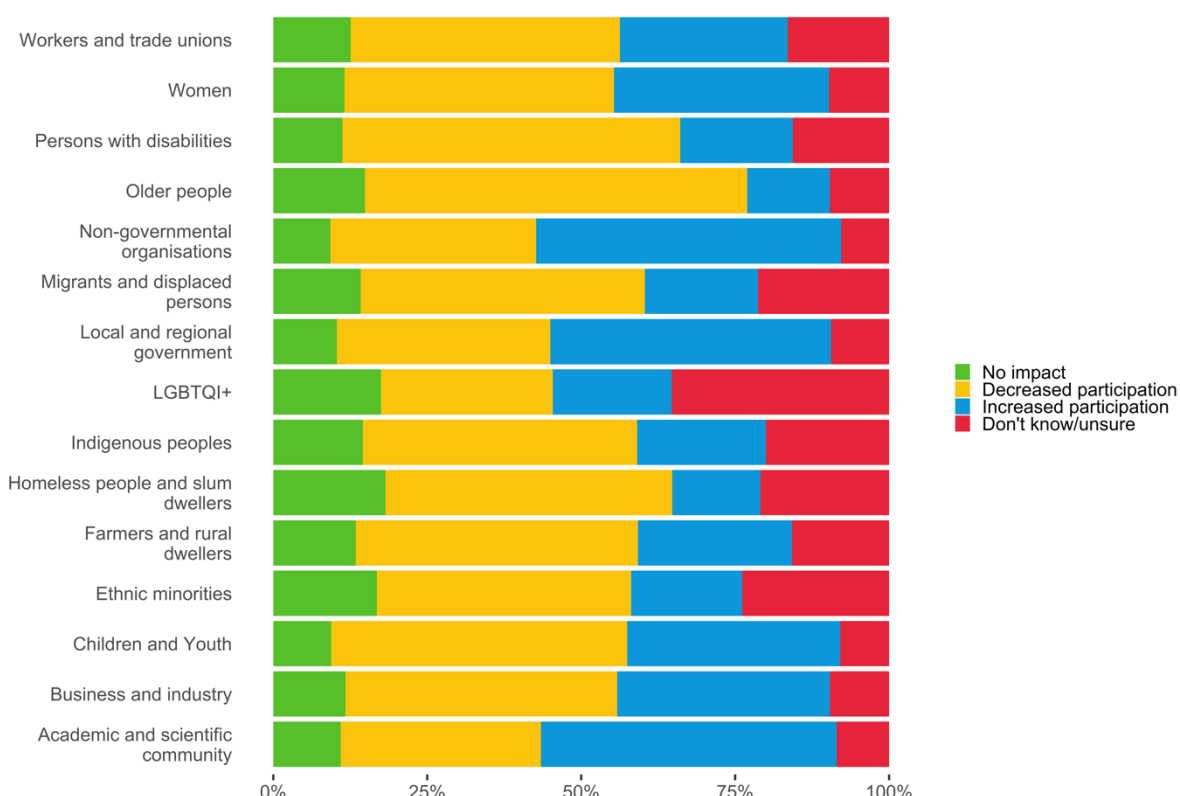
Figure 17

Stakeholders see COVID-19 generating *increased* involvement for particular *sectors*: academia, local and regional governments, and NGOs (all above 40% of approx. 330 respondents in each case). This might reflect two factors. *First*, as in the findings from the survey of governments, that some sectors have been relatively well placed to participate in remote, online engagement. also, and *second*, that some sectors have mobilised in response to COVID-19 to a greater degree than others.

To complement questions in the survey of governments about COVID-19 impacts on processes of national SDG implementation, and VNRs, stakeholders (reflecting a broader range of countries, not just 2020 and 2021 VNR countries) were asked more general questions about the impacts of COVID-19 on national SDG review and follow up. These findings are discussed in the context of a focus on meaningful participation in Section 4 below.

(4) Key challenges and looking forward

Having presented key data from responses to the two surveys, this section identifies and focuses on three 'forward looking' themes about the ongoing effects of the pandemic and its aftermath. These themes do not focus on the impacts of COVID-19 on SDG *outcomes* – these have been addressed well elsewhere – but rather address COVID impacts on the processes and practices through which the SDGs are achieved. The three themes are *engagement, partnership,* and *the SDGs as a framework for the recovery* from COVID-19.

4.1 Tackling the challenges for stakeholder engagement

This report has presented evidence on the importance of stakeholder engagement to implementation and review of the SDGs. However, the data also highlights the challenge of ensuring *meaningful and inclusive* stakeholder participation in the context of COVID-19.

The two surveys drew on elements from the UN's upcoming framework for analysing the quality of stakeholder engagement to pose a series of questions about different practices. Expanding on the analysis of government and stakeholder responses outlined above, these questions from the survey of governments allow for an assessment of specific components of stakeholder engagement that track 'meaningfulness' and 'inclusivity'. The first chart below, figure 18, shows government respondents' assessments of COVID-19's likely future impacts on *information sharing* aspects of stakeholder engagement around SDG review – 'informing' 'awareness raising' etc. The second, figure 19, shows the breakdown of state responses on proactive efforts to maximise inclusivity – 'reaching out to those furthest behind' and 'reducing barriers to participation' in quality engagement.

