Strengthening the multi-stakeholder dimension of national development planning and SDG mainstreaming – *A Follow Up Report*

ABOUT UN DESA

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat is a vital interface between global policies in the economic, social and environmental spheres and national action.

The Department works in three main interlinked areas:

(i) it compiles, generates and analyses a wide range of economic, social and environmental data and information on which Member States of the United Nations draw to review common problems and to take stock of policy options;

(ii) it facilitates the negotiations of Member States in many intergovernmental bodies on joint courses of action to address ongoing or emerging global challenges;

(iii) it advises interested Governments on the ways and means of translating policy frameworks developed in United Nations conferences and summits into programmes at the country level and, through technical assistance, helps build national capacities.

For more information:

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1. ACRONYMS

CF	Cooperation Framework
CCA	Common Country Analysis
CMSME	Common Minimum Standards for Multi-Stakeholder Engagement
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DCPS	Development Cooperation and Partnership Strategy
DENARP	National Poverty Reduction Document
DSDG	Division for Sustainable Development Goals
HDI	Human Development Index
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum
LGBTIQA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, Asexual, + others
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
MGoS	Major Groups and Other Stakeholders
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RCO	Resident Coordinator Office
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TOR	Term of Reference
UN	United Nations
UN DESA	United Nations Division of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNSDCF	United Nations Framework Plan for Sustainable Development Cooperation
VNR	Voluntary National Review
UNCTs	UN Country Teams

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This report is an overview of key findings and recommendations of a pilot project aiming to "**Strengthen the multi-stakeholder dimension of national development planning and SDG mainstreaming**" that the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) implemented in partnership with the United Nations Development Cooperation Office (UN DCO) and 11 UN Resident Coordinator Offices (RCOs). It was funded through a grant from the European Commission entitled "SD2015: delivering on the promise of the SDGs"."

- The countries engaged were **Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Cameroon, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Namibia, Serbia, Sri Lanka**, and **Uzbekistan** and the project was implemented between 2019 and 2021, while reforms of the UN Development System and the RCOs were being implemented.

- This Report was developed following a desk-review of countries' reports[1] and outcomes, feedbacks from RCOs and review of Terms of References (ToR). Additionally, semi-structured interviews with a number of UN Resident Coordinator's Office staff and members of the UN DESA team were organized.

- The review made it possible to take stock of the general landscape of stakeholder participation in SDG implementation and to identify, based on these national experiences, forward-looking recommendations to further strengthen the multi-stakeholder engagement in the SDG-related processes at national, regional and global levels.

- The results indicate that the project a) helped jumpstart and/or reinforce stakeholder engagement in implementation and follow up of the 2030 Agenda in partner countries[2]; b) contributed to leveraging the RCOs' system-wide thinking and resources towards enhancing partnerships with stakeholders from different sectors, including Member States; c) helped to identify potential new partnerships.

- All deliverables agreed through nationally-tailored ToRs were implemented by the majority of the countries. The main exception was the development of an "Action plan for engagement" after the stakeholder mapping phase. The main reported reasons for this were: a) the impacts of COVID-19 in stakeholder engagement planning; b) the need for specific guidelines; c) the need for specific external support for the task (including consultant support) and d) the need to strengthen the capacity within the RCO to assist in implementing/monitoring the plans, thus avoiding unrealistic expectations.

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[1] All project's reports can be accessed here: https://sdgs.un.org/stakeholders/strengthening-multi-stakeholder-dimension-national-development-planning-and-sdg

[2] Namibia's final report is undergoing consultations, and was not finalized to be considered for this consultancy.

2.1 Multi-stakeholder Engagement Key Findings

The project supported the participating RCOs **to map and better organize data about stakeholders across different sectors** within countries, primarily civil organizations and governments. It identified best practices, challenges, opportunities, recommendations and areas where Member States, United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs) and RCOs would need additional support or capacity building towards strengthening multi-stakeholder engagement for SDG implementation.

> Findings indicate that **leadership** for the SDGs in participating project countries is still concentrated within the national government and reasons vary from the political context to limited awareness or appropriation of the 2030 Agenda by local authorities and/or other stakeholders. The engagement of the private sector, parliamentarians, sub-national governments and academia varied from country to country. Groups, such as persons with disabilities, LGBTIQA+, human rights defenders, media and trade unions, were mentioned among those who needed further engagement. The majority of the reports also referred to the rich expertise existing among stakeholders and covering all the SDGs.

> The project also helped to foster multi-stakeholder engagement at **UN-related processes** at country level, although partner RCOs were in different phases of the development and/or implementation of Country Common Analyses and Cooperation Frameworks. Ten countries have presented Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF), while one will present a VNR for the first time in 2022, after this project.

> Eight of the eleven countries **used the Common Minimum Standards for Multi-stakeholder Engagemen**t [3] as methodological reference for this project. Further consultation indicated that ten RCOs consider it an important Guide that requires specific indicators for better monitoring/ implementation.

> The reports showed that the **capacity of stakeholders to provide inputs** to SDG-related process **varied significantly from country to country**, depending on the stakeholder group and existing participation modalities or mechanisms.

> **Mechanisms:** In most countries the participatory mechanisms are *informal* and have only consultative status. Some bodies have stakeholders representatives who lack decision-making power; others have high-level authorities but with limited results or, still, sporadic processes. Only 2 out of 10 countries have formal mechanisms with government high-level representatives and seats for stakeholders – and where they exist, *maintaining and fostering* these institutional arrangements remains a challenge.

> There was **a lack of information** about the level of **gender** balance within the existing national SDG"s related processes or mechanisms, a matter that requires urgent attention.

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[3] https://unsdg.un.org/resources/common-minimum-standards-multi-stakeholder-engagement-undaf Access: October, 2021

> **Social, economic and political context matters:** the establishment of a "culture of dialogue" amongst all stakeholders and effective coordination between UNCTs and RCOs working with the SDGs, was identified as a significant challenge. It is worth considering that, according to rating regularly undertaken by CIVICUS, civic space is closed, repressed or obstructed in 8 out of the 11 countries and narrowed in the remaining three[4]. Further enhancing the practical capacity of RCOs and UNCTs working in challenging political contexts is necessary, including through the creation/adaptation of accountability instruments.

> The RCO's also indicated **the need of more tools, guidance and capacity building** to allow effective monitoring and evaluation (data collection and analysis) on the level/ quality of multi-stakeholder engagement in SDG processes and better accountability. These measuring tools need to be easily adapted to countries' realities.

> **The UN can lead by example:** The challenge of rebalancing relationships between stakeholders and the UN was also noted. Most of the participating UNCT's processes do not have formal or clear mechanisms for engaging stakeholders. The selection of participants in consultations tend to be concentrated amongst the same groups and feedback and follow up capacity needs to be improved, lending more importance to the **need to build action plans** for engaging stakeholders in processes that are *meaningful and long-term.*

> The need to further **improve internal communications** between UNCTs and RCOs and to **enhance communication channels between UNCTs, RCOs** and **UNDESA** was identified. Recommendations were also made to establish meaningful engagement processes at all levels, including in the SDG multi-stakeholder mechanisms in UN Regional Commissions.

> Since the convening power of the UN varies among the countries, it was noted that **increasing external communication** and awareness of stakeholders on the work of the UNCT could facilitate the RCOs' role in fostering partnerships at national level.

> **COVID-19 impacted** stakeholder engagement in SDG-related processes, due to lack of IT access by stakeholders and changes in national priorities. The project made clear that although stakeholder **participation requires providing access to digital tools for the poorest and most marginalized groups,** greater uptake of online platforms post COVID-19 across the countries can be leveraged for improving the engagement of a wider group of stakeholders in the SDG-related processes.

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[4] https://monitor.civicus.org/Ratings/ Accessed on October 2021.

2.2 Recommendations

Most of the following recommendations are guided by the set of suggestions from the country reports, focusing on two groups: a) UNDESA/ UNDCO and b) RCOs/ UNCTs. Specific actions for each recommendation below are detailed in chapter 7, p.28.

