

# Capacity development for 2030 Agenda implementation

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development challenges stakeholders to think and work differently. Individuals and organizations across society require new capacities to effectively target their activities towards collective impact on sustainable development. Based on a review of good practices emerging from around the world, this policy brief offers recommendations on how governments can support the capacity development efforts of a range of stakeholders for 2030 Agenda implementation.

## Key messages

- Information on effective approaches to capacity development for all stakeholders in society to contribute to the 2030 Agenda is limited in Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports. VNR reports should include reference to capacity constraints faced by all stakeholders to promote sustainable development, including and moving beyond government institutions, and set out examples of good practices in capacity development to inform future efforts.
- National implementation strategies and plans should be informed by an assessment of capacity constraints faced by different stakeholders, followed up with appropriate policies and programs to develop capacities to enhance whole-of-society approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation.
- Development partners should support governments, civil society organizations and other stakeholders in developing their capacities to implement the 2030 Agenda in line with the commitment to support capacity development under Sustainable Development Goal 17 on partnerships for the goals.



This policy brief is part of the Good Practice in 2030 Agenda Implementation Series produced by the British Columbia Council for International Cooperation (BCCIC) and Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) and funded in part by the Government of Canada's Sustainable Development Goals Program.

Produced in collaboration with:



## 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.

## Building capacity to do things differently

The 2030 Agenda challenges stakeholders to think and work differently, particularly in light of its transformative elements, such as the focus on leaving no one behind, intergenerational equity, planetary boundaries, human rights, and inclusivity and partnership. To do so, individuals and organizations across society require new capacities to integrate all dimensions of sustainable development in their work, partner across sectors, and monitor, evaluate and report on efforts in line with SDG targets and indicators. Importantly, capacity development is featured in [target 17.9 under SDG 17](#) on partnerships for the goals through a commitment to enhancing international support for effective and targeted capacity building in developing countries.

The development of new capacities is not automatic, however. Organizations across society as well as citizens, including individuals from historically marginalized groups, require support to facilitate effective contributions to the 2030 Agenda. This challenge is recognized in VNR reports and demonstrated by the range of guidance documents and tools developed since the adoption of the agenda.

This policy brief outlines emerging standard and good practices with respect to capacity development for 2030 Agenda implementation. It focuses on good practices in terms of supporting non-state actors and complements the sister brief in this series that addresses capacity development for government institutions in the context of localization. It is based on a review of country reporting to the [United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#) over 2016–18 through [Voluntary National Review \(VNR\)](#) reports, which collectively serve as a key element of international follow-up and review of 2030 Agenda implementation. Also, interviews were carried out with civil society organizations in 11<sup>1</sup> countries to complement and validate information presented in VNR reports. The brief provides an overview of emerging practices along with recommendations on how governments can improve their efforts. An annex with detailed information on the specific good practices highlighted in this brief serves as a useful resource for governments and other stakeholders 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. 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.

<sup>1</sup> Interviews were carried out with civil society organizations from the following countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Canada, Hungary, Indonesia, Latvia, Nepal, Nigeria, Uganda, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. 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**

### **GOOD PRACTICES IN CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT**

The German government offers a useful definition of capacity development. It notes that capacity development is an “endogenous process of improving individual skills and abilities, ensuring organization that [is] productive, and creating institutions that optimize utilization of human, financial and physical resources for attaining individual, organizational, institutional and societal goals.”<sup>2</sup> In this sense, capacity development is a holistic approach that targets institutional, organizational and individual development, recognizing that these target levels interdependently affect each other. As such, good practice in capacity development considers and integrates all target levels.<sup>3</sup>

Good practice in capacity development ultimately breaks dependencies on external support and should ensure that organizations, individuals and society as a whole are able to manage their affairs successfully.

In the context of 2030 Agenda implementation, this means understanding capacity gaps across sectors and working with stakeholders to develop appropriate plans to address them.