Figure 18: Information sharing

In your view, to what extent did/will the COVID-19 pandemic affect your country's ability to implement the following practices for informing stakeholders in the Voluntary National Review process:
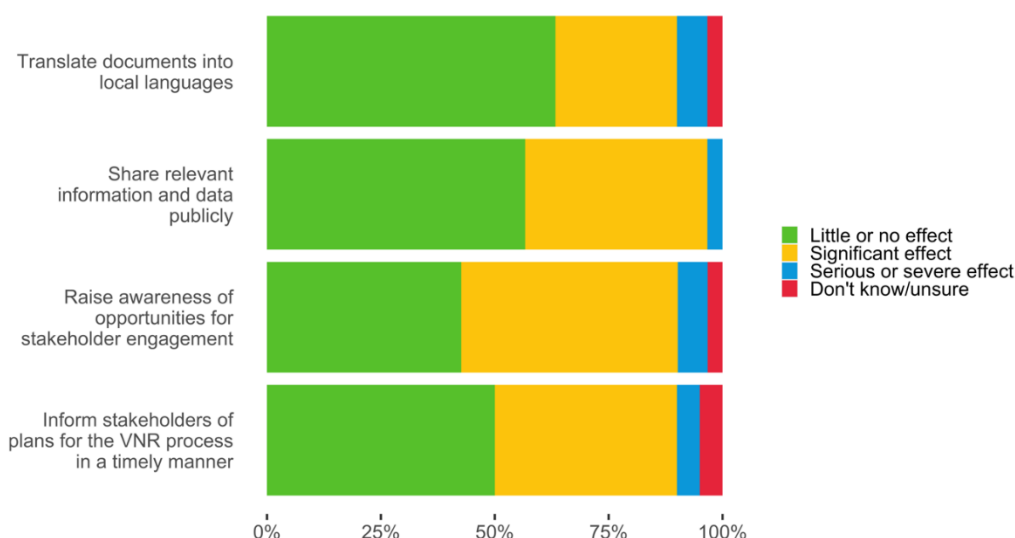

Figure 18

Figure 19: Increasing inclusivity

In your view, to what extent did/will the COVID-19 pandemic affect your country's ability to implement the following practices for including stakeholders from marginalized and/or vulnerable groups in the Voluntary National Review process:
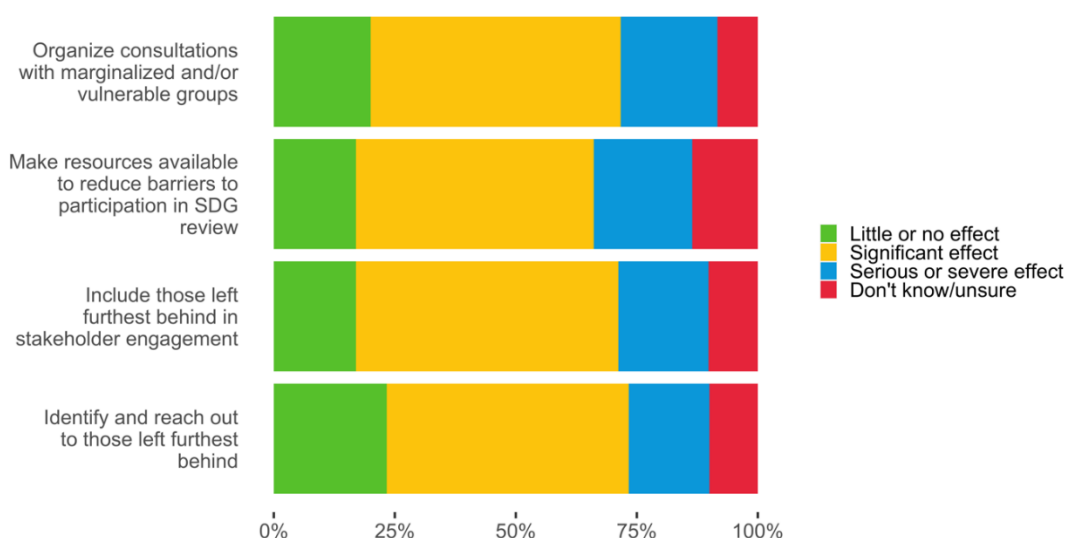

Figure 19

Taken together, these results show the challenge for meaningful and inclusive participation. A far greater proportion of responses see little or no impact (the green, left-hand portion of the bar) on elements of information-sharing (top chart), whilst a much larger proportion see significant (yellow) or severe (blue) impacts on proactive engagement with vulnerable and marginalised groups (bottom chart).

These results are reinforced by the responses of stakeholders on questions of COVID-19 effects on implementation, follow up and review. With respect to processes of review, 66-75% of approx. 320 stakeholder respondents see significant or severe impacts across *all* aspects of SDG review processes. These proportions are *lower* around COVID-19 impacts on 'information-sharing' aspects of stakeholder engagement, *higher* around more substantive stakeholder engagement, and *highest* around efforts to include vulnerable, marginalised groups. Stakeholders, then, see the current and potential impacts of COVID-19 as concentrated on government efforts at more meaningful, formal, and inclusive engagement efforts – for example, efforts to make resources available to overcome barriers to participation (severe 42%; 77% overall, 250 of 320 respondents); mechanisms for partnership with stakeholders (75% overall, 222 of 318 respondents), and efforts to ensure meaningful inclusion of stakeholders in policymaking (242 of 343 - 75%).