To UN DESA & UNDCO
1. Consider *establishing regular exchange channels with RCOs* related to stakeholder engagement, including potential support and partnerships.
2. Consider developing *regular* and *ongoing capacity building* to RCOs.
3. Consider developing *general tools and more guidance* to support stakeholder engagement efforts.
4. Consider further *strengthening the capacity of pilot-project partner countries* to foster multi-stakeholder engagement for SDG implementation.
5. Consider *extending this project to other countries,* based on the lessons learned from the piloting experience.
To RCO & UNCTs
6. Consider *supporting efforts for the UN to lead by example* in promoting partnership processes, and an organizational culture of multi-stakeholder dialogue.
7. *Review and improve internal and external communication strategies,* aiming to increase the UN's soft power and convening capacity, in alignment with Our Common Agenda's SG Report.
8: Further *improve the multi-stakeholder engagement* in the UN SDG processes.

> In a nutshell, the project confirms that **RCOs have a strategic role to play in supporting multi-stakeholders'** engagement processes at national level and that **collaboration with UN DESA is strategic in facilitating connections** with the regional and global levels.

> It also confirms that **meaningful engagement** depends on inclusive, participatory governance, intersectional and inter-sectorial approaches and modalities, effective consensus-based processes, available resources, and transparent and accountable inter-institutional coordination mechanisms, including regular, active communications channels between all stakeholder groups. It also depends on improved support for regional/national cooperation and the UN capacity to stimulate governments to fulfill their commitments of engaging stakeholders in SDG related processes.

> As a final note, the "Strengthening the multi-stakeholder Dimension of National Development Planning and SDG Mainstreaming" project was well received and supported

by RCOs, who in turn provided feedback and reports, praising the attention, inclusiveness and commitment of the UN DESA team responsible for its implementation.

3. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

- The UN DESA Division for Sustainable Development Goals' (DSDG), through the European Union grant "SD2015: Delivering on the promise of the SDGs", implemented a project from 2016 to 2021, aiming to support Major Groups and other Stakeholders' (MGoS) engagement in the 2030 Agenda implementation and follow-up, as a way to contribute to achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"[5], which depend upon the articulated action of a wide range of stakeholders at national, regional and global levels.

- As part of the grant, between 2019 and 2021, UN DESA partnered with UN DCO and 11 UN Resident Coordinators Offices (RCOs) "to support the multi-stakeholder dimension of national development planning and SDG mainstreaming, through analysis of current practices, sharing of best practices and the proposal of actions aligned with United Nation Country Teams' (UNCTs) implementation of the Cooperation Framework (CF)". [6] In this regard this project is already a practical response to the call from the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres for the UN Development System (UNDS) to support national demands for inclusive alliances and participatory processes, considering the needs of the most marginalized and bringing them to the table to achieve the SDGs through a multilateralism that is more inclusive and effective. As stated in his recent *Our Common Agenda Report*[7]:

   (…) "taking stock of challenges and recommending actions that build on what is working and improve what is not. (...) we have shown that we can come together to forge collective solutions. However, this does not happen often, effectively or inclusively enough." (Paragraph 7, p. 11)
   (...) "as part of open, participatory, peer-driven and transparent systems, geared at solving problems by drawing on the capacities and hearing the voices of all relevant actors rather than being driven by mandates or institutions alone. **This is a form of multilateralism that is more networked, more inclusive and more effective** in addressing twenty-first century challenges". (Paragraph 104, p. 58)

- The countries engaged in this project – **Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Cameroon, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Namibia, Serbia, Sri Lanka,** and **Uzbekistan** – were selected based on the RCO's expression of interest in consultation with UNDCO or identified based on previous partnerships with UN DESA. The project supported the hiring of national consultants, based on an equal estimated amount to each partner RCO. In general, the following results were expected from each country:

   • National stakeholder mapping for engagement with implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including potential platforms for meaningful engagement; analysis of

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[5] https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

[6] All project's reports can be accessed here: https://sdgs.un.org/stakeholders/strengthening-multi-stakeholder-dimension-national-development-planning-and-sdg

[7] https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/

stakeholder engagement, considering the VNRs and Common Country Analyses, if applicable; and analysis of multi-stakeholder engagement in the UNSDCF, considering the *Common minimum standards for multi-stakeholder engagement*;

- Identification of the challenges, opportunities and recommendations for strengthening stakeholder engagement with national governments, the UNCT and through the CF;

- A draft stakeholder engagement 'best practices' and 'action plan' for the inclusive and transparent participation of all stakeholders in the 2030 Agenda related processes, promoting the LNOB approach;

- Identifying areas where Member States, UNCTs and stakeholders could require additional support; and new ideas addressing the challenges to effective stakeholder engagement posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology and scope of the work:

This report "Strengthening the multi-stakeholder Dimension of National Development Planning and SDG Mainstreaming - A Follow Up Report" was compiled through a desk-review of country reports and outcomes (ten)[8]; feedbacks from RCOs (six); RCO's Terms of References (eleven); relevant UN documents; semi-structured interviews with the UN RCO' staff (four) and members of the UN DESA team (three). In addition, an open discussion (through a webinar) was held with partners of the project, which supported the development of countries' reports to take stock of the current landscape of stakeholder participation in SDG implementation and to discuss the key results of the project.

✓ Since the project had a **tailored approach,** allowing each country to adapt the methodology and timelines, and since the stakeholders engaged varied, depending on the national context, it was not possible to compare experiences or results in a consistent manner. This is **a limitation of the current analysis** which focus mainly on the common challenges and opportunities identified between countries as well as their main recommendations to strengthen multi-stakeholder engagement in processes related to the 2030 Agenda, despite their different socio-political and economic contexts.

✓ In a similar way, the limited space for this analytical report hindered the capacity of featuring all the richness of information, perspectives and specific recommendations of all the country reports. Readers are encouraged to review the reports here.

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[8] The final report from Namibia is undergoing consultations and was not concluded in time for this consultancy.

4. STAKEHOLDER MAPPING: KEY FINDINGS.

> *The mapping provides an overview of the stakeholders, which will make it possible to analyze their levels of interest in the SDGs, and their capacity to influence and mobilize other actors.* [Madagascar Report, p. 23. Free translation]
>
> *The project helped fill a gap in the understanding of the stakeholder landscape and the ways in which engagement has been and ought to be made with them (...). It gave us an enhanced understanding of stakeholder groups, expectations and ways of engaging with them.* [Sri Lanka's Feedback]

The project "Strengthening the multi-stakeholder Dimension of National Development Planning and SDG Mainstreaming" supported RCOs **to map and better organize data** about the stakeholders within countries, as well to identify best practices, challenges, opportunities, recommendations and areas where Member States, United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs) and Resident Coordinator's Offices (RCOs) would need additional support towards strengthening multi-stakeholder engagement for SDG implementation.

> The uses of the Common Minimum Standards for Multi-Stakeholder Engagement (CMSME) was proposed as a methodological approach for the project and as the base-level steps UNCTs should take in encouraging stakeholder engagement in support to SDGs implementation and follow up, developing and maintaining a database of relevant stakeholders, reflecting the principles of inclusive participation intended in the 2030 Agenda while considering national realities.
>
>   Guiding principles of engagement to promote inclusivity and enhanced engagement for the 2030 Agenda: 1. Civic space, inclusivity, diversity and representation; 2. Transparency and accountability; 3. Accessibility and safety; 4. Respect for human rights, democracy and sustainability.

✓ **Eight out of eleven countries used the CMSME** as reference and further consultation indicated that ten RCOs considered it as a relevant guidance that requires the development of indicators for better monitoring/ implementation. As stated by one of the RCO staff interviewed, "(...) the UNSDG proposed this Common Minimum Standards to step up the scale of support to multi-stakeholder engagement, however one size does not fit all". Therefore, although helpful, the CMSME requires fine tuning and new measurement indicators, for the proper monitoring of its application and the development of roadmaps/action plans to operationalize them."

