

UN Country Team Azerbaijan

Strengthening the Multi-stakeholder Dimension of National Development Planning and SDG Mainstreaming in Azerbaijan



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Executive summary

This report identifies strategies to expand and strengthen multi-stakeholder engagement for the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda in Azerbaijan. The multi-stakeholder nature of the 2030 Agenda demands an environment that enables the participation of all; and one that fosters new ways of working in partnerships to mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources at all levels. It will inform the participatory implementation of the UN-Azerbaijan Sustainable Development Corporation Framework (UNSDCF 2021-2025), the most important instrument for the planning and implementation of United Nations development activities in the country, in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The report outlines the limitations of the multi-stakeholder engagement process employed during the implementation of the current UN-Azerbaijan Partnership Framework (2016-2020). It suggests steps that the UN and the Government should take to forge better stakeholder engagement in support of the 2030 Agenda. Some of the issues to be addressed are:

- the ad-hoc, sporadic engagement of non-government organizations (NGOs), academia and the business community in the planning and implementation of UN programmes;
- a lack of coordination among UN agencies on private sector engagement, and;
- a weak commitment from state agencies to meaningfully engage other stakeholders to their work with the UN.

Stakeholder engagement in long-term sustainable development works best if it is organized as a continuous process rather than being conducted on an ad-hoc basis or through detached one-off engagement exercises at different points of the policy cycle. A structured process enables stakeholders and governments to plan, to assemble evidence, reports and other materials to make well-researched contributions at the appropriate time in the policy cycle. Standing institutional arrangements allow the capacities of civil society representatives to be strengthened over time and the trusting relationships of support and cooperation to be built up.¹

The report also identifies the main actors who could be involved in UN activities within Azerbaijan, including mapping the most active stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, media, academia/research centers, vulnerable and marginalized communities,

¹ European Economic Social Committee, 2015, extracted on September 20, 2020 from: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2703For_distribution_Stakeholder_Engagement_Practical_Guide_REV_11SEPT.pdf

diaspora organizations, government and political parties as well as prominent personalities/influencers. Proposed recommendations focus on how best to involve the actors mentioned above and identifies the most effective platforms to be developed by the UN and the Government. Recommendations are divided into two tracks.

- How to empower the existing platforms, such as the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) Steering Committee, results groups and thematic groups.
- How to establish new tools, channels and platforms for multi-stakeholder engagement.

Several creative tools, country-specific mechanisms and capacity building activities are discussed to offer a variety of options for strengthening partnerships for SDG implementation. The power of new technologies, online platforms, big data and social media are also proposed and discussed.

This report also includes sections regarding principles of engagement, rules of conduct, basic norms for participation and safety protection.

Report methodology

This report was developed using multiple information sources (both qualitative and quantitative) from government, UN, open source and personal interviews. A desk review of existing literature and an analysis of secondary data was conducted to develop the report. Meanwhile, this report also draws on best practices observed in other countries.

Unfortunately, due to movement restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was impossible to organize any focus group discussions in person, or travel to the regions and seek the input of marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Government data

The primary source of information used was statistical data gathered from various government agencies. For example, a list of NGOs was acquired from the State Council for the Support of NGOs, a body which trains and funds these organizations. Similar information was acquired regarding the registration and activities of religious organizations, media holdings, and business associations. The list of think tanks and academic research centers was sourced from the ADA University's database.

Open source data

A significant portion of information was gathered from the analysis of open-sourced information, such as local and international newspapers, reports and publications. The format and content of previous development-focused meetings between NGOs with the state were reviewed to develop recommendations that could help improve the engagement process. Similarly, open-sourced information was used to evaluate previously held conferences, workshops and discussions devoted to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Azerbaijan.

UN data

UN publications served as a major source of information for this report. Among those analyzed were:

- The [Internal Guidelines for the UNSDCE](#), Guiding Principles for the Cooperation Framework Companion Piece,
- UNAPF (2016-2020) Evaluation Report, Common Country Analysis (2020),
- Draft UNSDCF (2021-2025),
- UN Environment Programme Strategy for Private Sector Engagement and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation: A review of voluntary national review reports (2016-2019).

Interviews conducted

To acquire first-hand information about previous experiences with multi-stakeholder engagement, several interviews with members of the UN Country Team (UNCT) as well as independent experts and government representatives were also carried out. Discussions were also held with big business associations such as the Chambers of Commerce of the United States of America (USA) and France.

Multi-stakeholder engagement is key to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework in Azerbaijan

Successfully addressing the challenges facing Azerbaijan in the four priority areas identified in the next United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) – 2021-2025 will be impossible without broad and sustained stakeholder engagement. This report identifies key actors and proposes ways to engage them in the process of designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating UN programmes in Azerbaijan.

As a result of the Common Country Analysis conducted by the UN office in Azerbaijan in 2020, and in support of the Sustainable Development Goals of the country, the following four priority areas were identified for the next UNSDCF.

- **Priority Area 1:** Inclusive growth that reduces vulnerability and builds resilience.
- **Priority Area 2:** Stronger institutions for better public and social services delivery.
- **Priority Area 3:** Protecting the environment and addressing climate change.
- **Priority Area 4:** A gender-equitable society that empowers women and girls.

An emphasis placed on economic transformation, inclusive growth and opportunities for young people demonstrates the increasing pressure to provide Azerbaijan's youth with employment and a secure source of income, while ensuring that the economy moves toward inclusive and green growth. At the same time, such progress cannot be achieved without more robust, effective and transparent institutions. Finally, the rapid development of the country should not bypass environmental concerns and gender issues facing Azerbaijani society.

These four priority areas illustrate that multi-stakeholder engagement should be broad in scope, based on the principles of inclusivity, maximum outreach, cross-sectoral cooperation and involvement of new, previously underrepresented actors and vulnerable groups within society. As outlined in the UNSDCF's Internal Guidelines, one of the primary objectives of the new Cooperation Framework is to implement UN programmes in the spirit of partnership and with the participation of all development actors, with the ultimate aim of leaving no one behind. Participation has been associated with a range of positive effects in development, humanitarian aid and poverty reduction programmes, notably better assessment of needs and capacities, and improvements in implementation and sustainability. Its benefits include more equitable social development, better management of risks and reputation, pooling of resources, cross-sectoral learning, building trust and durable partnerships.

Previous experience with multi-stakeholder engagement

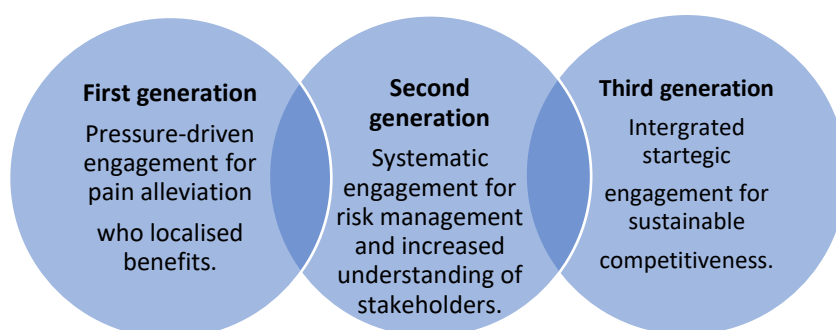
The concept of multi-stakeholder engagement around the world has evolved over the past few decades. Whereas at the beginning of this process, much of the engagement happened under pressure, subsequent stages of the process followed systematic and integrated approaches with strategic goals and benefits in line with the sustainable development of communities. The current assessment shows that both UN agencies and governmental entities have not yet fully utilized the full potential of multi-stakeholder engagement. The section below highlights some of the important observations stemming from the analysis.