Towards meaningful and inclusive digital engagement

As evidenced in responses reported in previous sections, digital provision has become the norm for stakeholder engagement in the context of the pandemic. This is also true at the global level – most notably the revised format for the HLPF this year, which adopted online solutions for sessions and

events.[30] And, given that digitisation was already a broad global trend prior to COVID-19,[31] we might expect to see a greater move to digital provision of engagement with stakeholders at all levels. Some stakeholders noted the benefits of online engagement:

"After the pandemic, our society has accelerated usages of online communication tools, such as Zoom and Teams. Therefore, it has become significantly easier for local people to access information on how to foster multi-stakeholder engagement".

"Government engages with different partners including Civil society, private sector, media and the local governments mainly through ICT mechanisms. This has increased awareness within government agencies on the importance of linking SDGs to national development plans".

"Engagement can now include so many people than usual using virtual platforms".

However, results from 2020 VNR countries laid out in section 2 demonstrate the challenge to *inclusivity*: there is a clear risk that certain groups who have difficulty accessing online engagement – for example, older persons, or migrants and refugees - will be excluded. This has the capacity to not just duplicate existing vulnerability and marginalisation in online engagement, but also exacerbate the existing challenges of, say, poverty or disability.

In some of their longer answers, state respondents reflect on this 'digital divide'– between those stakeholders (and states) who can reliably and easily access digital engagement opportunities, and those that cannot – as a worry alongside the move to online participation.

"The challenge is and will be with the populations without internet access, which are the populations in the most vulnerable situation. It is in our interest to be able to include these populations in the report. We will seek, with our allies novel ways to achieve this."

"These are [reliant on] video conferencing and in our country, we most often have a connection problem, which makes things more difficult for us."

Online engagement can make special efforts to include different populations of vulnerable and marginalised groups. For example, the detailed response of Nigeria, below, reflects on efforts to hold dedicated sessions to consult with vulnerable groups.

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[30] These are detailed at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020.
[31]The Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations (A/RES/75/1) specifically highlights digital technology, and its opportunities and challenges, as a theme (para. 13).

As respondents have noted, it is relatively easy to disseminate information digitally (though there might still be challenges in accessing that information). However, facilitating accountability, deliberation, and cooperation - meaningful engagement - in digital formats and settings is a pressing challenge in the context of a shift to online engagement. Interaction and dialogue in a 'live' or 'synchronous' setting, along with the further benefits generated (e.g. aiding the creation of partnerships and networks, mutual support, and responsiveness) is much less easy online. For meaningful, inclusive engagement, as many as possible should have an equal chance to contribute, but this becomes practically impossible in larger settings. Discussions can also take place in 'asynchronous' settings such as text-based forums or social media. This lessens the time constraint but can require monitoring in order to keep the discussion focused, stimulate input and collate key issues. Especially where stakeholders are asked for significant engagement in such spaces, it is important that there is a clear path for the value and impact of such contributions.

Some forms of online engagement, such as online surveys or polls, have an important, specific but limited place in meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Although such methods are a good way of gathering views and might be a useful prelude to meaningful engagement, their usefulness as a way of fostering 'whole of society' dialogue depends greatly on the questions that are asked (both their quality and purpose) and the audience thereby engaged. They are also, by definition, not "two-way". If they are to be part of a conversation or an exercise in accountability and responsiveness, this depends on how the results of the survey are engaged with and used. Surveys inherit limitations of their design and dissemination – in essence, the same kinds of issues of methodology summarised in section 1 of this report.

Crucially, for stakeholders to engage in such spaces, the engagement must be viewed as worthwhile, in the sense of creating value for the stakeholders or those they represent. In part, this requires an understanding of different stakeholders and the value they see in their participation, as well as clear

communication on the purpose of any engagement undertaken, and how that objective will be achieved.

Finland's work around the VNR, presented below, offers some examples of more meaningful engagement, including a mechanism to allow individual online assessments of progress can feed into the VNR and aid accountability for decision-makers.

Finland

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Finland moved several steps of their VNR preparation process online, including an online questionnaire for the public on how to organise the VNR process, online seminars with stakeholder groups and online peer dialogue around the VNR with Mozambique and Switzerland. Finland has established an interactive and participatory national follow-up and review mechanism that brings sustainable development related data, trends and challenges into wider public debate and scrutiny. As an input to the VNR, an online Citizens' Panel of 500 volunteers assessed the state of sustainable development on the basis of approximately 45 national SDG indicators, supported by interpretative texts. The panellists each made an individual assessment of current levels and recent trends using an online tool. These responses were aggregated into an overall citizens' assessment of Finland's progress on each indicator, presented to policymakers, and summarised in the VNR.

Capacity building for stakeholder engagement

The overall need for future support and capacity building around stakeholder engagement is made clear from survey data. 'Mapping stakeholder groups' was identified as a lower priority by government respondents (only 16% of 58 respondents chose this option) but every other capacity-building option offered in the survey was selected by over 40% of respondents, as shown in Figure 20 below. In terms of areas where support was thought most valuable, 78% of respondents (48) identify stakeholder engagement as an area for support and capacity building, followed by 54% awareness raising (33), and 47% (29) mobilising and engaging 'left behind' groups. Stakeholder generated data and creation of new multi-stakeholder partnerships were both chosen by 43% of respondents. It is important to remember that all respondents to the survey of governments had undergone, or were commencing, VNR processes. The UN's voluntary reporting guidelines and handbook might have served to highlight particular areas as challenges to be addressed.