✓ Mapping within countries included primarily civil society organizations (across different sectors, and in accordance with their national context) and governments. It has also helped to identify government sectors most committed to the 2030 Agenda.

✓ The *Our Common Agenda Report* calls for **a** more "systematic engagement of all sectors, but also of **parliaments, subnational authorities** and the **private sector**"[9]. However the inclusion and engagement of these sectors and of the **academia varied** from country to

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[9]Our Common Agenda. Report of the Secretary-General, 2021. Chapter 5, p. 72. Access: October 2021. https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/#download

country; the mapping also identified the need to further reach groups such as **persons with disabilities,** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/questioning, Asexual + Others' **(LGBTIQA+), human rights activists** and **trade unions** among others.

✓ **Private Sector** – All country reports recognized the important role the private sector can play in achieving the SDGs – through the creation of good jobs, innovation, and responsible investment, human right's-based approaches and good governance. However, some country reports highlighted that the business community, besides knowing little about the 2030 Agenda, also still seem to have **limited awareness of Corporate Social Responsibility** concepts, what makes the process of understanding how to contribute to the SDG goals more challenging. Their engagement with the UNCTs also varies between UN agencies and depends on which projects are being implemented.

> *The private sector dedicated to the advancement of the SDGs is not large in Serbia, (...) but even among those who have an interest in SDG acceleration, there is often a lack of awareness on the SDGs and a lack of recognition of opportunities to advance their work in line with the SDGs.* [Serbia's Report, p.30]

Some examples, however, indicated the **need for more analysis on the profile of the companies engaging in SDG implementation at country level.** In the Dominican Republic, for instance, a National Commission for Sustainable Development is made up of 32 governmental and 16 non-governmental seats that include 5 seats to the private sector and one to trade unions – but the influence of the private sector is high since four CSO representatives are connected to the social responsibility work of companies.

✓ In most country reports, **the importance of academia and research institutions** in the **production and monitoring of data** was mentioned, but their level of engagement was **still considered as a gap.** Although the abundance of knowledge of academic institutions that could carry out actions and produce research on each of the 17 SDGs was highlighted, in some countries, this capacity still needs to be further developed.

> *Two years after the publication of the SDG prioritization report, Madagascar is still struggling to materialize its commitment (...) the absence of a multi-stakeholder engagement strategy combined with a weakness in the indicator monitoring system are considered to be the main obstacles to the implementation of these actions.* [Madagascar's Report, p.19.]
>
> *(...) some goals really need experts to work on and so far, those experts could only be mobilized from international sources. There are needs to enhance and expand the roles of the academia by creating enabling environment for researchers to conduct scientific research. (...) embedding SDGs in the university curriculum would help accelerate the implementation process.* [Cambodia's Report, pp. 17 and 20.]

✓ Identifying information about the engagement of **subnational/local** was only possible in some countries. Nevertheless, most of the reports emphasized the fundamental importance of local governments for the localization of the SDGs. **Leadership for the SDGs is still concentrated within the central government** for reasons that go from the political context, to the limited awareness of the 2030 Agenda by local authorities, showing that efforts to engage actors at local level continue to be crucial to leaving no one behind.

> *Discussion with the umbrella organization for local government bodies indicated that, despite there being a larger role for local governments, (...) their level of engagement has been minimal.* [Sri Lanka's Report. P. 19.]

> *During the VNR process in 2020, one of the main findings is that even though a series of local governments are identified to have adopted and currently implement SDGs in their local plans and policies, further efforts to engage the meaningful participation of local governments are needed.* [Costa Rica's Report, p. 21]

✓ **Civil society organizations (CSOs),** Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-based Organizations (CBOs) had an important coverage in all reports, which made it possible to observe the different levels in terms of participation, capacities and in power relations that exist between them, or between them and the governments and/or between them and UNCTs. In most of the countries, CSOs are presented as having little financial autonomy, depending almost exclusively on grants for their operation and facing the need to adapt their priorities to donor priorities. This indicates **the need for UNCT's,** whenever possible, to **consider strategies to support CSOs fundraising strategies** for SDG implementation.

> *There is a wide presence of non-governmental organizations in the country, many of them with capacity, potential, and interest in joining initiatives aimed at promoting the advancement of the 2030 Agenda.* [Dominican Republic's Report, p. 5.]

Also, in some countries, the **international NGOs'** voices seem to be stronger than those of national organizations since they have both capacity and financial resources to engage and lead the processes. It is concerning that, in countries where governments are more resistant to civic participation, a stronger leadership of international NGOs can be used to delegitimize the engagement of CSO's in general. These contexts have been well mapped in country reports and deserve special of attention by UNCTs and RCOs.

> *The increased role of international NGOs, being funding channels of national organizations and also actors directly involved in the implementation of actions, resulted in the decrease in the support available to the most "structured" national NGOs. The latter in many cases have limited capacities in the formulation of competitive proposal for international/bilateral cooperation entities and, in all cases, have a limited capacity to "co-finance" projects.* [Guinea-Bissau's Report, p. 19.]

> *(...) from CSOs' views, stakeholder engagement practice is rather dominated by large and resourceful organization. Small CSOs tend to be less involved or heard (....) they can only comment on the indicators relevant to their areas they have been working on and the comments are provided through Technical Working Groups.* [Cambodia's Report, p. 20.]

✓ **Human rights' defenders, LGBTIQA+ continue to face challenges** to participate in the vast majority of the piloting-countries – and indigenous populations in some of them – due to a lack of government's interest in the dialogue with them or for not recognizing them as legitimate actors. It was also noted that, despite **women** and **youth** groups being

mentioned as key groups in all reports, issues such as sexual and reproductive rights are still highly sensitive in most of the countries participating in the project.

> *The government has been working to promote indigenous rights and women's rights. However, human rights organizations have not been included as the result of prioritization in the initial list of indicators. Human rights targets and indicators are absent from the Cambodia SDG 16,* [Cambodia's Report, p. 6.]

✓ It is worth considering that findings from country reports appear to align with external reviews showing that **civic space is quite challenging in the selected countries**. The rating regularly undertaken by CIVICUS[10] shows civic space as closed, repressed or obstructed in 8 out of the 11 countries, and narrowed in the remaining three, making more complex the promotion of an enabling environment for participation.
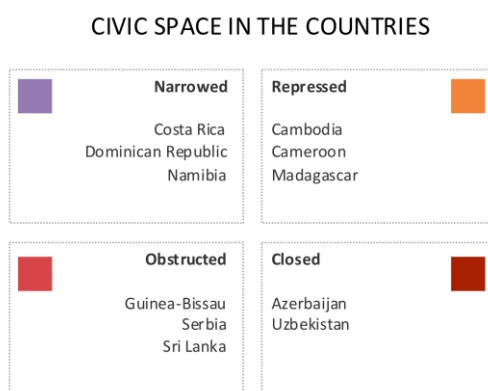

CIVIC SPACE IN THE COUNTRIES

Narrowed	Repressed
Costa Rica	Cambodia
Dominican Republic	Cameroon
Namibia	Madagascar

Obstructed	Closed
Guinea-Bissau	Azerbaijan
Serbia	Uzbekistan
Sri Lanka	

Fig.1 Created by the consultant. Source: CIVICUS's Report, 2021.

> *NGO sector (...) capacity to address critical or sensitive issues (e.g. sexual minorities, former prisoners, human rights violations) remains limited. (...) for them to be a real partner further work is necessary to liberalize legislation (...). The current laws governing NGO registration, financing, travel and their events are excessively restrictive and not in compliance with international standards.* [Uzbekistan's Report, p.3]

> *Article 55 stipulates that the constitution of associations is independent of authorization. However, important too is the legal status of CSOs (...) obtaining legal personality depends on proper registration, and is a complex and costly process.* [Guinea Bissau's Report, p. 12.]

