

Effective multi-stakeholder engagement to realize the 2030 Agenda

Formal arrangements for effective multi-stakeholder engagement are a key element in ensuring whole-of-society approaches to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Based on a review of good practices emerging from around the world, this policy brief provides a series of recommendations for how governments can develop effective mechanisms for multi-stakeholder engagement.

Key messages

- While consultation on the development of national priorities and in reporting on progress to the United Nations appears to be a widespread standard practice, the extent to which countries are establishing institutionalized mechanisms for long-term, inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement on 2030 Agenda implementation is unclear.
- Governments should establish a plan for inclusive and long-term multi-stakeholder engagement, institutionalize engagement mechanisms and set out provisions for periodic consultations and engagement.
- Multi-stakeholder engagement should be informed by the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda such as participation and leaving no one behind as well as principles that ensure engagement is timely, open and inclusive, transparent, informed, inclusive, and iterative.

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Introduction

In 2015, world leaders adopted the United Nations' [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). The 2030 Agenda, which introduced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sets out a transformative plan for people and planet. It aims to promote shared prosperity, environmental sustainability and progress on sustainable development that leaves no one behind. Realizing the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda requires a whole-of-society approach. Governments, citizens, civil society organizations, academia and the private sector all have roles to play in contributing to sustainable development outcomes.

Nearly four years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, many countries have put in place building blocks for its implementation as shown by reviews of government reporting to the [United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#) in [2016](#), [2017](#) and [2018](#). Many countries have integrated the SDGs into policy frameworks. Institutional and governance mechanisms have been established to oversee and evaluate progress on implementation. Partnerships across sectors are forming, while systems for monitoring and evaluation are being put in place. However, progress has been mixed across countries, particularly in terms of the extent to which countries have localized implementation of the 2030 Agenda, integrated its transformative elements into policies and practices, and developed enabling environments that promote whole-of-society contributions to sustainable development.

A key element in ensuring whole-of-society approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation is the establishment of formal arrangements for effective multi-stakeholder engagement. Mechanisms support the use of transformative elements in the agenda related to inclusivity, leaving no one behind and partnership. They have the potential to create inclusive spaces for ongoing discussions about priorities and progress, knowledge sharing and partnership development.

This policy brief outlines emerging standard and good practices with respect to the establishment of long-term mechanisms for multi-stakeholder engagement on the 2030 Agenda. It is based on a review of country reporting to the High-level Political Forum over the 2016–18 period through [Voluntary National Review \(VNR\)](#) reports, which collectively serve as a key element of international follow-up and review of 2030 Agenda implementation. Interviews were also conducted with 12 civil society organizations from 10 countries¹ to validate information presented in VNR reports. The brief provides an overview of emerging standard and good practices, recommendations on how governments can improve their efforts and an annex with detailed information on the specific good practices highlighted in this brief that serves as a useful resource for governments and other stakeholders that are keen to adopt and promote good practices for 2030 Agenda implementation.

What is a good practice?

TRANSFORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF THE 2030 AGENDA

A good practice is an activity or approach that demonstrates incorporation of one or more of the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda. The agenda is human rights-based and focuses on the inclusion of, and change for, the poorest and most vulnerable by promoting their inherent dignity and human rights through efforts to leave no one behind. Efforts are informed by inclusivity, solidarity and participation. The 2030 Agenda is universal in that it applies to all countries and people. The economic, social and environmental pillars of the 2030 Agenda are of equal importance, with the SDGs being integrated and indivisible—achievements under any one goal are linked to progress on others. Implementation of the agenda should occur with respect for planetary boundaries and inter-generational responsibility, recognizing the need to protect the planet's resources now and for future generations. Importantly, good practices respect the aspirational nature of the 2030 Agenda, demonstrably moving beyond standard practices or business-as-usual approaches. Finally, the 2030 Agenda is grounded in commitments to transparency and accountability.

¹ Interviews were carried out with civil society organizations from the following countries: Belgium, Brazil, Colombia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Nepal, Norway, South Korea and Switzerland. Interviews were also conducted with organizations from El Salvador and India, though practices from these countries are not included in the brief. This brief also includes a number of good practices based on VNR reports for other countries, but it should be noted that information for these countries could not be validated beyond additional Web-based searches.