Sporadic engagement in policy planning and evaluation processes

In the previous programme cycles, the UN and the Government have conducted dialogue and brainstorming sessions with business, academia and civil society organization (CSO) representatives. Moreover,

the UN has engaged representatives of CSOs, private sector and other stakeholders across various platforms. However, the approach to this process has not been systematic. Delivering a systematic approach to stakeholder engagement requires identification and mapping of relevant stakeholders, as well as developing platforms and mechanisms for engagement.

Evolution of multi-stakeholder engagement



Government dialogue with civil society is formal, lacking clear agenda, practical follow-up. For example, the National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development under the office of the Prime Minister has organized several conferences on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the involvement of UN organizations, CSOs, private sector actors and academia. These meetings have not yielded detailed action plans or substantial policy recommendations.

Another case in point is permanent consultative councils between government agencies and NGOs, which have become more common over the last few years. The councils meet several times annually and discuss various issues that are of concern to the portfolio of the Ministry. Government entities view these platforms as an opportunity to demonstrate the organization's transparency and accountability as well as seek feedback and ideas on certain

issues. In 2019, some 20 state agencies held meetings with NGOs.² Apart from permanent councils, engagement between Government and NGOs also happen through one-day workshops, conferences, roundtables.

Furthermore, for most NGOs, it serves as an opportunity to get closer to the government entity either for fundraising or public relations purposes. Agreed meeting agendas, focused discussions and an accountability mechanism are three critical components currently missing from the format of the councils. The positive exception is the experience of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation. The Foundation representatives meet regularly with representatives of the culture and arts communities. They organize programmes and events together with the leaders of these communities based on the proposals received in these meetings. Also, the Presidential Office regularly organizes focused discussions with ambassadors and CSO members. In one such meeting, conducted in September 2020, more than 90 NGOs participated.

[See here recent news coverage of meetings between government & NGOs, showing dialogue](#)

Restrictive CSO operating environment

Since 2014, the CSO operating environment has become more restrictive in Azerbaijan, including registration, funding and reporting requirements, with harsh penalties for their violation. Further to the restrictive amendments to the laws governing national and international CSOs implemented by the authorities in 2013-14, new complex rules were enacted in 2015. These require CSOs to register domestic and foreign grants with the Ministry of Justice and they require foreign donors to gain overall authorization from the Ministry of Justice and to receive approval for each grant from the Ministry of Finance. Given this constrained operational environment, alongside a decline in access to funding, particularly from foreign sources, many CSOs have had to suspend, scale down or move their operations abroad.

NGOs that back government policies receive most state financial support

The Council on State Support to NGOs under the President of Azerbaijan is tasked with providing state financial support to CSOs and to facilitate cooperation with civil society. The Council financed over 480 NGO projects in 2017. Even so, the general perception among

² These included: the State Committee for Women, Children and Family problems, State Committee on Religious Affairs, State Migration Services, Ministry of Ecology, ASAN Service, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, State Youth Fund, State Agency of Compulsory Insurance, Center for Economic Analysis, Ministry of Economy, Human Rights Ombudsman, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Culture, State Committee for the affairs of IDPs and refugees, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education.

independent CSOs is that the Council gives preference to organizations supportive of government policies.

It is worth noting that the State Council for the Support of NGOs recently announced that all upcoming grants would be organized and implemented in partnership with selected state bodies, such as ministries and committees. This is done to increase both communication between NGOs and government bodies as well as to identify cost-sharing and additional fundraising opportunities for ministries to support civil society projects. This decision has boosted cooperation between state actors and NGOs and led to the organization of several brainstorming and planning sessions. Government bodies appear to understand that it is beneficial to coordinate with NGOs during the planning phase of projects.

The UN is well placed to facilitate meaningful CSO dialogue with the Government and with the private sector. Meanwhile, the UNSDCF is the best platform to do so because it is focused mainly on key development issues in the country such as socio-economic recovery, environmental protection and gender equality. Even though the UN has continuously attempted to engage other stakeholders to this dialogue, most UN programmes are discussed, planned and organized in cooperation with the Azerbaijani government.

Barriers to full inclusion of other stakeholders

Barriers to full inclusion include: The absence of regular meetings with all stakeholders, lack of enthusiasm on the part of the state actors and inadequate involvement of non-state actors. The UNAPF Evaluation Report pointed to this gap, saying: “there is room for improvement to address certain operational challenges and allow some actors such as civil society, academia and the private sector to participate”. The report also urged better coordination among the government agencies and streamlining communication between the Government and the UN. It also called for greater inclusivity of non-resident UN organizations and better coordination among the UN organizations. “Challenges in creating and implementing joint programmes include operational and practical implications with examples being ‘double charging,’ different organizational work strategies, increased competition for funding among UN agencies,” the report concluded. Better coordinated UN work will benefit society as a whole, building trust and solidarity, creating better social cohesion, contributing to a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to development, and bringing new issues and voices into the public arena.

The Government seeks to reduce the distance between citizens and civil servants

For the past three years, Azerbaijan’s government has implemented a very useful practice of sending ministers and other high-ranking officials to the nation’s provinces to meet with ordinary citizens, listen to their concerns and discuss their problems and to identify solutions. Although middle-level officials do, to some extent, filter messages and complaints,

and it is not always easy for citizens to attend those meetings, this practice has been an effective tool, generally speaking. It has narrowed the gap between the citizenry and top-level policymakers, and it has created an opportunity for ministers to not only assist ordinary citizens but also to bypass bureaucratic or media censorship and to gather first-hand information. This practice has unfortunately been halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, in no way should this practice replace the role of NGOs and civil society. Several ministers have shifted such meetings online and conduct them either with ordinary citizens or employees of their regional branches.

Mapping of all stakeholders

The main national stakeholders to be involved in the process of consultations and multi-stakeholder engagement may be grouped under the following major categories:

- [Government](#)
- [Political parties](#)
- [Civil society organizations \(NGOs\)](#)
- [Business sector actors or business associations](#)
- [Academia, research and the think-tank community](#)
- [Media](#)
- [Non-registered entities](#)
- [Prominent individuals/influencers](#)
- [Parliamentarians](#)
- [Municipalities and local executive powers](#)
- [Diaspora organizations](#)

Government

'Internal Guidelines' outlined in the UNSDCF indicate that the Cooperation Framework is the foremost partnership document with government agencies. Very active and close dialogue with the relevant state agencies, ministries, committees and commissions is essential for the success of the UN programmes in Azerbaijan and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. To this end, engagement with Government, particularly with the offices of the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister (which are responsible for the National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development) as well as the Minister of Economy, is of particular importance. Furthermore, specialized UN agencies already work in close collaboration with their Government counterparts.