✓ There was a consensus, in all country reports, that **the stakeholder mapping exercise was an important result of the project**, welcomed and praised by RCOs. But a **more detailed and complete mapping** which identifies overlapping projects and possible synergies **is needed** for not only adding political *intel* but also to facilitate a more effective articulation between the UN system's actors within a given country, and contribute to

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[10] https://monitor.civicus.org/Ratings/ Costa Rica downgraded from 'open' to 'narrowed' in 2021 Access: October 2021.

"RCOs becoming empowered to be a one-stop-shop for partnerships"[11], which is still a challenge in many countries. It is also anticipated over time that the maps should deepen and expand to include, for example, data on which organizations received project funding from UN agencies and/or national governments, which will be relevant to understand their connection with other UN agencies and their political interests in the process.

> *RCOs need more than just a list of stakeholder contacts, they also need to know how comprehensive, and not compromised by interests, that list is.* [RC interviewed]

✓ This project proves that the concept of "meaningful engagement" demands further review and 'unpacking' and has still little practical resonance, indicating **a need for specific and detailed analysis and action in each country,** tailored to the *needs of each stakeholder group*. In this regard, after the mapping, one of the products of the "Strengthening the multi-stakeholder Dimension of National Development Planning and SDG Mainstreaming" project, was drafting of stakeholder engagement best practices and an ***action plan*** for the inclusive and transparent participation of all stakeholders, in the 2030 Agenda related processes, promoting the Leaving no One Behind approach.

✓ All countries have completed their *national stakeholder mapping*, have moved on to the organization of this data (albeit using different types of systematization) and have identified best practices. However, only a few has elaborated 'actions plans' due to the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as 1) the need for specific guidelines for the preparation of an action plan; 2) the need for a dedicated consultant with the specific expertise to do so; 3) the need to create capacity within the RCO to assist in implementing and monitoring the plan, thus avoiding unrealistic expectations.

✓ Finally, this project confirms that the whole-of-society approach inspired by the 2030 Agenda requires an *enabling environment* that promotes contributions and effective and meaningful partnerships across scales, sectors and silos (please, see picture below). It also requires coordination, mobilization and the sharing of "knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources", as outlined in SDG target 17.6.

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[11] "*In moving towards a new generation of United Nations country teams, we must ensure that, at the country level, resident coordinator offices are empowered to serve as a one-stop shop for partnerships with external partners, including international financial institutions, businesses, civil society and other stakeholders.*" Repositioning the UN development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: our promise for dignity, prosperity and peace on a healthy planet, Report of the Secretary-General, 2017, Paragraph 134. Access: October 2021. https://undocs.org/A/72/684

Fig. 2 Partnership Enabling Ecosystem
     /UNDESA

5. MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The review of the project demonstrates that, even in countries where formal mechanisms for follow-up of the SDGs exist, **effective participation is still unequal**, and rife with challenges, greater or lesser, depending on the culture of participation, the modality of

> *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 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.* [Azerbaijan's Report, p. 4.]

participation in place and, the stakeholder group itself, confirming the recognized fact that the political, social and economic contexts influence the extension, quality and results of stakeholders engagement processes.

It was also identified that there is a lack of information about the level of **gender balance** within the existing national processes for engaging stakeholders, (ad hoc or formal ones). Urgent attention to this matter is needed.

The review, finally, considered that, besides the civic space situation, the territorial size, **the population, and countries' income matter** and should be taken into consideration when developing multi-country projects, including in relation to the budget allocation for each country.[12]
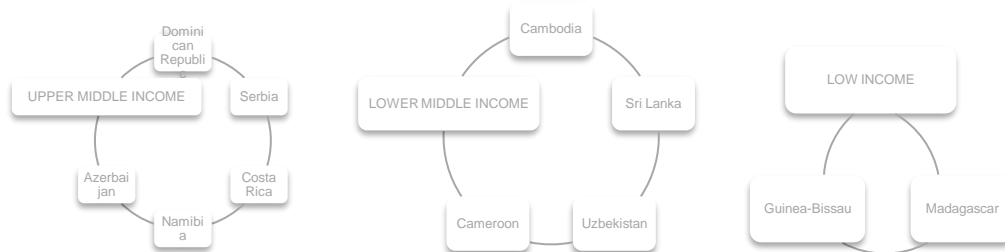
Fig.4. Created by the consultant. Source: World Population Review.[13]
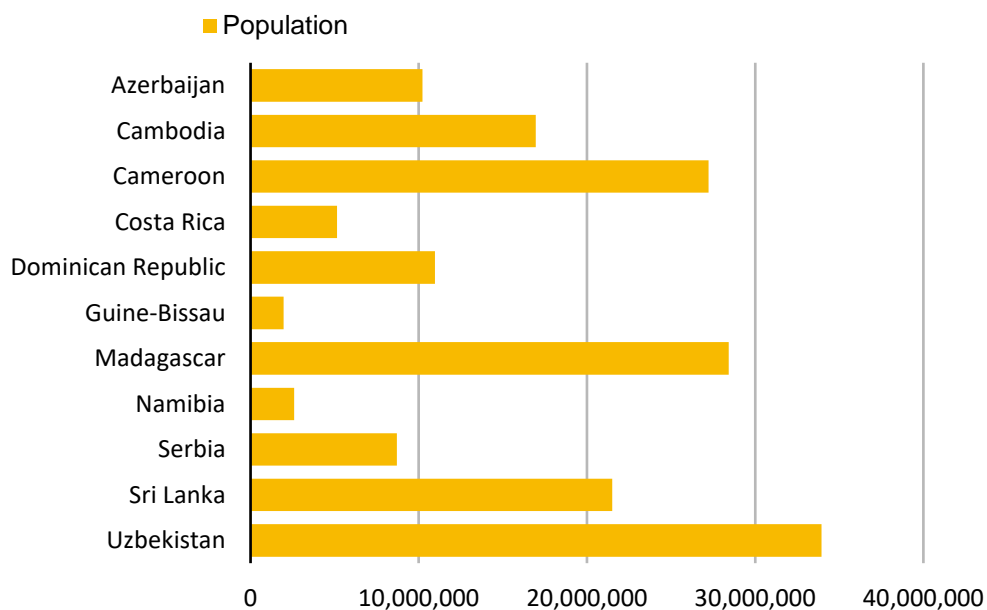
Fig.4. Created by the consultant. Source: World Population Review.[13]

Table 1. Created by the consultant. Source: Human Development Report 2020 [13]

Country	Size km²	HDI/2019
Azerbaijan	86,600	0.756
Cambodia	181,035	0.594
Cameroon	475,442	0.563
Costa Rica	51,180	0.810
Dominican Republic	48,442	0.756

[12] Total Population by Country 2021. https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries Access: October 2021.

[13] http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking Access: October 2021.

Guinea-Bissau	36,120	0.48
Madagascar	587,041	0.52.
Namibia	825,615	0.646
Serbia	88,361	0.806
Sri Lanka	65,610	0.782
Uzbekistan	447,400	0.720

5.1. Modalities and Culture of Participation

✓ The analysis of countries' reports shows that there are **different types of institutional arrangements for stakeholder participation in the countries**. They range from formal mechanisms with representatives who lack decision-making power, to consultative bodies with few results, to completely informal and sporadic processes. Formal mechanisms with seats for government high-level representatives and for multi-stakeholders were identified only in two countries – and in both *maintaining and fostering these formal* arrangements (multi-sectorial and inclusive) is becoming a difficult task.