Figure 20:

Which of the following would you consider priorities for capacity development and knowledge sharing around stakeholder engagement and developing multi-stakeholder partnerships for SDG implementation, review and follow-up considering the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis? n=58
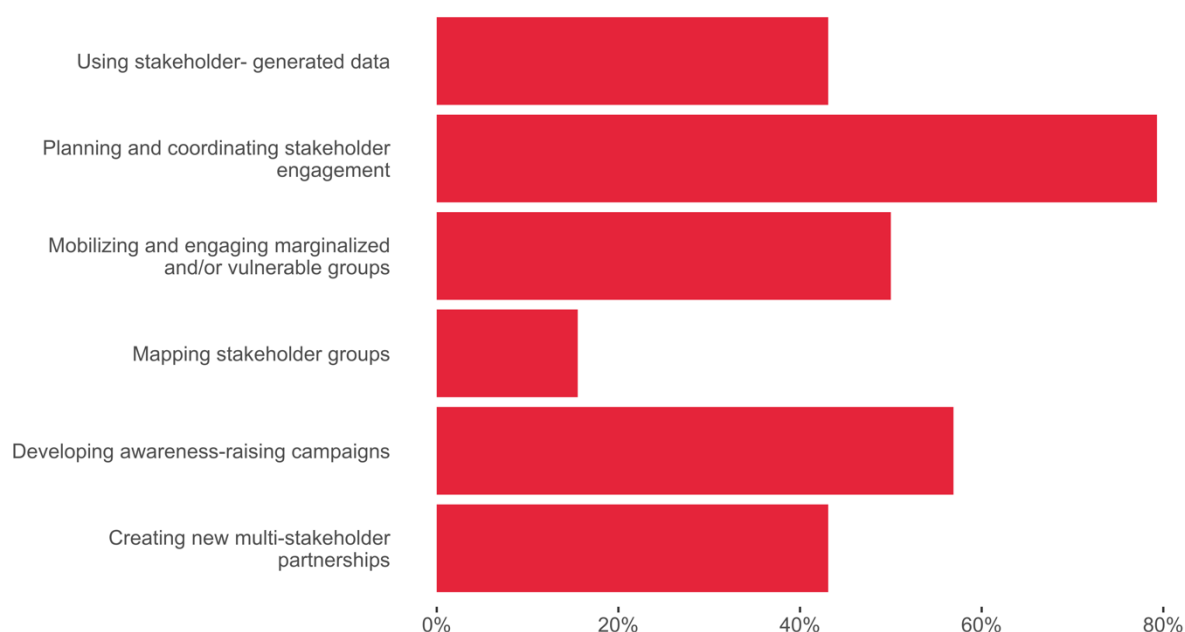

Figure 20

These responses cluster around the issues, identified earlier in this section, of ensuring the depth and breadth of online engagement. The links to these elements - for example, the way that capacity building around engaging marginalised and vulnerable groups could address worries about the inclusivity of engagement activity, or non-official data can be a meaningful contribution of stakeholders - reinforces the case for these expressed needs to be taken seriously as *foci* for future activity.

Reflecting on these stated needs in the context of the discussion of online engagement above generates a key recommendation: **capacity-building efforts should address the specific challenges of comprehensive, meaningful online engagement, and address the capacity of stakeholders to make the best use of such spaces. Additional research could be conducted on current good practice, and these activities could build towards development of specific guidelines that can facilitate quality online engagement.**

4.2 Challenges of harnessing partnerships

The report so far has highlighted the way that partnerships with a range of stakeholders have been important in the response to COVID-19 and wider SDG implementation. Respondents were asked to identify up to three lessons learnt from these experiences, offering a range of possible options. These responses are presented in figure 21 below. Of 55 responses, 75% (41) saw alignment with national priorities as important, 60% identified the importance of building synergies between sectors, and 40% the need for clear objectives, amongst their three key lessons.

Figure 21:

Identify up to three main lessons from partnerships forged in response
to the COVID-19 pandemic in your country that can support efforts towards
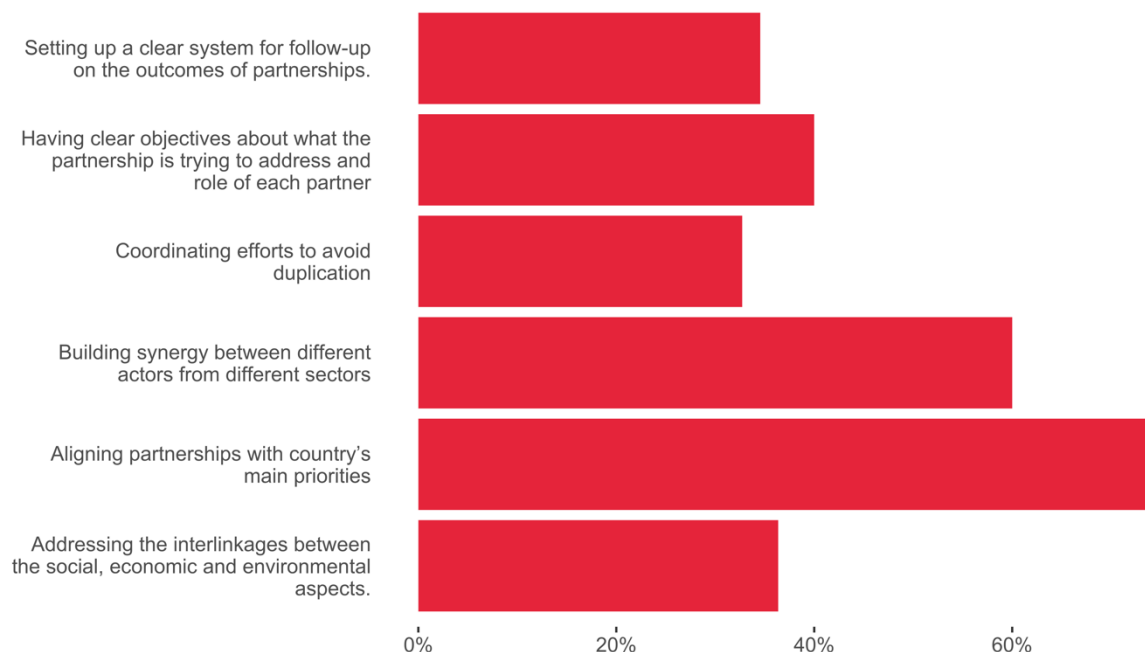delivering on the SDGs n=55