Political parties

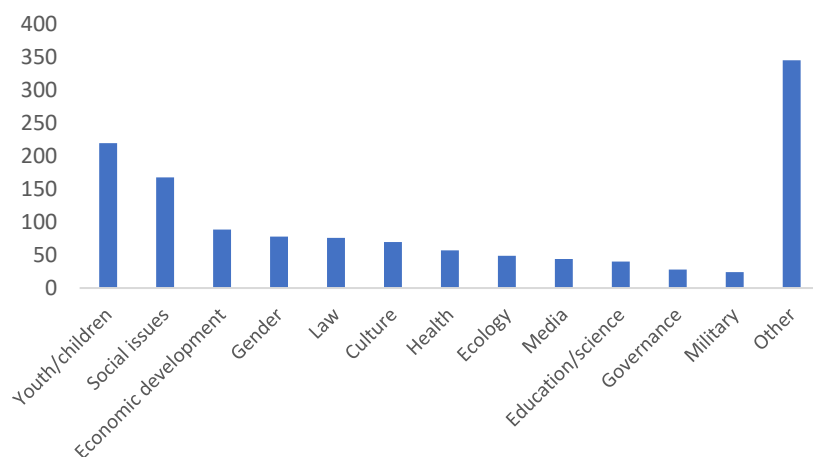
Political parties (more than 40 in Azerbaijan) have been less active in the discussion process concerning development assistance and programmes. At the same time, several parties have published constructive reports and policy recommendations in the national press and are actively involved and invited to policy discussions. Currently, nine parties are represented in the Parliament, with the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) retaining the majority (70 out of 125 seats) from the previous election. The second-largest party to be represented in the Parliament (the Civic Solidarity Party) won only three seats.

Civil society actors

More than 4,600 NGOs exist in Azerbaijan.³ Some of these are unregistered and function as initiative groups or have transformed themselves into limited liability companies to avoid the problem of funding. This number shows an increase, compared to 4,300 NGOs in 2017.⁴

The registered NGOs operate mostly based on grants and thus have limited resources to function on a permanent basis. Many of them lack technical capacity and skills to serve as a discussant or consultant on various international policymaking platforms because they have done little research or lack critical statistical data for policy analysis.

Number of active NGOs by sector



Source: *The Council on State Support to NGOs*

Yet, many of the registered NGOs are indeed very active in the socio-political and economic life of the country. They engage in various state and non-state programmes, projects, activities, campaigns and many have built a good reputation among the general public.

Noting the large number of NGOs, it is not practically possible to engage all of them in the consultation process. The section below groups active NGOs by their activity sector.

[Click here to see the full list of NGOs in Azerbaijan](#)

Youth NGOs

There are many active youth NGOs in the country. Two umbrella associations stand out as most active, namely: NAYORA (National Assembly of Youth Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan) and ATGTI (Azerbaijan Student Youth Organizations' Union). This is partly because the Ministry of Youth regularly funds them. They unite several dozens of youth organizations and, if needed, can quickly assemble good platforms for discussions and brainstorming. They also maintain good working relationships with many international organizations. IRELI Public Youth Union is also one of the most active youth NGOs in the

³ <https://report.az/media-xeber/azerbaycanda-dovlet-qeydiyyatina-alinan-metbu-orqanlarin-ve-qht-lerin-sayi-aciqlanib/>

⁴ <https://www.yeniavaz.com/az/newscontent/znewscontent/27312/azerbaycanda-dovlet-qeydiyyatina-alinan-qht-lerin-ve-kiv-lerin-sayi-aciqlanib>

country. All of these organizations can provide good ideas for thinking and implementation, but distance themselves from criticism of governmental policies that is considered too radical. Other possible active stakeholders in this group are the ASAN Volunteers Movement, the European Youth Parliament, AGAT Youth Union, the Young Diplomats Youth Union, and the Azerbaijan Children's Union. Several active independent youth organizations function without official registration. Another important stakeholder in this group is the State Youth Fund, which underwrites many youth projects.

Over the last three years, many state entities created their own volunteer youth movements. Such movements currently exist in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Migration Service, Ministry of Ecology, State Customs Committee, among others.

Women's rights organizations

There are approximately 80 NGOs in the country dealing with gender issues and the protection of women's rights. Among those that stand out as the most active are: the Society for the Protection of Women's Rights (named after Dilara Aliyev and is an organization that is often critical of the government), the 100 Women Business Leaders Association, Femmes Digitales Organization, Azerbaijan Women Oil Workers Society, Azerbaijan Women Journalists Society and Women's Society for the Rational Development. Their involvement in the process will help to ensure gender equality and female empowerment in the country as both the main principle of the development framework and also a priority area for the UNSDCF.

Ecological organizations

More than 50 NGOs are registered in Azerbaijan in the field of ecology. It is noteworthy that many of these NGOs work in the country's regions, specifically in mountainous areas. The IDEA Campaign, led by President Aliyev's daughter, Leyla Aliyev, is a resourceful and active organization in this field. Involving ecological organizations is very important as they are the main stakeholders of the UNSDCF priority area number 3. They are also important to realizing the resilience principle of the development framework.

NGOs dealing with socio-economic and human rights issues

Many NGOs focus on issues related to internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees, regional economic development, poverty reduction, education and societal problems. Most active are HAYAT, Umid, Damla, the Union of Disabled Persons, NGO Forum, Eurasia Press Club, and the Society for Humanitarian Research. Organizations dealing with challenges facing disabled persons should be included in this category as they are very vocal and active in the policymaking process and should always be invited to participate in UN discussions. There exist several active Human Rights promotion organizations in Azerbaijan, such as the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly or Azerbaijan Human Rights Center, both of which are actively

involved in the engagement process. Most of these NGOs employ staff of no more than 10 people and depend heavily on grants, thus carrying out projects on an irregular basis.

It should be noted that State Support Fund for NGOs serves as an umbrella entity for most of these entities located within Azerbaijan. The involvement of the Fund creates an efficient communication and discussion framework for brainstorming sessions and organizing meetings.

NGOs representing ethnic and other minorities

NGOs representing ethnic and/or religious minorities are less active on a national scale, except for Azerbaijan's Russian community and several NGOs that focus on the promotion of Jewish heritage.

The Heydar Aliyev Foundation is a powerful, respected and resourceful organization, which engages in various fields of social life, such as education, children, health care, ecology, among others. They should be involved as a major stakeholder in the process. One of their projects, Development of Regions, is gaining popularity outside of Baku.

[Click here to see list of organizations representing national or ethnic minorities](#)

Business sector actors or business associations

Traditionally, the private sector has had little involvement in the development assistance process. As Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) gains ground, more businesses have a better understanding of their responsibility to contribute to society's broader needs, the empowerment and development of communities, the improvement of their business practices to conserve energy and resources, waste less, protect human and labor rights, etc. Many of them also contribute financial resources to social projects. The business sector understands that their support to achieving the SDGs not only offers good PR opportunities, but that it is impossible to achieve the goals without the active involvement and participation of businesses.

Since the liberalization of business registration in the country, the number of registered businesses increase daily. As such, it is almost impossible to track and/or involve all of them in the policymaking process. Yet, several large business associations exist that effectively unite major companies and serve as a useful platform for the expression, advocacy and lobbying of business interests in the country. Listed below are some of them.