✓ The identified participatory mechanisms, formal and informal, also work through **various modalities**, implying different types of membership, convocation processes and regularity of meetings. In this regard, the project has helped countries to identify both gaps and opportunities to improve engagement channels for non-state actors and to identify an important challenge: even in countries where participatory mechanisms are formalized, **the quality of participation is not necessarily guaranteed**, as indicated by the experiences of Costa Rica, where multi-stakeholder engagement processes are at an advanced stage:

> *One of the main findings in this report is that the representation of civil society in the integration of the SDGs into governance structures faces significant challenges and is not inclusive. (...) Although the National Pact is an open call for the participation of multiple stakeholders, through representative or individual instances, more significant efforts are needed to ensure the voices of vulnerable populations are heard and critical groups such as indigenous peoples, youth and people with disabilities can effectively participate.* [Costa Rica's Report, Chapter III]

✓ The reports also indicate that existing institutional arrangements are primarily focused on the 'whole-of government', making it difficult for other stakeholders to develop a sense of ownership. A general conclusion can be drawn that **the concept of "meaningful engagement" and a culture of participation need to be better disseminated and appropriated,** by both non-government stakeholders and government representatives, especially the latter, in all countries; since they bear the main responsibility for SDG implementation and follow up.

✓ Finally, processes and platforms engaging multi-stakeholders were highlighted in the reports – in person/ virtual meetings, focus groups, working groups, forums, etc – but their effectiveness depend on different variables and capacities, and preferences vary from country to country. It was noted however that a common gap was the **lack of follow-up on initiated debates**, with communication negligible or non-existent among the different stakeholders between the meetings.

5.2 United Nations: Leading by Example

Almost all reports identified the level of engagement between the RCO and other UN agencies as collaborative, and some of them acknowledged existing coordination structures for the elaboration of and follow up on the United Nations Framework Plan for Sustainable Development Cooperation (UNSDF). However, the need for a more regular and consistent approach to build greater confidence and effective engagement, including with government stakeholders, was identified, since, similarly to government's processes, the majority of the countries' reports indicated that the **engagement of multi-stakeholders** in the planning and implementation of **UN programs is also conducted on an ad-hoc basis.**

> *In previous programme cycles, the UN and the Government conducted dialogue sessions with business, academia and civil society organizations (...) 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 (...) requires identification and mapping of relevant stakeholders, as well as developing platforms and mechanisms for engagement.* [Azerbaijan's Report. p. 8]

✓ Adopting a **"feedback culture" appears to be a challenge for UNCTs**, lending even more importance to the need to build action plans for engagement, as outlined in the Common Minimum Standards for Multi-Stakeholder Engagement, and especially, in meeting the Secretary General's invitation to all countries "to conduct inclusive national listening exercises, so their citizens can contribute to decisions that affect their future"[14].

> *Existing successful partnerships could be enhanced by greater transparency on UN programme progress, and updates to stakeholders would ensure more engagement, facilitate planning and prevent overlaps.* [Uzbekistan's Report Key Findings p.3]

✓ It was also observed that processes aiming to engage stakeholders from different sectors conducted by UNCTs usually **tend to concentrate the same group of organizations**. In this sense, investing in a deeper multi-stakeholder mapping and their relationships, as indicated in the previous chapter, could help disrupting this culture and facilitate the

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[14] SG/SM/20891 – Global Crisis Response 'Too Little, Too Late', Secretary-General Tells UN General Assembly 'Our Common Agenda' Event, Warning of Instability, Climate Chaos. 10 September 2021 https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm20891.doc.htm Access: October 2021.

inclusion of new partners. This is still more complex in some contexts, as flagged in the example below:

> *The vicious cycle of socio-political and military instability in which the country has been submerged for the past two decades has contributed to further degrading working conditions and disqualifying the capacity of public officials. Therefore, with the need for cooperation from different institutions with the State, there is a tendency to personify the relationship through the indication of focal points (...) On the positive side, it is possible to execute programming with less difficulty than if it depended on the instability of the Guinean state. On the other hand, there is a risk that engagement will be more personal than institutional, often losing the opportunity to establish more consistent bonds over the long term.* [Guinea-Bissau's Report, p.15.]

✓ It was also possible to identify that, in many countries, multiple UN agencies are engaging with the same Government Agencies/institutions, or the private sector, on different fronts and at different levels, with limited inter-agency coordination. **Coordination between UNCTs** was classified as still poor in some countries and mentioned in most of countries' reports **among the main challenges in the field.**

✓ There are indications that, despite principles of transparency and accountability being pursued, **the level of collaboration** between some UN Entities in support to the RCO's role as the articulator of the SDGs in the country needs to be enhanced. The challenges for RCOs range from information not being shared to a lack of interest in developing joint activities. Also noted was the need of fine-tuning of existing instruments and for the creation of new indicators to assess the level of coordination between the UNCT in the promotion of multi-stakeholder engagement within countries.

✓ The **need of inclusive and horizontal relationships between stakeholders and the UN** was also noted. Some reports informed about very vertical relationships established, in which partners must adapt to existing UN programs, often provided "ready-made". It seems that persisting misunderstandings about the role and mission of the UN amongst multi-stakeholders also contribute to this situation. In some countries, there is also a perception that the UN is solely a financing entity.

> *(...) the image of an international organization, often perceived popularly, but also amongst state actors, as a tutor of the nation state, inhibits the possibility of a more horizontal relationship. Deconstructing the image of an important but inaccessible partner is essential in engaging stakeholders.* [Guinea-Bissau's Report, p. 21.]
>
> *(...) according to (the NGO) Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC), when presenting a report in Bangkok, they were unable to access the UN there. The GADC had to go through UN Women. Those who do not share a network with the UN do not have the opportunity to participate.* [Cambodia's Report, p. 14.]

✓ As one UN person interviewed mentioned, "(...) facing challenges is the nature of our work" and another one to consider is that **the convening power of the UN varies from nation to nation**; in some countries there is resistance from governments, in others outright disbelief, therefore finding alternatives to ensure continued dialogue and buy-in

for stakeholder engagement in countries where the political context is significantly unstable, should be a priority in order to leave no one behind.

✓ In this regard, it was noted that, besides **measuring tools** that consider countries' realities and political landscape, **more capacity building is needed for UNCT and RCO's** towards fostering the culture of participation among governments, UN staff, and stakeholders.

✓ Finally, this project was a welcome surprise to some RCOs, who had not yet considered the possibility of collaborating with UN DESA. Therefore, in addition **to further improving the internal communications** between UNCTs and RCOs, **more collaboration between RCO's and UN DESA is needed** to facilitate better connection with regional and global levels and strengthen the RCOs capacity to support meaningful stakeholder's engagement in the SDG processes, while keeping up to date with the systematized guidelines made available. As one RCO staff aptly summarized, in reference to the group of countries in the project:

> *I am not sure how many RCO staff are aware of DESA's work and the potential engagement opportunities.* [RCO's Feedback.]

5.3 Creating SDG Awareness Among Stakeholders is a First Step

> *The SDGs continue to be communicated from a technical, institutional, and centralized perspective without fully transcending into the day-to-day work of civil society. Some CSOs are unclear about their relationship with the SDGs, how to get involved, and above all, they do not feel a sense of ownership of the Agenda as a commitment for which they must be accountable, disseminate and monitor compliance. Therefore, work with civil society must be revitalized and reformulated. To do so, strategies that consider two fundamental elements should be designed: 2030 Agenda engagement and appropriation for CSOs from a human rights, accessibility, and culturally relevant approach; and follow-up structures with clear results and feedback.*
>
> *To ensure the inclusion and representativeness of the diversity of civil society, decentralizing the spaces for participation, identifying networks and communication channels in the communities, ensuring that they are accessible to people with disabilities, and organizing them from a gender perspective are some of the fundamental recommendations.* [Costa Rica's Report, p. 4.]