Figure 21

These findings resonate with wider thinking on partnerships generally – the need for clear objectives, for example – and on the place of partnerships for the SDGs. The 2019 UN survey on partnerships found similar issues - and a similar pattern of responses - about issues of prioritisation duplication, and coordination.[32]

Responses across both state and stakeholder questionnaires make it clear there have been new partnerships formed in the context of COVID-19. It is clear that these partnerships are already contributing to SDG implementation, and could be scaled up, expanded, or transposed to wider fields. Longer responses from stakeholders reflect this:

"The fund has been able to mobilize voluntary contributions from individuals as well as business, and similar drive could be used for SDGs implementation."

"The Stakeholder Engagement between the Centre for Disease Control, Medical Association, the Ministry of Health and the media played a major role in fighting COVID-19. If such partnership is encouraged and implemented across board, it will go a long way in achieving the SDGs".

The survey of governments also asked respondents about the perceived needs for future partnerships, summarised in Figure 22 below. These directly reflect key COVID-19 concerns – focuses are on health (74% of 52 respondents), support for business (42%), digital services (52%), and education (44%).

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[32]Clough et al. A Study of Partnerships and Initiatives Registered on the UN SDG Partnerships Platform (2019).

Figure 22:

Considering the ongoing impact of COVID-19 in your country, in which areas do you think it will be particularly important to build new multi-stakeholder partnerships for the implementation and follow-up of the SDGs? n=52
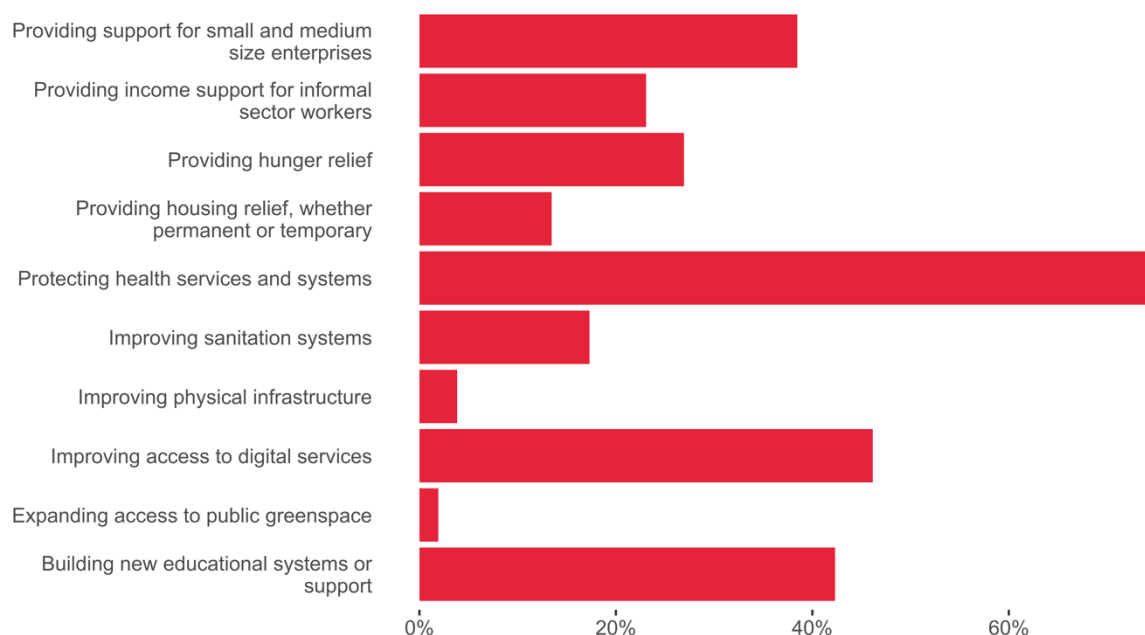

Figure 22

The experience of Estonia below reflects a partnership focused on digitisation of public services:

Estonia

Prior to COVID-19, Estonia had invested in an online government services network which has been valuable in responding to COVID-19. In response to the pandemic, Estonia has raised access to public services by expanding the digital architecture of public service offered to citizens. For example, the state chatbot 'Suve' is already up and running on many public sites to assist the public with pandemic-related questions. Additionally, a platform that matches volunteers with people needing assistance in the crisis and another platform helping companies share the workforce that would otherwise remain idle are also successfully working. These and other projects were developed through a 48-hour online Hackathon - 'Hack the Crisis' - that involved over 1000 innovators across 14 time zones. A further focus has been developing measures to increase the accessibility of digital services, public services, physical space, for people with special needs (for example, online meetings have been found to increase the engagement of people with physical disabilities).