- 1.1.1 ASK - Azerbaijan Confederation of Entrepreneurs - This organization has excellent contacts with government entities and often organizes conferences and

- workshops on tax and customs problems, export and import issues, government laws and regulations. ASK has several standing committees on thematic areas.
- 1.1.2 Caspian Business Club - Although this organization works mainly on energy issues, they do organize regular discussions regarding customs, transportation and other issues.
 - 1.1.3 Amcham - Although the American Chamber of Commerce is close to the United States embassy, they do effectively unite many Azerbaijani companies as well and organize regular discussions on problematic issues, including publishing policy recommendations to the government.
 - 1.1.4 AHK – The German Chamber of Commerce is also very active with monthly discussions and surveys/reports on EU businesses’ concerns.
 - 1.1.5 Turk-Azerbaijan Association of Businessmen
 - 1.1.6 British Business Group
 - 1.1.7 French Chamber of Commerce
 - 1.1.8 Israeli-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce
 - 1.1.9 Azerbaijan Micro-Credit Association
 - 1.1.10 Another important stakeholder in this area is KOB – the State Agency for the support of small and medium businesses.

Foreign chambers of commerce are unique in that they openly discuss problems in the local business sector and do not shy away from the criticism of some governmental policies. Unlike local businesses, they often raise concerns stemming from the business community, which hinder the development of a free market. Such concerns usually relate to customs, taxes, regulations, migration, labor laws, etc.

Considering the structure of Azerbaijan’s economy, it would be advisable to develop specific partnership relations with major holdings, such as Pasha Holding, Gilan Holding, Azersun Holding, Sinergy Holding, Veyselolu Holding and others. They command the lion’s share of the local economy and have significant resources to dedicate to CSR activities and projects related to the SDGs. In fact, in private conversations, many of the top CEOs expressed their interest to help with development projects but were unable to find credible projects in which to invest. At the same time, many of these companies and holdings do have active CSR departments, which try to help social projects to the best of their ability.

When selecting among the key private sector stakeholders, it is important to consider those who have worked to obtain [UN Global Compact](#) status, as they demonstrate a greater commitment to the issues of sustainable development, ecology, human rights and community development.

Considering the heavy reliance of the Azerbaijani economy on the agro-sector, ongoing dialogues with farmers associations and large agricultural players/producers should be established. This could help tackle not only employment and economic development issues but also problems related to ecology, water resources, land distribution, pollution and waste management.

The National Association of Trade Unions is a weak and ineffective organization and garners little public trust. While they can be invited to discussions, it is unlikely that they will produce meaningful recommendations for the UN office.

Academia, research centers and think-tanks

This sector has traditionally had little involvement in the policy planning and analysis process. Yet over the past 10-15 years, many centers have proved themselves credible sources of sound analysis and advocacy. The ones listed below are of specific note.

- 1.1.11 The Center for Economic and Social Development, led by Member of Parliament (MP) Vugar Bayramov, is active in many research projects related to budget analysis, fiscal and monetary policy, poverty reduction and social development issues.
- 1.1.12 The Center for the Analysis of the International Affairs and The Center for Social Research are two new think tanks that were created out of the former Center for Strategic Studies.
- 1.1.13 The Center for Economic Reforms and Communication is an active center set up by the economic advisor to President Natig Amirov and very much involved in strategic economic policy issues.
- 1.1.14 The Caspian Center for Energy and Environment at ADA University works very closely with State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) and several Ministries on energy and ecological issues.
- 1.1.15 Several university centers and institutes of the Academy of Science (ANAS), such as the Khazar University Center for Energy studies, the Institute for Economic Research and the Institute for Human Rights, are also active in policy analysis and advocacy.
- 1.1.16 The Institute of Economic Reforms at the Ministry of Economy
- 1.1.17 The Center for Economic Research at the Central Bank

At the same time, one should note the rising quality of the local universities, who have, thanks to the dual degree and other international partnerships, significantly improved their academic capacity. Among them are, the University of Economics (UNEC), ADA University, Baku Engineering University and the State University for Oil and Industry. These institutions

are particularly notable for their research activities as well as their contributions to public discourse and innovations.

[Click here to see list of active think tanks and research centres in Azerbaijan](#)

Media

Several media outlets in Azerbaijan actively participate in the policy planning process as well as being instrumental in shaping public opinion. They need to be taken into consideration and involved in various policy consultations. APA, Trend, Report, 1news, Turan, Haqqin.az are among the most prominent and trusted online media platforms. Most of them have respected in-house analysts on various social and economic issues.

Even so, significant challenges remain when it comes to the independent media's ability to operate freely, creating concerns about the freedom of expression, association and assembly. These concerns are closely tied to maintaining respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. While a range of media outlets operate in Azerbaijan (including 11 TV stations with nationwide coverage, radio stations, newspapers and internet providers), access to pluralistic views and impartial information is assessed by relevant international bodies as limited. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on the Freedom of the Media and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights have repeatedly drawn attention to the cases of several journalists, bloggers and social media activists currently in prison. They have called on authorities to end restrictive measures detrimental to journalists' freedom and safety. On several occasions, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has ruled on unlawful restrictions on journalists' freedom of assembly and their ill-treatment whilst in detention. The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers has adopted several resolutions to that extent.

In the past several years, umbrella organizations have been established for the media sector, such as the Press Council, a self-regulatory body that receives funding from the state budget, and State Fund for the Support of Media. However, both organizations are under state inspection at the moment due to political and tax concerns. Some major newspaper editors are represented on this Board.

Non-registered entities

There are several groups with no formal registration representing disadvantaged communities including those representing Roma, Armenian and LGBT minorities, also senior citizens and homeless people, among others. Particular attention should be paid to women and girls who come from poor communities and are often left in divorced or broken families without proper education, with kids and social stigma attached to them. Groups representing

people with disabilities also need to be engaged. Currently, there are around 630,000 people living with disability in Azerbaijan, which is 6.3 per cent of the overall population. Families of people living with disabilities do not have the means and opportunities to convey their concerns to policymakers. As the Cooperation Framework emphasizes the commitment to marginalized and vulnerable groups, it is important to identify and involve them in the discussion process.

Prominent personalities/influencers

In the era of digital technologies, notable individuals become prominent public opinion-makers that need to be involved in policy planning. Whether they are bloggers or activists, they do not represent a particular organization, but instead have many social media followers. Among them we should specifically point out Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu, Azer Garib, Bahram Bagirzade, Hamid Hamidov, Chingiz Abdullayev (their number of followers range from 35,000 to 500,000). They actively use live broadcasts on Instagram, YouTube and posts on twitter, Facebook and most recently on telegram. These individuals often present unique policy recommendations and most recently, the Office of the President (Assistant to President Anar Alakbarov) organized a brainstorming session with some of them to discuss social problems related to COVID-19. Assistant to President Hikmet Hajiyeu also met with prominent bloggers to discuss foreign policy issues.