✓ Whilst better co-ordination and cohesion in the stakeholder engagement process is essential, according to the countries' reports it is also required **to create a sense of ownership of the 2030 Agenda** amongst different stakeholders, to achieve meaningful engagement. A common challenge mentioned was a **lack of general awareness about the opportunities to engage in the SDGs**, across all segments, as illustrated bellow:

> *Although efforts have been made to disseminate the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda, they must be intensified to achieve greater commitment from all stakeholders. 25% of the 180 NGO consulted in the process of preparing this report stated that they had little or no knowledge about the 2030 Agenda, and 34.5% declared that they had no knowledge of the National Development Strategy (END 2030).* [Dominican Republic's Report.]
>
> *(...) This lack of awareness among broader groups of citizens, prevent their more proactive participation and contribution. Based on a survey conducted by IPSAS in 2020 for the occasion of UN75, 6 out of 10 citizens in Serbia have never heard of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.* [Serbia's Report.]
>
> *Effective engagement was also hindered due to stakeholders operating in silos, lack of deeper understanding of SDG goals and their inter-connectedness, as well as how it directly relates to them (...) there is* a general lack of knowledge and understanding of how SDGs can impact stakeholders directly. [Sri Lanka's Report.]
>
> *While this research found that SDGs have started to become a reference, awareness-raising work remains to be done for the stakeholders to assess their work in terms of SDGs achievement (...). In addition, this step should enable state and non-state actors to develop a shared understanding of the SDGs and their translation to the Cameroonian context, which will, in turn, contribute to strengthening the dialogue between these stakeholders.* [Cameroon's Report.]

✓ There is also a need for greater awareness of the existing **mechanisms for engaging stakeholders in UN regional bodies.** Only two country reports mentioned regional spaces and the level of knowledge amongst RCOs and UNCTs regarding existing participation mechanisms needs to improve. The project, in this sense, also suggests that **complying with regional processes can significantly accelerate achievement of the SDGs**, not only at regional but also at national levels, as showed below:

> *At the Battambang Province, there is a pilot project on localizing the SDG 11. Via guidance from the ESCAP, the city started with defining the priorities with all provincial department, NGOs, waste collectors and Battambang University.(...) Commune levels also participated. In order to implement, the Provincial Administration creates a taskforce consisting of those stakeholders mentioned above. The committee is rather ad hoc, so it will be automatically dissolved after the project is done.* [Cambodia's Report, p. 19.]

✓ Countries' reports also identified the need of **producing media campaigns and reliable data** on the stakeholder engagement for sustainable development. More **granular data** about the needs of various communities will enable **targeted** approaches to specific population groups, ensuring no one is left behind.

✓ Three reports and two interviews suggested that the general public should be more regularly informed about the work of the UNCT and the national progress and advances

resulted from broader participation, as a means of promoting the 2030 Agenda.

> *The creation or engagement of local, regional and national platforms to discuss the 2030 Agenda is essential for establishing a relationship of trust with stakeholders. In addition, information and awareness campaigns on the United Nations' new approach of cooperation with the national stakeholders is essential.* [Guine-Bissau's Report, p. 21.]

✓ For creating awareness, **language matters**. Some reports highlight that many debates and key information are still only available in English, and it takes a long time for many documents to be translated, especially where the UN official languages are not official or commonly spoken, which is the case of five countries participating in this project.

Table 2. Created by the consultant. Source Wikipedia [15]

Country	Language
Azerbaijan	Azeri 90%; Russian 2%.
Cambodia	Khmer 85%
Cameroon	French, English
Costa Rica	Spanish
Dominican Republic	Spanish
Guinea-Bissau	Crioulo or Kiriol. 11% Portuguese
Madagascar	French
Namibia	English, Afrikaans, German, Otjiherero
Serbia	Serbo-Croatian
Sri Lanka	Sinhala Tamil / English
Uzbekistan	Uzbek

5.4 UN Process: Strategic for Engagement

While developing this project, countries were at different stages in their implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (formerly named the United Nations Development Assistance Framework),[16] however, available reports and interviews confirmed that its strategic and tailored approach fostered multi-stakeholder engagement and partnerships:

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[15] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_official_languages_by_country_and_territory. Access: October, 2021

[16] For complete information, please see here: https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/cooperation-framework

Country	Country Report's information
Azerbaijan	Despite the RCO having to consult through separate groups to ensure inclusion of women and LGBTI, who are often left behind in discussions on gender equality and LGBTI issues, this was the first time the Cooperation Framework has enjoyed so many participants, a very important result. The next step from the project report is to plan stakeholder engagement in time for the launch of the new UNSDCF 2021-2025
Cameroon	The new national development strategy (SND 2020-2030) is being finalized as a platform that can offer a possibility of achieving greater multi-stakeholder commitments and, among the results of the project, the inclusiveness of the CSO platform for SDGs, recently set up, is mentioned; (...) the alignment of the UNDAF 2018-2020 on national priorities as contributing factors to this success (...) and the operationalization of a joint budgeted work plan and steering committee between the Government and the UN as foreseen in the UNDAF.
Cambodia	The 2020 CCA was prepared amid rising demands for the UN system to respond rapidly to the COVID-19 pandemic that has severely affected Cambodia, ranging from health emergencies to socio-economic impacts. Numerous consultations with relevant stakeholders were conducted through the UN75 Conversations campaign and the UN Cambodia Framework for Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19 (SERF) to solicit insights, evidence and feedback reflected in the CCA. Through the UN75 Conversations, consultations were carried out with various local communities, including factory workers and LGBTI groups in Phnom Penh, female farmers and youth in Kampong Thom province, and indigenous youth and children in Rattanakiri province. Through the SERF, consultations were conducted with the diplomatic corps, international financial institutions, development partners, civil society organizations and relevant government line ministries such as the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), and the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC).
Costa Rica	In 2021, the Advisory Committee, convened the National Pact Stakeholders, agreed to formulate a Work Plan to strengthen their advisory role with the High-Level Council and promote strategic actions for SDGs acceleration. The project represented an opportunity to strengthen the multi- stakeholder dimension of national development planning and mainstreaming of the SDGs (...) and proposed concrete actions in line with the implementation of the UNCT Cooperation Framework.
Dominican Republic	The key findings and recommendations of this project will inform the formulation of the UN Common Country Analysis (CCA), the design of the UNSDCF, and formulation of the new national development plan. In fact, the consultation (about meaningful engagement) offered a space to engage with the CSOs on the process of the formulation of national development plan, SDGs mainstreaming, CCA at the country level, which has to be sustained throughout the implementation and M&E of the national development plan as well as the UNSDCF to improve the stakeholders' buy-in and ownership.

Guinea-Bissau	A key step in the process of drafting its new UNSDCF for 2021-2025, the UNCT started a process of socialization and consultation for the initial Common Country Analysis (CCA) with different stakeholders. In addition to a literature review, the CCA consultation session allowed better understanding and analysis of the challenges and opportunities for stakeholder engagement in implementing and monitoring the 2030 Agenda, including government and civil society organizations.
Madagascar	The project is very useful and important, because Madagascar is elaborating a new cooperation framework for 2021-2023, and relaunching the SDGs dynamics with national authorities. The collected data and results of the analyses will be used during the implementation and monitoring of the new cooperation framework, through a concrete work plan. Multi-stakeholder involvement at the start of the UNSDCF elaboration process in Madagascar was considered a best practice in the COVID-19 context by the UNDCO, and should be shared.
Namibia	The government has prepared the United Nations Partnership Framework UNPAF for 2019-2023 together with the UN Namibia, including non-resident agencies, through an extensive consultation process with various stakeholders, including civil society organizations, bilateral and multilateral organizations, the private sector, the academia and research institutions. At the writing of their report, Namibia were finalizing the National Development Plan 6 which will be launched in 2022, and the stakeholders mapping will be useful for that.
Republic of Serbia	The project is an important starting base for the mapping and stakeholder analysis. The country is under the Final Evaluation of the UN Development Partnership Framework for the Republic of Serbia 2016-2020.
Sri Lanka	The project's results and analyses were used to inform the current Cooperation Framework development process. It was shared with the RCO team and UNCT Deputy Representative's team for their input and use as guidance tool. One of its recommendations was taken up as a priority by the SDG-Driven National Planning, Financing and Data Results Group.
Uzbekistan	The project happened during the development of the CCA and UNSDCF for 2021-2025, in which extensive multi-stakeholder consultations were conducted in six regions and in the capital of Uzbekistan on the most critical development challenges, their effects and causes, as well asking about beneficial solutions in which the UN could play a useful role.