### **What are the capacity challenges?**

Information on the capacity challenges that stakeholders across society face in contributing to the 2030 Agenda are not well documented in VNR reports. These reports tend to refer to challenges related to limited awareness or resources for 2030 Agenda implementation, rather than specific individual and institutional challenges for a range of stakeholders. A notable exception is capacity challenges faced by governments. While some governments refer to capacity development as a general issue that requires further attention, others identify specific areas where lack of capacity hinders SDG implementation. The most commonly cited capacity challenges for governments include monitoring and evaluating the impacts of programs, weak coordination across government institutions and with stakeholders outside government, limited capacity within the national statistical system, and challenges in improving civil society capacities.

Civil society shadow reports and interviews conducted with civil society organizations also point to limited resources for capacity development, limited capacity to coordinate efforts across civil society and shrinking space for civil society as key challenges. Interviewees from developing countries consistently highlighted limited support from the international development community for civil society capacities to contribute to the 2030 Agenda.

In 2018, [Action for Sustainable Development](#) conducted a survey on engagement in 2030 Agenda follow-up and review processes with civil society organizations. The forthcoming report on the survey results shows that there have been limited resources to support civil society participation in VNR reports and there is a need for training and other capacity development activities to strengthen the engagement capacities of national stakeholders.

Similarly, [Forus](#), a global civil society network, has found that there are limited resources to support civil society organizations to self-organize and participate in regional follow-up and review mechanisms related to 2030 Agenda implementation. Opportunities for diverse stakeholders to participate in exchanges and learning at the regional level are also limited.

<sup>2</sup> GTZ, “Engineering Capacity Building Programme Ethiopia – Developing Capacity through ecbb – Success Factors and Implications for Phase II,” Working Paper version I (Frankfurt: GTZ, 2009), quoted in Ilka N. Buss, [Best Practices in Capacity Building Approaches: Recommendations for the Design of a Long-Term Capacity Building Strategy for the Wind and Solar Sectors by the MEF Working Group](#) (Frankfurt: GTZ, 2010), 7.

<sup>3</sup> The German government prepared a [best practice guide on capacity development](#) that outlines approaches, strategic elements, methods and instruments.

The academic community also faces challenges. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) found that its members' capacity to engage on the 2030 Agenda is particularly restricted by a lack of funding for universities and research institutions, especially in developing countries.<sup>4</sup>

### Standard practices

VNR reports provide limited information on standard practices by governments in terms of successful models and approaches to capacity development. They often point to awareness-raising activities of different stakeholders and in some instances one-off training or capacity development workshops and seminars targeting specific stakeholder groups and professions. Some VNR reports refer to preparation of guidelines and toolkits for specific stakeholder groups to effectively mobilize their support towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. With respect to capacity development in developing countries, a few VNR reports point to the importance or necessity of capacity development for SDG implementation, but do not consistently refer to specific areas and sectors that require support, though some exceptions exist. VNR reports that show examples of capacity development tend to refer to capacity development initiatives – and as noted below, there are multiple – rather than provide information on overall approaches and good practices. For their part, developing countries sometimes note where support was received and appreciated, but do not necessarily provide insight on good practices that should continue or be adopted more often.

Following a review of VNR reports, it remains unclear what standard practice is with respect to capacity development for 2030 Agenda implementation in terms of the overall approaches that countries are taking and standard practices for supporting different types of stakeholders. Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of where governments, civil society and others are starting to take ad hoc approaches to capacity building that could be further institutionalized and scaled within and across countries.

### Good practices

#### **Q** BETTER REPORTING ON CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Some examples of approaches that can provide a basis for good practice include the adoption of inclusive approaches to capacity development that address intergenerational equity and the integrated nature of the SDGs. Yet, VNR reports provided no examples of approaches to capacity development that are iterative in nature, part of longer-term implementation plans, or target the full range of transformative elements in the 2030 Agenda including partnering more effectively, adopting human rights-based and integrated

approaches and building capacity to leave no one behind. Information on the best ways to address the capacity challenges that all stakeholders face in contributing to the 2030 Agenda in developing countries is also needed. Such information provides a useful basis for exchanges with development partners on their roles in supporting local efforts to address capacity challenges.