Parliamentarians

Several independent and party-affiliated members of parliament (MPs) have been active in traditional media outlets and on social media. Ganira Pashayeva (independent), Erkin Gadirli (REAL party), Razi Nurullayev (AXCP), Fazil Mustafa (Great Order Party), Asim Mollazade (Democratic Reforms party), Vugar Bayramov (independent) are MPs who regularly share their views on various social problems and issues. They do not shy away from speaking out about issues in their communities as well as at the national level. Including MPs in discussions and platforms may bring a unique perspective to the stakeholder engagement process.

Municipalities and representatives of the local Executive Offices

In 1999, municipalities were established in Azerbaijan. They are relatively new organizations and lack power and resources in real decision-making. Even so, they are intimately familiar with the problems of their local areas. Their selected representatives would add much value to discussions with the UN office regarding poverty reduction and economic development programmes in the regions. The Assistant to the President Anar Alakbarov recently travelled to Ganja to meet local religious leaders and discuss community issues with them. Such leaders are especially influential in the south and in Ganja, in Nardaran (all of these are heavily populated Shia communities and regions). UNDRR has

been working with local governments, often at the forefront of disasters, by supporting municipalities in developing Disaster Risk Reduction strategies.

Diaspora organizations

Over the last three decades, many Azerbaijanis relocated abroad and settled in various European countries, the USA, Turkey and in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). They have formed active and powerful organizations such as the Azerbaijan Society of America, the All-Russian Congress of Azerbaijanis, the European-Azerbaijan Society, etc. They actively participate in foreign and domestic policy discussions and often pressure state agencies and international organizations. The recent outbreak of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the subsequent fights between Armenians and Azerbaijani diaspora organizations in California, Paris, London, Moscow, Kyiv and Brussels, demonstrate the growing role of such organizations. They are very closely linked to the organizations and parties in Baku. Thus, the UN Country Team (UNCT) should also consider the inclusion of these groups in policy discussions.

Principles of engagement

For many years, Azerbaijan's general population has feared and shied away from participating in public discourse. Some fear repercussions from law enforcement; others simply don't believe in the efficacy of such participation. Over the past several years, the ubiquity of social media and other online platforms have created a space for public discussions without much fear or hesitation.

Overall, a multi-stakeholder engagement process must be inclusive and continuous. Often, ad-hoc events and discussions diminish the hopes and trust among the involved parties. Dialogue and partnership must be long-term, multi-staged and institutionalized.

Several essential principles of engagement of multi-stakeholders should be observed. Seven of these principles are clearly articulated in the [Guiding Principles underpinning the UN Cooperation Framework: Leaving No One Behind \(LNOB\)](#), [Human Rights-Based Approach \(HRBA\)](#), [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#), Gender equality and women's empowerment, resilience, sustainability, and accountability.

[See the Common Minimum Standards for Multi-stakeholder Engagement in the UNDAF](#)

Safety

The foremost priority is the safety of all participants and their families. Although there is no record of punishment for participating in UN events and/or other activities with international organizations (except for events organized by foreign NGOs) over the past decades. Participants in this process must be ensured of their safety and security. If any adverse consequences of their involvement in UN discussions occur, the UN office should seriously engage and follow up on such cases and deliver the message to the highest authorities in the country.

Code of conduct and freedom of expression

Events and discussion platforms should be safe from pressures by one group of participants to another. Suppose moderators or UN staff feel and/or observe the imposition of (aggressive) views by a particular participant(s), including violence or the use of force. In that case, such persons should be excluded from the process until they agree to conduct themselves appropriately. In past instances, violence or the threat thereof occurred during election monitoring by foreign organizations. All discussions must be held peacefully with protocol rules and clear norms of behavior applied to all participants, without exception. The code of conduct should be developed for all meetings and all participants. Breaching these norms should be punishable. Freedom of expression should be observed in all meetings.

Nobody should be afraid to speak up and express his or her views and opinions. Whenever necessary, and depending on the sensitivity of the topic, confidentiality of the discussions should be preserved by applying the [Chatham House rules](#).

Inclusivity and diversity

According to the 2030 Agenda, equality and non-discrimination are the two critical components necessary to achieve sustainable growth. Inclusivity and diversity are primary criteria in the selection of discussion participants; it is strictly forbidden to discriminate on any criteria (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity/religion). Organizers must try to include all age groups, geographic regions and representative of various social strata from across the general population. ‘Leaving no one behind’ should serve as the guiding principle when selecting participants to the process. It is recommended to announce such public discussions ahead of time via general media and social networks, to increase awareness and participation among the general citizenry.

Accessibility

The issue of accessibility can be challenging; specifically, coordinating logistics (i.e., how participants will get to the meeting points). In some cases, marginalized groups will not have the opportunity to fund their trips. In such cases, the UN office should consider the provision of transport, housing, food and other necessary support. All meeting spaces must be accessible for disabled persons. However, some limitations might remain depending on the type of disability and the costs related to providing the conditions for their inclusive participation. Regarding this issue, the UN office should once again refer to the guiding principles on Human Rights-based Approach (HRBA), as the involvement of such vulnerable groups will help to ensure and protect their human rights.

Accountability and transparency

As long as previously agreed with all participants, meetings, discussions, and follow-up actions must be transparent and available to the general public. This can be assured by conducting meetings via web-broadcasts as well as the timely publication of meetings minutes and subsequent action plans on the UN website and pushed out through other social media channels. All decisions and agenda items must be delivered to the attention of the participants for timely feedback and communication; no ‘behind-the-scenes’ decision-making or parallel processes should be held to maintain participants’ trust.

Following these recommendations would ensure achieving the accountability and transparency principles of the development work. By supporting and respecting the integrity of the process, the public can be assured that the UN team (and other stakeholders) are conducting discussions transparently and are accountable to the beneficiaries of the projects and/or country’s residents.

Statistical data and other critical information should be openly shared with all participants via various channels, including published materials, emails, letters. For participants who lack access to technology, UN staff should ensure that they get the needed information in a timely and secure manner without any censorship.

COVID-19 considerations

Considering the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts must be made to create a safe and healthy environment for discussions, including observation of the sanitary norms for travel and organization of meetings – keeping safe distances between participants, distribution of face masks, gloves and other hygienic materials.

UN responsibility

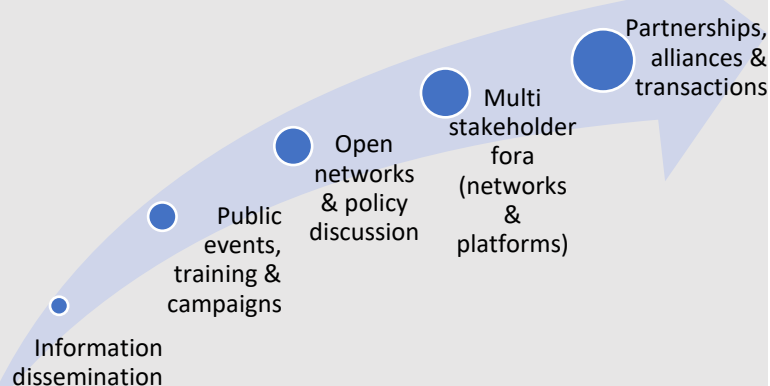
The UN office should take full responsibility for the engagement process and be held accountable for the timely delivery of reports on follow-up actions in a transparent manner. If any problems or obstacles occur during the engagement process, the UN office should promptly address them.