✓ Finally, Voluntary National Reports (VNRs)[17] were also identified as being significant strategic opportunities to foster multi-stakeholder engagement. The majority of countries were already well familiarized with the process; with the exception of Guinea Bissau (which will present its first VNR in 2022), all have submitted VNRs to the High Level Political Forum (HLPF).

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[17] For complete information, please see here https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/

VNR (Voluntary National Reviews)							
Azerbaijan	-	2017	-	2019	-	2021	-
Cambodia	-	-	-	2019	-	-	-
Cameroon	-	-	-	2019	-	-	scheduled for 2022
Costa Rica	-	2017	-	-	2020	-	-
Dominican Republic	-	-	2018	-	-	2021	-
Guinea-Bissau	-	-	-	-	-	-	scheduled for 2022
Madagascar	2016	-	-	-	-	2021	-
Namibia	-	-	2018	-	-	2021	-
Serbia	-	-	-	2019	-	-	-
Sri Lanka	-	-	2018	-	-	-	scheduled for 2022
Uzbekistan	-	-	-	-	2020	-	-

Table 3. Countries X VNRs. Created by the consultant. Source: SD Knowledge Platform

✓ In several countries, the project has also allowed for a better understanding of the level of stakeholder inclusiveness in VNRs, and although the results differed, there was consensus that the VNRs' processes contribute significantly to awareness and provide some indication of commitment and ownership to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

> *UNCTs should reach out to all stakeholders (mapped) at the very beginning of the programme stage and tell them about the (UN) process, their opportunities for participation, and formally ask for their inputs.* [Uzbequistan's Report, p.6]

6. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT & LESSONS

> *Let there be no illusion: COVID-19 may pale in comparison to future challenges if we do not learn from failures that have cost lives and livelihoods. Our best projections show that a stark choice confronts us.*[18] [Our Common Agenda Report]

✓ Reports on the impact of COVID-19 on the project implementation and the process of engaging and fostering partnerships varied. For example, the Dominican Republic reported impacts in each one of the SDGs itself, while one country did not consider the topic in its analysis, because it completed the mapping before the pandemic. However, from the complementary desk review, it can be stated that, in general, COVID-19 presented challenges to the engagement of stakeholders in the SDG's related processes in all countries, especially due to restrictions on mobility.

✓ From a political point of view, a key challenge identified was the shift in priorities due to COVID-19. With economic recovery and health concerns taking precedence, several SDG initiatives, both at policy and implementation levels, were impacted. Examples

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[18] Our Common Agenda. Report of the Secretary-General, 2021. Session 01. Access: October 2021.
https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/#download

include interruptions to data collection processes; activities postponed, or cancelled even in countries where formal structures of engagement for the 2030 Agenda exist; concern that the pandemic ended up justifying less attention to the SDGs by governments, when a certain lack of interest was already being identified; trend of further narrowing civic spaces during the pandemic, with governments using the need for urgency as pretext to bypass dialogue.[19]

> *It is possible to identify a series of laws passed (...) in the period between 2017 and 2020, which substantially contribute to the advancement of the 2030 Agenda, however, the incipient roadmap follow-up implementation process was interrupted by impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgency required in addressing the international emergency.* [Costa Rica's Report, p. 20.]

> *(...) Roma, people with mental disabilities (...) were left out, not only in the SDG activities, but also in different forms of support to address the impact of COVID-19. These and other consequences pose new challenges to the achievement of SDGs, and in some cases caused pushback against already achieved results, as reported by stakeholders* [Serbia's Report, p. 26.]

> *From the stakeholders' points of views, the Ministry of Planning has made effort to raise the awareness on the SDGs despite the scope of which is not broad enough. However, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry has been less active.* [Cambodia's Report, p.23]

✓ COVID-19, in addition to uncovering the levels of inequality that exist between and within countries, revealed gaps in outreach to vulnerable populations. Most of the engagement tools prior to COVID-19 were based on physical interactions, such as on-site workshops, forums and meetings. Over time, some of these transitioned to remote formats, using digital technologies, where possible. However, **poor IT infrastructure, lower access to Internet and mobile data were identified as challenges** for engaging stakeholders since not all stakeholders could rapidly transition to digital communication, particularly those who are poor, or living in rural areas or belong to marginalized populations.

✓ It was reinforced that face-to-face engagement through open houses, physical meetings and workshops etc. remain important in ensuring the engagement of marginalized groups and that in-person meeting facilitates interaction and mutual understanding. Thus, while there was consensus that it was possible to access a greater number of people and groups through digital platforms, there was also a **concern about *the quality of engagement***.

✓ Greater usage of online tools and social media channels throughout the countries post COVID-19 was also identified **as an opportunity** since this could be leveraged to create greater awareness of the SDGs amongst a wider group of people.

✓ It can bring some cost savings (of resources and time) compared to in-person, especially when there is a need to support travel and lodging. In this way, closing the digital gap should be a priority, considering the **significant shift towards digital communication** channels developed or strengthened in response to the pandemic, which, in some countries, contributed to the maintenance of engagement between organizations.

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[19] https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/?location=&issue=9&date=&type=

✓ And finally, from a programmatic point of view, **almost all countries reported having developed plans to respond to COVID-19,** so enhancing the contribution of stakeholders in the implementation of these plans can also be an opportunity to continue fostering stakeholder engagement, as synthesized bellow:

> *There is a wide range of opportunities to expand and strengthen alliances, capacities and the participation (...) in the planning, implementation and follow-up in the fulfillment of the SDGs, and the mitigation impacts plan for COVID-19. This was evidenced in both the revised documentation and in consultations conducted in preparation of this report, which enjoyed participation from 180 organizations across civil society, the business sector, academia and municipalities.* [Dominican Republic's Report.]

> *UN agencies highlight the fact the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for agencies to deepen their engagement at the community level, through involvement in the COVID-19 Response Plan, and through direct engagement via digital channels.* [SriLanka's Report.]
>
> *Serbia UNCT produced a comprehensive COVID19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment,20 and Response Plan21. These documents (...) inform future interventions addressing the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, provide guidance for recovery and contribute to developmental processes in the post-COVID period.* [Serbia Report, p.26.]

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

> *Despite so many challenges, we know people need us. Especially those who, as always, keep getting left behind.* [RC interviewee.]

This section contains a set of action-oriented recommendations based on the set of suggestions from the country reports. They focus on UNDESA/UNDCO and RCOs/ UNCTs and aim to put into practice the principles of people and environment centered, rights-based approaches to supporting successful stakeholder engagement for the 2030 Agenda implementation and follow up.

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20 https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia_report%20%281%29.pdf

21 https://www.rs.undp.org/content/serbia/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/covid-19-socio-economic-response-plan.html

To UN DESA & UNDCO

1. Consider establishing regular exchange channels with RCOs related to stakeholder engagement, including potential support and partnerships.

These would allow for:
1.1 Regularly scheduled meetings and direct communication channels with interested RCOs to share DESA's work and easily follow up on stakeholder engagement;
1.2 Setting up *practical* knowledge and experience exchange initiatives between DESA and RCOs, on multi-stakeholder engagement and partnerships;
1.3 Improving administrative and operational procedures to expedite the setup and management of partnerships between UN DESA and RCOs.

2. Consider developing regular and ongoing capacity building to RCOs.

Suggested actions:
2.1 Organize *practical* short training sessions to share insights on how to work with governments to increase interest/ strategies for engaging stakeholders in the implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda;
2.2 Organize workshops to strengthen the capacity of UNCT/RCOs for *results-based management* of stakeholder engagement initiatives;
2.3 Facilitate experience exchanges amongst RCOs, particularly those embarking on new UNSDCFs, on successful and inclusive SDG *mechanisms* for stakeholder engagement;
2.4 Facilitate exchange between RCOs and focal points of UN Regional Commissions about the existing multi-stakeholder participation mechanisms for the SDGs.