Further research is needed to identify good practices related to overarching approaches to capacity development. Inclusion of good practices in capacity development in VNR reports as well as better civil society reporting would facilitate the compilation of examples to inform knowledge sharing and peer learning. A number of key elements could be better integrated into reporting, perhaps strengthened in the [United Nations Secretary General's Common Reporting Guidelines](#), to encourage more explicit focus on these elements.

- Assessments of capacity challenges in contributing to the 2030 Agenda for all stakeholders, including and moving beyond the constraints faced by governments.
- Overarching inclusive and participatory approaches to capacity development.
- Integration of capacity development into national strategies and as a regular part of implementation efforts.
- Specific efforts to support SDG-ready organizations such as introducing new systems and skills to promote integrated approaches, partnerships and effective follow-up.
- Good practices in supporting capacity development for 2030 Agenda implementation in developing countries.
- Learning and peer support around capacity development.

These information gaps do not necessarily suggest that countries lack such approaches. However, countries and civil society organizations actually need to be better at reporting capacity development activities that are being done in the context of implementing the 2030 Agenda. In this vein, the following examples illustrate some of the interesting initiatives underway, which many countries could replicate for their specific national contexts and needs.

<sup>4</sup> SDSN staff member, phone interview, March 22, 2019.

### EMERGING GOOD PRACTICES

In general, good practices tend to include the preparation and dissemination of guidelines and toolkits, capacity development events such as workshops and seminars, the launch of specific initiatives, and the establishment of technical working groups and committees. In this sense, they include ad hoc initiatives as well as institutionalized efforts. Guidelines and toolkits tend to target non-state actors (e.g., the private sector) and underscore the importance of actionability. Capacity development events cover a range of issues and stakeholders with an emphasis on inclusiveness, whereas specific initiatives tend to have a topical focus, target particular stakeholder groups and center on the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda. Working groups and committees tend to be formed around parliamentarians to promote policy coherence and the integrated nature of the SDGs.

### GUIDELINES AND TOOLKITS

Guidelines and toolkits are useful resources to facilitate stakeholders' contributions to 2030 Agenda implementation through the provision of concrete, actionable steps for specific groups. They can also ensure greater engagement by demonstrating useful case studies from which stakeholders can learn. At the global level, a number of organizations have developed resources for specific stakeholder.

#### GUIDELINES AND TOOLKITS DEVELOPED BY THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

- SDSN developed a [guide for getting started with the SDGs](#) for a range of stakeholders including governments, civil society, the private sector and academia.
- The [SDG Compass](#) was developed by the Global Reporting Initiative, United Nations Global Compact and World Business Council for Sustainable Development to support the incorporation of the SDGs into business operations.
- SDSN Australia/Pacific prepared a [guide for academic institutions](#) that sets out potential contributions in terms of learning and teaching, research, organization governance, culture and operations, and external leadership.
- Localizing the SDGs, an initiative of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, United Nations Human Settlements Programme and United Nations Development Programme, has curated a toolbox to support localization of the 2030 Agenda including through the provision of [various guides and courses](#)
- Working with partners, Together 2030, a global civil society coalition, produced a [handbook](#) to support civil society organizations' engagement with parliamentarians on the 2030 Agenda.
- The [Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data](#) supports improved statistical capacity to monitor and report on progress in 2030 Agenda implementation.

Some countries have sought to ensure that globally developed resources are locally accessible. For example, local chapters of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development in **Brazil** and **Hungary** launched the SDG Compass in local languages to guide efforts by the private sector to align business models with the SDGs, with a particular focus on multinational businesses. The SDG Compass sets out actionable steps for not only effective but also greater private sector engagement on the 2030 Agenda.

The [Australian Council for International Development](#), the national civil society platform in Australia's humanitarian and international development sector, launched a [toolkit](#) aimed at individuals who are keen to contribute to the 2030 Agenda. The toolkit focuses on various aspects of individual development such as collaborative responses and systems thinking. This publicly available toolkit with a broad target audience is an example of an inclusive approach to capacity development which recognizes that all citizens can have a role in 2030 Agenda implementation.