-  **HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH**
-  **LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND**
-  **INTEGRATED AND INDIVISIBLE**
-  **INCLUSIVITY AND PARTICIPATION**
-  **PROGRESS WITHIN PLANETARY BOUNDARIES**
-  **INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**
-  **ASPIRATIONAL**
-  **TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Principles for effective multi-stakeholder engagement

Multi-stakeholder engagement should be timely, open, transparent, informed, inclusive, and iterative. In addition to the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda, the selection of good practices is informed by established principles for effective multi-stakeholder engagement that aim to ensure meaningful, inclusive, sincere and purposeful whole-of-society approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation.²



ENGAGEMENT IS TIMELY

Effective multi-stakeholder engagement should be timely. This means that stakeholders are given sufficient time frames for their engagement that are well established and communicated in advance of actual engagement opportunities.

ENGAGEMENT IS OPEN AND INCLUSIVE

The pledge to leave no one behind means that engagement mechanisms should be open and inclusive, providing all people and groups with opportunities to participate. Openness, however, is not sufficient to ensure inclusivity. Extra efforts are often needed to ensure the presence and participation of people and groups that are most often left behind. Providing information in local languages and making use of a range of methods for engagement, including both offline and online options, are also important. Inclusivity can be bolstered by working with representative organizations for non-state actors, such as civil society platforms and business associations.

ENGAGEMENT IS TRANSPARENT

Multi-stakeholder engagement should be transparent, with information on engagement processes and plans being clear and widely communicated. Moreover, information related to engagement processes should be published in a timely fashion. This means information and documentation that inform engagement processes are published in advance and feedback is provided to participants during the follow-up to engagement processes.

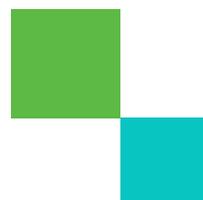
ENGAGEMENT IS INFORMED

Effective multi-stakeholder engagement requires that participants are informed about the purpose of engagement, how their inputs will be used and the overall expected outcomes. Documentation should be provided ahead of all interactions with ample time, clear deadlines and appropriate tools to provide feedback. There should also be follow-up reports and documentation on how inputs have been considered.

ENGAGEMENT IS ITERATIVE

Lastly, effective multi-stakeholder engagement should be iterative. Engagement is not a singular process or event but rather a continuous process where multiple opportunities for ongoing engagement exist for different stakeholders. Dialogue should be two-way between those hosting the consultations and those in attendance with mechanisms for engagement institutionalized to

² These principles have been adapted from [A Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue](#).



provide long-term dialogue for continuous input from non-state actors. Embedding engagement mechanisms within institutions and as part of regular practices is important to ensure their longevity through changes in governments.

Standard practices

Consecutive civil society reviews of VNR reports from 2016, 2017 and 2018 show a number of emerging standard practices with respect to multi-stakeholder engagement in 2030 Agenda implementation. Most governments are holding consultations to establish national priorities and targets and consulting with civil society organizations, academia, the private sector and religious groups. Countries are also consulting with a range of non-state actors during the development of their VNR reports, using both online and offline mechanisms. The 2018 civil society review of VNR reports, however, showed limited progress on the establishment of institutionalized long-term mechanisms for multi-stakeholder engagement, with only 18 of 46 reporting countries presenting information on this topic. While consultation on the development of national priorities and VNR reports appears to be a widespread standard practice, implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires efforts to engage with stakeholders over the longer term. Individual consultation efforts neither capture the views and ongoing needs of different stakeholders nor provide the necessary basis to build trust and partnerships across sectors and promote whole-of-society approaches to implementation.

Good practices

The VNR reports and interviews with civil society organizations highlight a number of established good practices around mechanisms for multi-stakeholder engagement. These good practices include developing formal plans that detail how there will be engagement with stakeholders. Mechanisms that are jointly established between a government and other stakeholders, or established for the longer term, are also good practices. Planning regular meetings that are widely publicized in advance, supporting non-state actors to participate through their own platforms, and hosting meetings in local languages are all good practices. Other good practices include developing mechanisms for engagement that ensure no one is left behind, bring together views from a wide cross-section of society and include special efforts to improve accessibility, using multiple forms of engagement. Finally, a good practice is establishing long-term mechanisms for engagement but also including specific multi-stakeholder initiatives for participation at key moments in 2030 Agenda implementation, such as during VNR reporting or drafting of national strategies.

