

Summary

VNR Lab “Meaningful participation in times of crisis: Engagement of stakeholders for the preparation of VNRs”

14 July 2021, 2:00-3:00 PM (EDT)

UNDESA, through its Division for Sustainable Development Goals and Partners for Review organized the Voluntary National Review (VNR) Lab on “*Meaningful participation in times of crisis: Engagement of stakeholders for the preparation of VNRs*”. The objective was to promote an open conversation and exchange between Member States, stakeholders and partners on experiences and lessons learned on the engagement of stakeholders from different sectors in the preparation of VNRs and supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, especially considering the impacts and adjustments needed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The VNR Lab was opened by Ms. Lotta Tahtinen, Chief of the Outreach and Partnerships Branch of the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (UNDESA), and Mr. Jörn Geisselmann, Advisor at Partners for Review. The VNR Lab proceeded with a panel and interactive discussion. Invited speakers were Mr. Alfredo González Reyes (2030 Agenda Office, Ministry of Economy, Mexico), Ms. Natascha Skjaldgaard (Head of Section – Africa, Policy and Development, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark), Ms. Judith Kaulem (Executive Director, Poverty Reduction Forum Trust, Zimbabwe), Mr. Andreas Kuestermann (Board Member, Centrarse, Guatemala), and Ms. Aparna Basniyat (Senior Research and Policy Advisor, SDG16, UNDP). The panel was moderated by Mr. Oli Henman, Global Coordinator at Action for Sustainable Development.

Highlights of the discussions

Speakers underlined the importance of strong collaboration and partnerships between national governments and stakeholders from all sectors and at all levels. Even though stakeholder participation during the consultation phase of VNR processes has become common in many countries, reaching out to stakeholders is still a major challenge as well as developing engagement practices that can substantively influence VNRs and be sustained after presentation of the reports at the HLPF.

Speakers highlighted that meaningful and impactful engagement demands commitment, planning and resources. Stakeholders are still too often engaged in silos, thereby limiting the potential of exchange and synergies among all actors involved. Meaningful engagement is about developing clear and tailored communication and building trust, including personal trust, between focal points of different institutions.

Some speakers identified that engagement mechanisms may become more institutionalized after the first VNR, hence strengthening stakeholder engagement processes. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the government has mandated a specific Ministry to coordinate SDGs

implementation, which facilitates for civil society to engage directly with the government. In addition, it is also important for stakeholders to be actively engaged and not wait for governments to approach them. Looking for alliances and partnerships is key, as well as looking for space for dialogue with the government, as was the case with the private sector in Guatemala. A well-coordinated stakeholders' group is also important to facilitate the presentation of coordinated messages to governments. Another critical aspect mentioned by a speaker is the lack of technical and financial support, especially now during the pandemic, which has for instance serious implications on civil society's ongoing engagement in SDG implementation as well as the follow-up and review process.

In addition, discussants flagged that meaningful engagement on SDG follow-up must be timely and provide sufficient time for preparation, influencing opportunities and stakeholder's self-coordination. Insights gained through non-state actors' own assessment reports and data are increasingly finding their way to official VNR reports - either as annexes or direct references in the main text. One example for the latter is the inclusion of Civil Society's Assessments for each SDG in the second Danish VNR. Meaningful engagement needs to be open, transparent, and inclusive and provide all people and groups with opportunities to contribute. The principle of "Leaving No One behind" is fundamental in the VNR process. However, identifying and reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized remains a challenge. Successful experiences from Mexico included for instance partnering with a small number of trusted networks who have more, better and direct connections with hard to reach vulnerable groups.

COVID-19 brought extra challenges to stakeholder engagement. Lockdowns and physical restrictions resulted in online consultations, where informal aspects of networking and exchange went missing. The adaptation of moving online, and blending online and offline participation, was challenging, although it also allowed for an expansion in numbers of stakeholders engaged. The lack of technical and financial support was mentioned by most speakers as impactful to devising online engagement practices. The communities that are left behind digitally, will continue to be so if the digital gap is not addressed sufficiently in the near future. This was also highlighted in a Survey commissioned by UNDESA on [the potential impacts of COVID-19 on stakeholder engagement and partnerships for SDG implementation and follow-up, including VNR preparations](#).

Further to this, all speakers, and many participants in the chat box, flagged that meaningful stakeholder engagement should be long-term and not a singular process, including efforts to review the [quality of participation](#) and to strengthen the enabling environment for participation and collaboration. It was stressed that it is critical to translate what is coming out of a VNR process as part of national planning.