## TRAINING

Training offers an opportunity for individuals to gain knowledge and interact with others on shared challenges. While important for enhancing individual capacities, training activities should be complemented by broader efforts to improve institutional capacities.

**Greece's** Institute of Training of the National School of Public Administration and Local Government developed a specific training initiative to raise awareness among and build capacity of a range of stakeholders to contribute to 2030 Agenda implementation. The institute provides a recurring three-day seminar on the SDGs for representatives of ministries, local and regional administrations, universities, research centres and independent authorities. The **Maldives**, recognizing the importance of the media in raising awareness of the SDGs, designed capacity development events for journalists on how to create and report content on sustainable development. In addition, **Mexico** embarked on providing training on the 2030 Agenda for more than 500 civil society organizations in eight states in the context of a project on technologies for the greater good. This case is an example of inclusive approaches at scale.

## SPECIFIC INITIATIVES

A number of countries have developed targeted capacity development initiatives that focus on specific groups and sectors, some of which have demonstrated scalability and impact so far. **Cabo Verde** developed a specific initiative around capacity development for civil society actors to improve the lives of children and youth.

Owing to the institutional strengthening of civil society organizations, the country aims to create a social security network for children, where civil society actors are expected to function in an oversight role.

**Canada's** [Foundation for Environmental Stewardship](#) is promoting environmentalism by educating children and youth on issues around climate change, aiming to enable them to take action in their own communities. Its flagship project, 3% Project, aims to reach out to 3% of Canadians, or one million youth, and provides an ongoing mentoring program and employment skills transfer program on issues around the environment. The project has already led to other youth partnership initiatives including school clubs and student initiatives to train their peers. By empowering youth to own their environmentalism, the project supports intergenerational equity and responsibility at scale.

In **Indonesia**, [centres of excellence on the SDGs](#) have been established in universities throughout the country to support capacity for research and curriculum development that can inform local implementation. A number of regions have begun implementing the SDGs, including by incorporating the SDGs into local action plans and budgets, and developing multi-stakeholder implementation teams.

## WORKING GROUPS AND COMMITTEES

Several countries have established parliamentary committees and working groups to support contributions of parliamentarians in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Specialized working groups often capacitate other parliamentarians by raising awareness of the SDGs. They also function as oversight mechanisms for greater policy coherence on cross-sectoral issues, thereby addressing the necessity of integrated approaches in implementing the SDGs.

**Mexico** established a working group for the legislative monitoring of the SDGs to complement the work of executive bodies on the Agenda 2030. Training activities on the economic, social and environmental pillars of the agenda for members of the legislature and a diagnosis of the capacities of the legislative branch to realize the agenda are among the activities of the working group so far.

**Spain** formed the Joint Parliamentary Committee for the 2030 Agenda. The committee plays a watchdog role in the legislature on issues around the SDGs. The committee is expected to create added value by preparing guidelines for decision-making by diverse stakeholders, putting special emphasis on policy coherence with respect to global public goods and developing countries' perspectives.

**Nepal's** parliamentary committee on the SDGs has also engaged in monitoring and capacity development activities. Unlike Mexico and Spain, Nepal's parliamentary committee organizes capacity development events not only for parliamentarians but also for other stakeholders including voluntary organizations of evaluators, government institutions, multilateral banks, United Nations agencies, philanthropic organizations and academia. These events have seen high levels of participation

While the Mexican and Spanish examples, in keeping with the integrated nature of the SDGs, emphasize policy coherence, the example of Nepal underscores inclusiveness as an aspect of good practices in making progress on SDG implementation.

## KEY SUPPORT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY TO ADDRESS CAPACITY CHALLENGES

Civil society *reviews* of VNR reports have shown that the bulk of VNR reporting countries, particularly developing countries, highlight capacity challenges in implementing the SDGs that require support from the international development community. A number of efforts by the international development community to address capacity constraints have also been highlighted. For example, the United Nations Development Programme's *Rapid Integrated Assessment* tool supports countries in SDG planning through a set of steps and templates for assessing interlinkages across targets and the relevance of the goals for the country context. Similarly, the United Nations' *Mainstreaming, Acceleration, Policy Support* (MAPS) assists countries in identifying concrete policy steps. Some developing countries mentioned the importance of technical support from United Nations agencies in coordinating and preparing VNR reports.