Overall, two sets of questions seem important in reflecting on partnerships and the impact of COVID-19. The **first** concerns how to grow and replicate the vital partnerships formed in response to COVID-19 to larger scales: whether there is an opportunity for "building back better" by building on these partnerships already established. At the same time, the progress and contributions of these partnerships in a context of the resource challenges noted in section 3 are a powerful demonstration of the value of partnerships, which could itself have wider effects.

The **second** reflects a worry about COVID-19's effect on the wider ecosystem of SDG partnerships. The partnership landscape - who partners, and on what issues - can be viewed as at least partly arising in response to signals about urgent priorities and needs. A danger of focus areas for partnerships being set by the priorities of COVID-19 is that attention is taken from other areas, following perceived critical need and funding. There are potential impacts, too, on the kinds of partnerships encouraged and fostered. Partnerships around SDG implementation and review are diverse in their purposes, scales, and types - from loose, global alliances focused on review processes to grassroots partnerships looking at SDG implementation for a particular section of society. It remains to be seen how COVID-19 will decisively alter this web, and what the consequences might be.

In response, the recommendation here is to 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.

4.3 The SDGs as a COVID-19 response framework

The longer-term impact of COVID-19 on the 2030 Agenda as a framework or 'roadmap' for the world is currently unclear. On the one hand, the immediate impacts of COVID-19 have placed a focus on crisis management and addressing urgent challenges as they arise. This, coupled with a focus on the longer-term societal and economic impacts of COVID-19, and a potential 'inwards-looking' focus for donor governments, might threaten the commitment and political will required to drive a 'decade of delivery' for the SDGs.[33] Countering this, national plans for COVID-19 recovery offer to 'build back better' in ways that link such an agenda to the SDGs. To what extent the SDGs are prominent in government's responses to COVID-19 – and *how* the links are being made – are critical questions for the next 10 years of activity.

To offer evidence on the visibility of the SDGs and how they have been brought into recovery planning, the stakeholder survey posed a question about whether governments were linking the COVID-19 crisis to the SDGs.

Overall, 42% of 365 stakeholders responded that governments have been explicitly drawing on the SDGs in addressing COVID-19; 33% said this had not occurred, and 25% responded 'don't know'. There are reasons for caution about generalising from this: respondents were from countries at different stages of the pandemic, in very different national contexts. Furthermore, it could be that governments had made reference to the SDGs, and respondents were not aware.

However, taken at face value, this suggests the mixed effectiveness of the message that the SDGs are the best framework for response and recovery. Where states have not done this, stakeholders who are invested in the SDGs have indicated frustration in their longer responses – some of these are reproduced below. In a context where stakeholder action is acknowledged as important, but the challenges to stakeholder action are severe, a government's messaging around the importance of the SDGs can be a powerful signal to stakeholders.

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[33] Though international cooperation and the "whole of world" approach is outside the scope of this report, the impacts of COVID-19 on development cooperation and financing are also important issues for investigation.