[See examples of global multi-stakeholder engagements](#)

Recommendations

It is recommended that the multi-stakeholder engagement for the UN programmes in Azerbaijan is implemented along two parallel tracks. The first of these identifies ways of strengthening existing mechanisms by engaging a wider range of stakeholders and improving formal procedures. The second track is about significantly boosting multi-stakeholder engagement in Azerbaijan using new mechanisms that reach and mobilize all sectors of society in a meaningful, productive and consistent way.

While involving various stakeholders, it is vital to maximizing their engagement through five levels.



Track 1: Strengthen existing mechanisms

- ✓ [Engage a wider group of stakeholders](#)
- ✓ [Improve formal procedures](#)
- ✓ [Involve different stakeholders in reporting](#)

Engage a wider group of stakeholders

These recommendations focus on how to empower the existing platforms, such as the UNSDCF Steering Committee, results groups and thematic groups, to make them more inclusive and effective in the planning, delivery, monitoring and reporting of UN programmes. Relevant NGO representatives as well as the private and academic sectors that did not participate in the previous programme cycles should be included in this formal, established and authoritative channel of communication. This would bring new insights to the discussion process. It would also help the UN in informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering the general public as well as specific target audiences. NGOs, private sector and representatives from academia should also be included in the Monitoring and Evaluation Groups.

Improve formal procedures

More attention should be paid to improving formal procedures and forming a steering committee to avoid scheduling conflicts, seek improved and more committed engagement from government representatives as well as UN agency team members. This approach would also create an atmosphere of productive interactions, while reducing redundancy. The sharing of information and data among high-level actors should be improved. These groups must have transparent and coordinated communication plans.

Involve different stakeholders in reporting

Development of Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports and other national documents should also include multi-stakeholder engagement. Previous VNR processes have had limited engagement with representatives of civil society, academia, and other stakeholders. UN DESA analyzed 158 VNRs around the world and found that countries are taking diverse approaches to inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower the public through their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. Around 75 per cent of countries reporting to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) from 2016-19 noted the inclusion of non-state actors in governance mechanisms.

Track 2: Create a new mechanism for multi-stakeholder engagement

- ✓ [Establish a new consultative council](#)
- ✓ [Set-up an online platform](#)
- ✓ [Organize large-scale SDG forums](#)
- ✓ [Enrich partnerships with universities](#)
- ✓ [Regional townhall meetings](#)
- ✓ [Create small expert groups](#)
- ✓ [Create a small club of VIP businesspeople](#)
- ✓ [Organize and manage an association of all donors](#)
- ✓ [Commission and implement annual household survey](#)
- ✓ [Harness the power of the media](#)
- ✓ [Leverage new and existing partnerships](#)

Establish a new consultative council

The new council would meet regularly (preferably quarterly) to discuss UN programmes and activities, while providing suggestions (such a practice exists in Finland). The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister should also be involved in this process. This council will be more informal than the steering committee but will also carry some features of formally established bodies. Almost all of the business associations in Azerbaijan (e.g., Amcham, ASK, French Chamber of Commerce, British Business Group, AHK) have such councils (boards).

They meet to discuss issues of concern to the members, develop advocacy plans and address policy issues.

The advantage of such standing consultative bodies as compared to the ad-hoc or sporadic gatherings is that its members feel more responsibility for and pride to serve within such entities. As such, they develop better chemistry among themselves, create internal platforms for communication, share thoughts and information outside formal meetings, maintain regular contact, and eventually become a solid group of internal experts benefiting the organization.

The council should be made up of no more than 20 people, representing various sectors, such as government, NGOs, business, media, regional organizations, minorities and influencers. Members of the standing council should be exemplary representatives of their respective sectors, so that they can provide reports and feedback to/from their constituencies. At the same time, these individuals can use their networks for actions/advocacy or promotional purposes.

The standing consultative council should establish chairs who maintain good moderation and conflict-management skills. Meetings should be regularly scheduled, with a pre-determined agenda and good record-keeping to contribute to institutional memory. UN officials should participate in these meetings both to seek first-hand information and to empower those present. The recommendations of these council meetings should be strongly considered and endorsed by the UN office in the annual action plans/programmes and activities. Meetings with results groups can be organized as well.

Members of the standing council should be changed annually with new members nominated by the UN office based on their previous professional experience and overall reputation in their respective industry.

Set-up an online platform

Both the UN office and the permanent standing council should set up an online platform for additional feedback from the public. This informal platform of communication should be actively publicized in social and traditional media as a space for bringing various stakeholders together. Collected recommendations and suggestions should be used in the form of monthly reports.

Organize large-scale SDG forums

Once a year, it is recommended that the UN office organize large-scale SDG forums with the participation of various societal stakeholders to create a wider platform for discussion and action. These large-scale platforms will be more inclusive and richer in terms of generating

ideas, yet they cannot occur more frequently due to their large size. To achieve sustainable development (and particularly the targets and commitments set out in the 17 SDGs) will require not only action by Government but everyone across society. The purpose of the SDG stakeholder forum will be to inform a wider audience about the development of the national SDG framework, provide engagement mechanism for key stakeholders and voice the views/concerns of disadvantaged groups. Such successful practice exists in Nepal, Ireland, Vietnam. Canada's legislation requires the organization of such extensive consultations with a wide range of stakeholders.

Enrich partnerships with universities

It is highly recommended to enrich partnerships with universities as they add considerable value to the content of the discussions both because of their academic/research experience as well as their perceived neutral status in the country. Universities, with their broad remit around the creation and dissemination of knowledge and their unique position within society, have a critical role to play in achieving the outcomes of the Cooperation Framework and the SDGs more broadly. This engagement will also benefit academia by helping them demonstrate their impact, capture demand for development-related education, build new partnerships, and access new funding streams.

ADA University, with its good connections, both to the government, private and non-governmental sectors, could serve as a platform for enriching partnerships. This university has a good track record of cooperation with UN agencies (e.g., UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNCTAD, UNITAR) on various projects. Perhaps involving ADA University as a more permanent stakeholder in this engagement process would open up new opportunities. At the same time, universities and research centers can be utilized to promote the [UN Global Compact](#) and for teaching Corporate Social Responsibility and SDG courses. Universities also catalyze innovations and effective policy research.

While ADA University, with its multi-dimensional educational programmes, could contribute to the general public policy field, the University of Economics could also serve as a platform for economic discussions and policy research.

Regional town hall meetings

UNCT members and standing committee members should engage in regular meetings with the various regions and organize regional town hall meetings with the participation of regional stakeholders who are not able to travel to the capital city. Such townhall meetings will aid both in terms of providing a specific regional focus on a particular geographic area as well as help to seek feedback from underrepresented groups better. Local executive authorities, local NGOs as well as local universities, can assist in organizing such meetings. In some geographical regions, instead of large town hall meetings, smaller focus groups or

even interview sessions can be organized. As a good practice, UAE has established youth councils in local communities to identify problems and priorities.