ENGAGEMENT IS TIMELY

Developing a multi-stakeholder engagement plan early and scheduling regular meetings ensure that there is commitment to a long-term plan for engagement from the planning and implementation stages through to monitoring and evaluation. Both **Colombia** and **Uganda** established national development plans that detail their respective strategies to achieve sustainable development and how they will include stakeholders in the process. **Sri Lanka** developed a plan dedicated to multi-stakeholder engagement that details how, when and where stakeholders will be engaged throughout the implementation process. Not only do these efforts contribute to timely engagement on 2030 Agenda implementation, they also contribute to other principles for effective engagement—ensuring engagement efforts are transparent, informed and iterative.

In terms of regular meetings, **Ireland** hosts an [annual national forum](#) where representatives across all sectors come together to work on policy coherence and action towards the SDGs. **Vietnam** also holds an annual conference to engage with a range of stakeholders, including those from the private sector.

Finally, **Canada's** approach to preparing [Federal Sustainable Development Strategies](#) is grounded in legislation that sets out an obligation for the government to carry out extensive consultations according to a predetermined timetable. This approach provides a legal basis for ensuring that consultations are timely.

ENGAGEMENT IS OPEN AND INCLUSIVE

Having an open and inclusive process for engagement contributes to ensuring that no one is left behind and domestic efforts reflect the needs of a country's diverse population. Even when engagement processes are open in terms of who can participate, inclusion is not automatic. A good practice from **Ireland** shows that governments and other stakeholders can actively work to ensure inclusivity. At each annual national forum, participants discuss who is missing and who needs to be included the following year.

Establishing long-term engagement mechanisms for non-state actors can contribute to an environment of inclusiveness. A government's engagement with stakeholders is critical not only because it aligns with the underlying transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda, but also many non-state actors are closer to communities and therefore better able to engage with marginalized groups. **Nepal** has developed a national forum for the government to consult on SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions that includes discussion and partnership with civil society. In this context, it is

important that such a mechanism respects and supports the right of non-state actors to organize among themselves how they will engage. In the **United Arab Emirates**, youth councils have been established in local communities to identify local priorities and provide inputs on SDG implementation.

Where and how engagement occurs also impact inclusivity. Engagement mechanisms must reach rural areas—consultations and forums cannot only be held in urban centres. Using offline and online forms of engagement and providing opportunities for stakeholders to engage in the language of their choice are also important. In **Germany**, stakeholder consultation processes occurred throughout the country and moved beyond large cities. In **Benin**, the government's engagement initiatives were implemented in indigenous languages to reach all communities. Such efforts contribute to ensuring that groups are not left behind and everyone can be included in engagement opportunities.

ENGAGEMENT IS TRANSPARENT

Multi-stakeholder engagement mechanisms must be transparent to ensure that all stakeholders know who is involved, when engagement is happening and the platforms through which they can get involved. **Cameroon** has focused on enabling constructive dialogue between civil society and the government on specific themes through Common Working and Collaboration Platforms. The effectiveness of these platforms has been bolstered through the [Civil Society Engagement Charter](#) and Monitoring Review and Accountability Framework that, among other things, clearly lay out how stakeholders can work with the government to participate in national SDG implementation. In **Finland**, a network of experts from statistics, research, evaluation, policy and other stakeholder groups monitor and evaluate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the mapping of associated indicators. The inclusion of a range of stakeholders in formal SDG working arrangements is important to transparency regarding who and how stakeholders are engaged. These approaches also support efforts to ensure that engagement is timely, inclusive, informed and iterative.

Indonesia developed a set of principles related to multi-stakeholder engagement for its most recent VNR report. The principles contribute to transparency regarding how stakeholders can expect consultations to unfold. **Latvia** reported in its 2018 VNR report that transparent processes for multi-stakeholder engagement have been established through which citizens can send opinions and ideas on how to achieve the SDGs to the government for consideration. Draft SDG documents are published on the government's website under a

section titled "Public Participation," which provides transparency on the policy-making process and an open opportunity for engagement. Citizens have the right to comment and make suggestions on all draft SDG documents.