3. Consider developing general tools and more guidance to support stakeholder engagement efforts, *including:*

3.1 Guidance for the creation of virtual platforms to help stakeholders and agencies establish new connections, build, and follow-through *while implementing joint projects*;
3.2 Guidance on the formulation of an *action plan* for multi-stakeholder engagement.
3.3 Develop indicators to measure/qualify implementation of the Common Minimum Standards for Multi-Stakeholder Engagement at national level.

4. Consider further strengthening the capacity of pilot-project partner countries to foster multi-stakeholder engagement for SDG implementation.

Suggested actions:
4.1 Consider a next phase of the Project, tailored towards the primary needs identified in national reports, and support key common actions in all project countries, including aligning the deliverables and timelines amongst all countries, if possible.
4.2 Consider supporting RCOs in the development of *action plans* for stakeholder engagement; and having an external national expert to facilitate the design of the plans.
4.3 Consider supporting *a participatory budgeting approach,* to jointly mobilize resources for the Action Plan.

5. Consider extending this project to other countries, based on the lessons learned from the piloting experience.

Suggested actions:

5.1 Consider maintaining the strategy of supporting national consultancies, providing consultants a shared research methodology, including interview and report templates, for assessing stakeholder engagement, ensuring a consistent approach.
5.2 Consider allocating resources to communication actions for stimulating multi-stakeholder engagement in the SDGs.
5.3 Whenever possible, support engagement of stakeholders in the development and implementation of COVID-19 response, considering the SDGs as a roadmap for sustainable recovery.

To RCO & UNCTs

6. Consider supporting efforts for the UN to lead by example in promoting partnership processes, and an organizational culture of multi-stakeholder dialogue.

Suggested actions:
6.1 Consider strengthening the Stakeholder Mapping process: add updated information to existing stakeholder lists on partnerships with UNCTs/governments, and the relation of each stakeholder to the SDGs.
6.2 Promote capacity building for government (national and subnational) officials *on results-based participatory* processes for the SDGs, drawing attention to multi-stakeholder engagement commitments in the 2030 Agenda, whilst demonstrating the advantages of meaningful and collaborative participation.
6.3 Promote capacity-building training programs for stakeholders, *aimed at cultivating skills* for active and effective listening, consensus building, and respectful dialogue.
6.4 Support the training of civil society organizations and other stakeholders on the SDGs, participatory governance mechanisms, and facilitate their engagement in the existing national, regional and international SDG processes.

7. Review and improve internal and external communication strategies, aiming to increase UN's soft power and convening capacity, in alignment with Our Common Agenda's SG Report.

Suggested actions:
7.1 *Intensify information campaigns* on both opportunities to engage with the SDGs and the UN's new perspective and approach to cooperation, further *tailoring the messages* towards different audiences and increasing the variety of communication channels, including in social media. Showcasing examples of best practices of meaningful engagement is advisable.
7.2 Establish feedback platforms/initiatives/channels through the more prominent public social and traditional media.
7.3 Consider options to ensure continuous feedback to stakeholders and maintain a smooth flow of communication, while providing space for them *to meet and convene*.

8: Further improve multi-stakeholder engagement in the UN SDG processes.

Suggested actions:
8.1 Align the use of terminologies, standards and guidelines to ensure more effective stakeholder engagement practices at country levels.
8.2 Create or stimulate the creation of mechanisms for engaging all stakeholders through tailored strategies in the development/monitoring of the CF and VNRs, particularly non-governmental actors and/or those who still have limited participation.
8.3 Build capacities of the stakeholder groups on how to align activities and measure their contributions to the SDG and, specifically, to CFs and VNRs.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING FORWARD

> *(...) We are at an inflection point in history. (...) Humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: breakdown or breakthrough. The choices we make — or fail to make — today could result in further breakdown and a future of perpetual crises, or a breakthrough to a better, more sustainable, peaceful future for our people and planet.*[22]

In September of 2020, to mark its 75th anniversary, the UN launched the results of its global consultation on the expectations of international cooperation for the UN, and people's fears and hopes for the future. Over a million people from all countries responded, more than 87% of them believe global cooperation will be vital to deal with today's challenges, and that international cooperation is more urgent, due to the pandemic. Results indicate that people want the UN to change and innovate, to be more inclusive of diversity, and to become more transparent, accountable and effective.[23]

It is an even greater task making these necessary changes at the UN, during a time when the entire world faces immense challenges. In this context, the project "**Strengthening the multi-stakeholder dimension of national development planning and SDG mainstreaming**", from an operational point of view, had most of its objectives achieved, in addition to the various positive externalities, highlighted throughout this report. Although experiences from the eleven countries are too few to draw representative global conclusions, the similarity in national contexts allow for three general conclusions:

1) Implemented within the scope of reforms to the UN Development System, this pilot project ended up **contributing to the priorities of *Our Common Agenda***, which is about a renewed social contract seeking a whole-of-society approach, one capable of responding to an already harsh international reality now worsened due to an unprecedented global health emergency.

As demonstrated throughout this report, activities developed in the countries were centered in a "Leave-no-one-behind" approach, anchored in human rights (Priority 1). Recommendations from the mapping exercises should, once implemented, contribute to an ongoing process to booster partnerships (Priority 10), and an upgrading of the United Nations (Priority 8), which aim to create a "system-wide policy, putting people at the center, (...) with more listening, participation and consultation of all (including digitally)."

Results, and the overcoming of identified challenges in countries, will also contribute indirectly to process innovation and the establishment of new partnerships, resulting in better data quality, strategic foresight and increased use of results-based approaches (Priority 2), fostering sustainable development. Furthermore, it is also expected that the lack of analysis and data (in general) on the gender perspective in the processes and mechanisms where stakeholders participate in the countries will serve as a warning and

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[22] Our Common Agenda. Report of the Secretary-General 2021. Access: October 2021.
https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/#download
[23]https://www.un.org/africarenewal/web-features/un75-future-we-want-un-we-need

help to strengthen the gender approach in future initiatives, thus contributing to Our Common Agenda's Priority 5.

2) Common challenges across countries highlight **an urgent need to build capacity** and further develop the skills and practices of RCOs in promoting multi-stakeholder engagement with governments who do not properly value and/or adopt rights-based approaches. In these countries, achieving the SDGs will be even more challenging, hence, the necessary presence of the UN. **Given the centrality of civic space with enabling environments that foster meaningful engagement** for the participation of all stakeholders, UNCTs and RCOs need additional tools and guidance to help them in fostering dialogue and establishing more horizontal and transparent relationships. This will be key to build the trust required to develop inclusive and effective partnerships, and ensure that no one is left behind.

In this regard, this project had the added value of having been, in itself, a process that allowed for *learning by doing*; a clear indicator of the team's proactivity and capacity for effective communications with RCOs. Additionally, RCOs and national teams demonstrated not only a willingness to engage with this process, but also an outright enthusiasm to get the utmost possible from it.

3) Finally, it was possible to conclude that **the tailored approach** proposed by the project **should be continued**, although this requires more time and attention from the coordination team. Within the consolidation of UN Development System reform, the continued support of UNDESA and UNDCO will be essential to strengthen initiatives that help to reassert, invigorate, or expand the convening power of the UN in those countries.

In turn, the RCOs need to move forward on their action plans to engage stakeholders in tailored ways that consider national contexts. Additionally, RCOs should continue **strengthening their internal alliances within the UNCTs** to ensure that UN practices in countries reflect the realignment proposed by *Our Common Agenda*. The "Delivering as One" approach, combined with innovative communication strategies, will be essential in building a new image of this multilateral institution that, at the age of 75, is undergoing a process of revitalization, committed to doing exactly what it preaches: leading by example and inspiring all countries of the world, in innovative ways.

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