Create small expert groups

Small expert groups (3-5 people) should be created around each of the four priority areas. Their role would be to closely monitor the design and implementation of UN activities and provide specific feedback to the UN country team and standing committee. Such practices exist in Finland, where a network of experts from statistics, research, evaluation and policy monitor Agenda 2030. At the same time, the UN country team and members of the standing council should meet regularly with experts from various fields to better understand complex societal problems and seek their guidance and recommendations regarding UN activities. Often such experts represent very narrow areas of expertise, which are frequently ignored by the mainstream media. Some of these areas are related to marginalized, underrepresented or voiceless communities. Overall, the monitoring and evaluation stages of the Cooperation Framework should not be performed without input from local experts as they are better equipped to analyze specific project data and/or discuss particular issues or problems. Such expert groups can also assist with the work of Parliament, such as the design and discussion of laws, draft bills. They can also conduct targeted consultation workshops on specific themes.

Create a small club of VIP businesspeople

The UN Resident Coordinator should create a small club of VIP businesspeople, around 20-25 top Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and company owners in the country, to conduct bi-monthly meetings regarding CSR, SDGs and the [UN-Business partnership](#). This exclusive club should be a very prestigious networking opportunity for all members and should dedicate itself to the causes of philanthropy and support for UN programmes. Some wealthy Azerbaijani business people from Diaspora communities could also be included in this process. Involving the private sector into this process could help not only with fundraising but also with innovative ideas and solutions to societal problems. Specific focus should be given to getting a commitment from the private sector towards the main UN goals, such as reducing environmental impact, focusing on human and labor rights, anti-corruption measures. These goals can be achieved via bilateral and multilateral agreements, partnerships and transactions with the private sector, public forums and information dissemination.

Organize and manage an association of all donors

As outlined in the Internal Guidelines and UNAPF Evaluation Report, the Cooperation Framework should leverage all sources of sustainable financing towards the 2030 Agenda. It would be instrumental in organizing and managing an association of all donors in the country, not only deriving from international organizations but also other stakeholders, such

as private individuals, philanthropists, social corporations, large holdings and government/semi-government entities. It would be useful to invite major local holdings (Pasha Holding, Gilan Holding, Azersun Holding, Synergy Holding) to join and lead some critical UN-Azerbaijan's social campaigns and projects. It is also recommended to involve embassies and various other diplomatic missions, such as Honorary Consulates, as they are actively engaged in various developmental projects.

Commission and implement annual household surveys

The UN office should work closely with the State Statistical Committee to commission and implement annual household surveys in Azerbaijan. Availability of granular data will help to understand the needs of various communities better and target certain population groups to leave no one behind. Such surveys will also be a useful data source for assisting in monitoring UN programmes. The flexible and customizable annual household survey is uniquely positioned to meet data needs for evidence-based policymaking.

Harness the power of the media

The power of the media should be harnessed to create a coordinated public relations campaign including social ads (Public Service Announcements) on TV, outdoor advertising (e.g., billboards, kiosk ads, etc.) as well as other marketing tools. The efficacy of such a PR campaign can only be supported via subsidies provided by local media holdings. The UN office should create a special 'UN MEDIA PARTNER' award. Media and prominent personalities/influencers can unite with the UN office to formulate and deliver media statements as well as lead information campaigns. Such effective media campaigns to raise awareness among the general citizenry will also empower them to take supportive actions, engage in a discussion of priorities, share knowledge and successful approaches.

Leverage new and existing partnerships

The UN office should work to build new partnerships, while also utilizing and leveraging the potential of existing partnerships and strategic alliances to bring continued benefits to the UN goals in the country. Potential legislative changes and new laws requiring multi-stakeholder engagement in the design and implementation of the Development Strategy of the country should also be considered.

Capacity-building activities

The efficacy of multi-stakeholder engagement is dependent not only on the clear and positive intention of the UN office but also on the skills and competencies of other stakeholders. The more professional, transparent and result-oriented other stakeholders become, the more resilient Azerbaijani society will be. Building a resilient society is one of the primary guiding principles of the UN Cooperation framework. Internal Guidelines from the UNSDCF also emphasize capacity-building.

Basic skills training, with a focus on SDGs

Some government agencies, NGOs, youth and religious organizations do not maintain staff trained in policy analysis and programme evaluation. As such, they have not participated in many brainstorming sessions and do not know how to articulate key messages. Therefore, specific training programmes for such stakeholders would be very beneficial. At the same time, training and capacity-building programmes can be aimed at cultivating such skills as active and effective listening, meeting management, consensus building, respective dialogue, and understanding the needs and priorities of others and being able to incorporate them into expected outcomes. These skills might seem quite elementary; however, in Azerbaijan, various planning and brainstorming sessions often end up with disputes and nasty disagreements. The culture of civic debate, consensus building and team-based work on seeking solutions to common problems are still weak in our region. Most stakeholders are stubborn and unwilling to listen to or respect diversity in opinions.

Trainings and capacity building activities should also focus on SDGs for government agencies, as the UNAPF Evaluation Report indicates that most ministries are poorly informed regarding such goals. This can also be extended to civil society.

Specific statistical and data analysis training for key staff

It is recommended that the State Statistics Committee's staff are provided with specific training in statistical and data analysis as a large percentage of UN reports originate from this agency. Most of the departments at the State Statistics Committee still use Soviet-era tools and lack the necessary skills for modern software utilization. ADA University's Big Data Center can serve as a helpful partner in this capacity-building effort. The UNAPF Evaluation Report indicated that data collection and analysis is often problematic, unreliable and limited with some serious discrepancies existing between various data sources. Collecting and managing national statistics and data is also critical for protecting development gains and making effective policy. Data on risk can in particular support improved risk modeling and evidence-based fiscal policies, that are key steps toward developing disaster risk reduction strategies and mechanisms to transfer risk, as well as preparedness efforts to respond to disasters. To this end UNDRR has been supporting

countries in collecting disaster loss data through the implementation of the disaster loss database DesInventar Sendai.

Transform discussions with NGOs to a result-based relationship

Government coordination with NGOs needs capacity building assistance as well; most government agencies place little value on cooperation with NGOs aside from bolstering their image. Trainings and mentorship are needed to transform discussions with NGOs to a result-based relationship. Targets, measurement criteria and a more structured cooperation framework must be established to maximize outcomes from these currently nascent relationships.

Specific work must be done with the relevant government offices, including the Ministry of Justice, regarding the registration problems of NGOs, religious and ethnic minority associations, and other underrepresented groups.

Increase awareness about CSR and SDGs

Business community representatives and private entrepreneurs have little information about Corporate Social Responsibility concepts and how to contribute to the SDG goals. Thus, trainings and information sessions are needed for them to increase their awareness, enabling them to contribute to UN goals and causes. Such individuals must also be trained in various international tools, such as the UN Global Compact, to adapt their business practices to become friendlier towards the needs of the society. Promotion of the UN Global Compact, requesting companies to join its membership and convincing business chambers such as Amcham to assist with recruitment, could serve as an essential pillar to achieve UNSDCF goals as well as fulfilling Agenda 2030.

Better structured coordination

Coordination between various UN agencies has been mentioned as one of the weaknesses of the current policy planning process. Better structured coordination will require common discussions and agreements on specific plans of joint action. The participation of an external expert involved in designing a joint plan of action should be considered.