ENGAGEMENT IS INFORMED

Stakeholders should be properly and sufficiently informed to be able to provide input and feedback on SDG implementation.

Ireland used a stakeholder consultation workshop during its VNR process where participants representing national civil society and private sector stakeholder groups could learn about the proposed VNR report and provide feedback on it. A summary of this workshop is included in the VNR report to ensure transparency and accountability. This mechanism allows stakeholders to verify government reporting. By providing an opportunity to provide feedback, like confirming or identifying areas in need of improvement, stakeholders are directly engaged in the VNR process. In **Benin**, stakeholders are also engaged in the VNR report drafting process and helped identify national priorities. The government acknowledged the need to continue capacity-building initiatives at the local level for greater informed participation. A platform called [Futuro en Común](#) was created in **Spain** to promote learning among and mobilization of stakeholders, ensuring that they are well informed before forums.

ENGAGEMENT IS ITERATIVE

For it to be successful, multi-stakeholder engagement must be a continuous process with diverse mechanisms that are institutionalized at the government level. In addition to the long-term engagement mechanisms mentioned above, other countries have institutionalized multi-stakeholder engagement on 2030 Agenda implementation. **Brazil** has institutionalized the [CSO Working Group for the 2030 Agenda](#), an advisory body made up of various civil society organizations. This working group monitors progress on the SDGs in the country and is responsible for disseminating information on the SDGs among different stakeholders at both the national and sub-national levels. Brazil has also institutionalized its National Commission, which provides continual engagement with many different stakeholders. It is a permanent body that is directly responsible for implementing and monitoring progress on the SDGs in the country. Both are long-term engagement mechanisms to ensure that diverse inputs are used throughout implementation.

Finland has a permanent [National Commission for Sustainable Development](#) that was created to reflect the diversity of its

population and therefore includes civil society organizations, minority groups, academia, Indigenous peoples, refugees and government officials. This commission is responsible for many aspects of SDG implementation including developing the SDG agenda, monitoring and reviewing, and supporting multi-stakeholder engagement

throughout society. **Cameroon** has developed a Monitoring, Review and Accountability Framework that institutionalized dialogue between civil society organizations and the government and outlines how stakeholders can interact with advisors, government officials and others to ensure that they know their responsibilities.



Recommendations

This brief has outlined standard and good practices for multi-stakeholder engagement on 2030 Agenda implementation. Regular consultation on national priorities and VNR reports is a welcome standard practice. Still, an opportunity exists for governments to draw on international good practices to establish institutionalized mechanisms for multi-stakeholder engagement grounded in a principled approach. Four key recommendations emerge from this brief for governments.

Establish a plan for inclusive and long-term multi-stakeholder engagement as part of 2030 Agenda implementation strategies.

The plan should be based on principles for effective engagement and partnerships across sectors and pertain to all aspects of implementation, including selection of national priorities, policy development, and monitoring and evaluation. Accountability for this plan should be clear from the outset.

Establish institutionalized opportunities for multi-stakeholder engagement, which include a wide range of non-state actors in line with the pledge of leaving no one behind.

Such mechanisms should work directly with appropriate government bodies and reflect a range of stakeholders, including civil society networks, indigenous groups, refugee and minority groups, youth, the private sector, people with disabilities or their representatives, trade unions, academia, and sub-national governments. Special attention should be given to ensuring the inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Establish provisions for periodic consultations and engagement around regular progress reporting, VNR reports and the creation of or revisions to national 2030 Agenda implementation plans.

Periodic consultations should adhere to good practices such as soliciting verbal and written inputs, providing stakeholders with opportunities to comment on draft documents as well as providing formal responses from governments to inputs that have been received.

Ensure multi-stakeholder engagement—formal and ad hoc—adheres to the principles for effective multi-stakeholder engagement and remains timely, open, inclusive, transparent, informed and iterative.

As noted in the 2018 civil society review of VNR reports, good practice means using varied and inclusive approaches to consultation such as online and offline methods, engaging stakeholders from across regions and outside of large metropolitan areas, publicizing consultation opportunities widely and with appropriate lead times, actively working to include marginalized groups and their representatives, and ensuring that information is available in local languages.