Conversely, 42% might be considered better than expected given this global crisis: a significant number of countries *are* endorsing and making use of the SDGs in their COVID-19 response. There is an interesting regional disparity, however, in the proportions of responses. This is shown in Figure 23 below. Whilst acknowledging the impact that the country makeup of respondents might have, a higher proportion of respondents from Africa, Asia and Oceania (58% 42% 66% respectively[34]) have seen governments linking the SDGs to their COVID-19 response, compared to much lower proportions in Europe (26%) and the Americas (33%). The high proportion of 'don't knows' from Asia – 37% - should also be noted. Further research would be needed to explore this apparent difference. For example, this might partly be explained by different approaches to the SDGs in national planning contexts, either by region or more broadly between developed and developing countries.
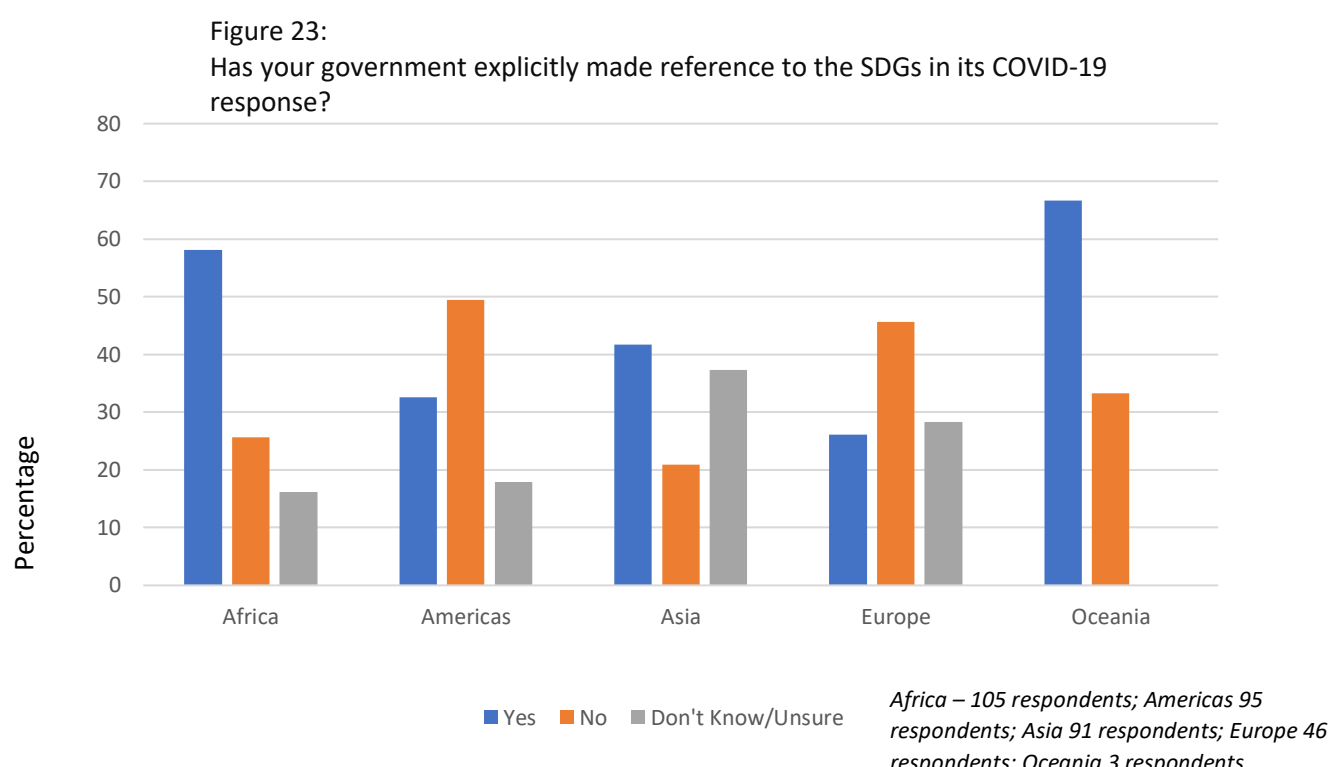
Figure 23:
Has your government explicitly made reference to the SDGs in its COVID-19 response?

Africa – 105 respondents; Americas 95 respondents; Asia 91 respondents; Europe 46 respondents; Oceania 3 respondents

Figure 23

A follow up question was posed for those who responded positively, asking about *how* the SDGs had been linked. The results are presented in Figure 24 below. 77% of 151 respondents who see the government linking SDGs and COVID-19 say this happens through the "leave no one behind" agenda, and 65% through addressing interlinkages and complexity. Only 23% have seen specific SDGs referenced in their government's response.

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[34] Numbers of respondents are given below – of note, there were only 3 respondents from Oceania.

Figure 24:

In what ways has your government explicitly acknowledged the SDGs in its response to COVID-19? n=151
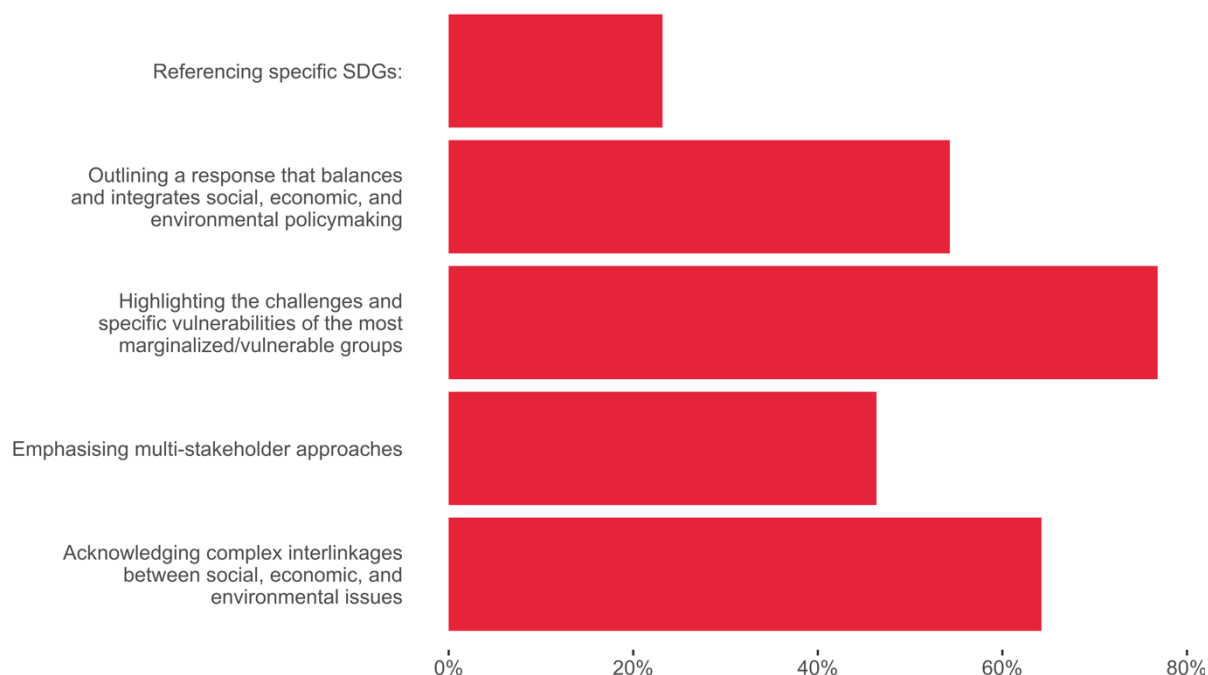