Policy research and advocacy training

It is also recommended that local university and research centers' staff are professionally trained in policy research and advocacy – this includes some of the tools and best practices drawn from international experience. A properly trained academic community will serve as a professional, convenient and trusted platform for multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue.

Developing the economy

A special working group should be established to work with the Cabinet of Ministries with the goal aligning UN programmes with the Strategic Road Map for the Development of the Azerbaijani economy.

Country specific and tailored recommendations

One of the main objectives of the Cooperation Framework, as outlined in the Internal Guidelines, is to focus on member state's specific needs and realities and assist countries with addressing their national priorities and gaps. Some of the development activities and recommendations on multi-stakeholder engagement may apply to many nations. However, to sharpen the focus of the Cooperation Framework on Azerbaijan's particular needs, we also recommend engagement with specific target groups that exist within the country.

National, ethnic and religious minorities

Azerbaijan is a country with many national, ethnic and religious minorities. Some of them have organized centers and cultural associations, while others do not. Those with formal, registered associations are not actively involved in the policy formulation, planning and implementation process. Many of these ethnic and religious groups live in specific, remote geographic areas, which lack infrastructure and basic social services. Some feel marginalized and voiceless. It is important that the UN office and its expert groups conduct meetings with these groups to understand their needs and priorities better, and to communicate their feedback to the UN policy planning team in a clear and timely way. If needed, translation and interpretation services should be provided to these groups, as many do not speak the state Azerbaijani language (such practice exists in Benin). Initially, it is recommended to meet with Talysh, Lezgin, Georgian, and Jewish minorities, who live in compact geographic areas. Other small villages with national minorities in northern Azerbaijan should also be visited. In Baku, it is recommended to meet and establish a dialogue with the Russian, Ukrainian and Catholic communities.

LGBT community

A similar situation is related to the LGBT community, who have no formal registered organization and whose voices are poorly represented in the governance process. Such discussions with this community are also essential for an inclusive, human rights-based, 'leave no one behind' policy process. Local culture and national traditions often make this community voiceless and underrepresented. They are often subject to attacks, violence and high levels of discrimination.

Refugees and IDPs from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Azerbaijan still maintains large numbers of refugees and IDPs from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Even though their involuntary movement took place more than 25 years ago, most of them are still not well integrated into society. They attend separate schools and live in separate communities. Special effort must be made through town hall meetings to better

understand and involve IDPs in the UN SDG goals, policy planning and implementation process. Fortunately, the IDP population has many registered NGOs, who are active in various social and political processes. They also have a strong sense of a unified community with many active politicians, public figures and opinion leaders publicly expressing their concerns. They should be easy to invite to participate in the UN multi-stakeholder engagement process. This group is especially important due to the possible return to the liberated lands and beginning of the process of reconstruction and re-development of the formerly occupied areas.

Roma minority

As shown by the statistics on inter-racial violence, Azerbaijan does not have severe issues with racial discrimination. This is partly because most citizens are of a Caucasian (Indo-European) background. Yet, it is essential to become familiar with the concerns of groups such as the Roma minority, to address their social and economic problems better. The Roma minority is mainly concentrated in Baku and in the western part of Azerbaijan. They should be involved in the process as well because, as a whole, the community suffers from disproportionately high rates of poverty, health care problems and crime.

Women and girls

Women and young girls remain at risk of discrimination in Azerbaijan because many of them, especially those residing in the rural areas, lack proper education and are not fully aware of their rights. They are often subject to domestic violence, harassment, poverty and social pressures. Many young girls marry early and end up in broken families with many children and without jobs or a source of income. Such women should be identified and involved in the process of designing the development process. This is a common problem in many Muslim societies. According to recent statistics, the rate of divorce in Azerbaijan is on the rise, putting many uneducated separated women at risk of hunger and depression.

Diaspora

Azerbaijan maintains a considerable-sized diaspora in many countries. Some of them are unified in powerful and active organizations, which influence not only foreign policy but also domestic issues. The UNCT should make a special effort to reach out to them for consultations and engagement in the multi-stakeholder process either via online channels or through the State Committee for Diaspora Issues. The Azerbaijani Diaspora in Russia and other nearby countries has significant wealth and resources, which if properly engaged, can help UN programmes in Azerbaijan and contribute to the development process.

Creative and transformative ideas

The traditional format of meetings, discussions and brainstorming sessions should not be the only way to acquire up-to-date information from society, especially from its marginalized and underrepresented groups. The development of technology and various connectivity tools has opened up opportunities for more inclusivity and involvement of remote regions and groups or communities into the mainstream discussion agenda. Especially considering the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on travel and face-to-face meetings, the use of technology becomes even more timely, vital and useful.

Utilize social media and the power of technology

One way to achieve this would be to utilize the power of social media to reach out to various communities and groups of people across the country. Open discussions can be organized on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to obtain feedback from the general population as well as from specific target groups. Social media is also extremely useful in communicating UN messages to the wider (especially younger) population. The power of television should be further explored given that in Azerbaijani society, especially in the regions and among the older generation, it is a relied upon source of information.

The power of technology can be further utilized in the form of web surveys, SMS messages, online polls and other easy-to-use tools.

Explore big data

At the same time, particular companies can be hired to do big data textual analysis of what is written in social and traditional media regarding UN programmes, SDGs and other important matters. Such data analysis tools already exist and are very helpful in understanding the two-way feedback from society, the donor community, and various other stakeholders.

Engage more with public figures, celebrities and influencers

The UN should better utilize the role of prominent public figures and celebrities in SDG campaigns and other social projects. Similar actions are done, for example, during the Olympics. In traditional societies, like Azerbaijan, the role of actors, singers, athletes, and pop stars can be very powerful in changing stereotypes, delivering new values and messages, and forming public opinion. They also serve as important voices of general concern to policymakers and stakeholders. Various government bodies in Azerbaijan use pop stars during election campaigns or national holidays to gain public support. Most recently, the Assistant to President Anar Alakbarov met with various prominent personalities to

understand their concerns regarding anti-COVID initiatives. Thus, the UN should also create an active coalition among the pop stars, similar to the [Young Ambassadors network](#).

Developing an active dialogue with bloggers and media representatives might also be a very useful tool, given the global popularity of short media messages; such individuals are widely read and perceived as influencers among various segments of society. Therefore, they can help the UN in both message delivery as well as establishing a two-way dialogue with their audience(s).

Host online discussions

Some ministers have started conducting online discussions with their staff in disparate regions or with other active citizens. The Minister of Education has recently organized an online discussion with 50 teachers and school directors from across Azerbaijan. Similar online discussions are regularly arranged with university rectors. This practice should be expanded to enable top-level policymakers to hear directly from ordinary citizens as well as beneficiaries of their respective programmes and state policies.

Engage youth in a way that makes them feel comfortable

Often people in the regions, specifically youth, are intimidated or afraid to raise certain questions or problems during town hall meetings or public discussions. Azerbaijani students lack public debate or communication skills. For this segment of the population, experts suggest the application of alternative creative tools (e.g., essay competitions, hackathons or school Olympiads and after-class activities, etc.) to enable youth to express themselves. These communication channels may also shed light on problems facing these specific communities.