Figure 24

Whilst acknowledging the need for caution about differences in country contexts, these results seem to demonstrate the importance of the underpinning commitments and principles of the SDGs. 'Leaving no one behind'; the indivisibility of the agenda; policy coherence as a response; and 'whole of society' implementation are all being emphasised as links between the COVID-19 crisis and the 2030 Agenda. Reflecting on the way that efforts to "build back better" can be aligned to the 2030 Agenda – as in section 1 – it is interesting to note that these are aspects of a wider and more holistic understanding of the 2030 Agenda.

By contrast, it is also interesting to note that the goals and targets of the SDGs have *not* been perceived as embedded more firmly in COVID-19 responses. Clearly, aspects of the COVID-19 response from decent work (SDG 8) to health (SDG 3) map against those SDGs: the point is rather that stakeholders are not seeing this mapping – let alone "active alignment" – in government framing of pandemic responses.

As noted in the methodology, we would expect survey respondents to be engaged with, and watchful for, the SDGs and we would expect levels of awareness amongst other stakeholders to be lower. Overall, then, this raises the question of whether an opportunity is being missed to sensitise and motivate more stakeholders around the SDGs. Stakeholders, in their long answers, testify to the frustration this generates:

"The lack of engagement of government to the follow-up of 2030 Agenda is, at least, very disheartening given the monumental effort of CSOs".

"The government is addressing the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic as a health problem, without emphasizing that health is included in the SDGs. It is the organizations and social movements, as well

as the International Cooperation with a presence in the country, who keep the SDGs alive in this time of pandemic and "New Normal".

Reflecting on the SDGs as a framework for COVID-19 recovery, these results can be combined with the discussion under 4.1 and 4.2 above. Meaningful, inclusive stakeholder engagement and partnerships are themselves vital parts of a more comprehensive account of "building back better". Effective safeguarding of online space fosters a whole of society approach to implementation and review.[35] Partnerships are one form that this 'whole of society' approach must take, a way to add value and generate new knowledge, resources, and solutions. These issues inform the wider question tackled in this final section - how to mesh COVID-19 responses effectively and publicly with the framework of the SDGs. This is vital, since a failure to do so can undermine the 'whole of society' approach.

The final recommendation for further investigation is to **develop a stronger and more detailed understanding on how to employ and promote the SDGs as a framework for "building back better" - drawing on SDG goals and targets but also integrating the principles of 'leave no one behind' and 'whole-of-society' implementation and review -** and then to **identify steps governments and stakeholders can take** to effectively communicate and publicise these systematic links to the SDGs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report underscores the threat that COVID-19 poses not just to SDG goals and targets, but also to the processes that should be at the core of SDG review and implementation. Data from the surveys show that partnerships with stakeholders are perceived as critical to SDG implementation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a diverse range of stakeholders making important and distinct contributions. The need for stakeholder engagement and partnership will increase in response to COVID-19 – though respondents also worry that stakeholder engagement in implementation and follow up of the SDGs may in fact decrease**.** This worry is, to an extent, justified: COVID-19 poses stark funding, staffing and capacity challenges for stakeholders that threaten these contributions, as well as a potential threat to the civic space in which they operate.

Countries have adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of how they engage with stakeholders for SDG implementation, follow up and review, moving to online engagement. The report has showcased examples of how countries have innovated in response. Nevertheless, stakeholders and governments see the current and future effects of the COVID-19 crisis impacting heaviest on the opportunities for the most meaningful, inclusive kinds of stakeholder engagement in implementation and review. 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 the move to digital engagement.

The key recommendation arising from this report is to tackle this challenge of meaningful and inclusive engagement in the context of COVID-19 and its aftermath – in particular, in light of a trend towards digital engagement activities. This is where the UN could usefully facilitate further capacity-building, practice sharing, and peer learning activities. The analysis also highlights some further challenges and opportunities arising from COVID-19 that need research and reflection.

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[35] See UN, Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space (2020), p. 4.

New partnerships have arisen in response to COVID-19, targeted especially at urgent impacts of the pandemic. The challenge is to consider carefully how to learn from, and build on, these COVID-19 oriented initiatives for wider partnerships around the SDGs – harnessing the spirit of cooperation and responsiveness established, but balancing emphasis on impacts of the pandemic with maintaining and developing the broad web of partnerships contributing to the SDGs.

Partnerships and stakeholder engagement are vital to the SDGs as a framework for COVID-19 response and recovery. According to stakeholders, there is mixed evidence of the SDGs being presented by countries in such a way. More research is needed into how to use the 2030 Agenda as a holistic framework to "build back better", drawing on the goals and targets but also integrating the principles of 'leaving no one behind' and 'whole-of-society' implementation and review. As the world begins to move slowly beyond the pandemic in 2021 and starts to survey the aftermath - poised between the desire to return to normal, and the hunger for a *better* normal - the need for a shared framework of understanding on how to create a world we want "of the people, by the people and for the people" could not be more urgent.