A number of development partners reported on their efforts to support capacity development in partner countries, particularly for areas where developing countries have noted constraints, such as monitoring and statistical capacity. Australia has provided support to the Pacific *Roadmap for Sustainable Development* for monitoring and reporting on the SDGs. The country also worked in partnership with the *Pacific Statistics Steering Community* and *Pacific Community* to establish a subset of regional indicators for the SDGs relevant to the Pacific context. In Jamaica, the *Scientific Platform for Applied Research and Knowledge Sharing (SPARKS)* was launched with support from the Inter-American Development Bank to facilitate more effective risk assessment of climate change impacts through "big data" in the Caribbean. It is expected to contribute to informed decision making in fighting climate change.



Photo: PeaceGeeks



## Recommendations

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A number of good practices are emerging in capacity development for 2030 Agenda implementation in the form of ad hoc and institutionalized approaches. Nevertheless, examples of how capacity development can be effectively integrated into national 2030 Agenda implementation strategies are unavailable and efforts to enable SDG-ready organizations are unclear. Canada has an opportunity to take a bold approach to incorporating capacity development into its 2030 Agenda National Strategy and implementation efforts. Several recommendations emerge from this review.

### **Assess capacity constraints for different stakeholders to contribute to sustainable development and include efforts to address these constraints in national 2030 Agenda implementation plans.**

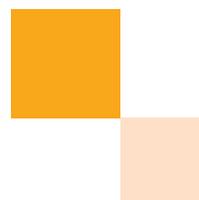
Whole-of-society approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation require stakeholders to develop new skills and capacities in order to align their efforts with the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda, adopt new working methods and partner effectively across sectors. Capacity development activities—at individual, organization and institutional levels—should be integrated as a regular part of implementation efforts. Based on an assessment of capacity constraints for diverse stakeholders, 2030 Agenda implementation plans should set out overarching and inclusive approaches to capacity development including opportunities for capacity development in national planning and reporting processes and specific efforts to support SDG-ready organizations. They should also identify opportunities for learning and peer support around capacity development.

### **Deliver capacity development according to international good practices.**

There is a need to consider how organizations will continue to make use of existing and new capacities over the longer term. Efforts should be informed by needs assessments that include the stakeholders in question with projects and programs catered to their specific needs, including through the use of a range of different capacity development methods such as guidance notes, toolkits, training, specific initiatives and institutional mechanisms.

### **Provide opportunities for capacity development activities targeting cross-sectoral issues, inclusiveness and transformational elements of the 2030 Agenda.**

Capacity development should be comprehensive and target a range of stakeholders. Capacity development approaches should demonstrate use of the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda, such as ensuring inclusivity and participation in line with leaving no one behind and intergenerational equity. They should work across silos and sectors, facilitating partnerships between sectors, and work to ensure that organizations have the capacity to carry out their own efforts in line with the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda.



### Support capacities for a diverse range of stakeholders to engage in follow-up and review processes.

Civil society organizations have identified capacity constraints related to engagement on VNRs at national, regional and global levels. There is a need to build capacity for non-state actors to engage in VNR-related processes, including in terms of submitting independent evidence and reports into VNR processes, resourcing, and the establishment of opportunities for peer learning and exchange. Regional sustainable development exchange and learning hubs could be established to provide an opportunity for diverse stakeholders to openly exchange on 2030 Agenda implementation. Similarly, more "VNR Labs" at global level during the HLPF could be established, enabling governments and other stakeholders to exchange openly in a closed setting to promote best practices in capacity development for SDG implementation.

### Partner for effective capacity development.

Various organizations can support capacity development efforts for 2030 Agenda implementation, including academic institutions, civil society organizations, business associations and development partners. Such organizations have a comparative advantage in terms of understanding local and sector-specific challenges, addressing them in the best ways and delivering capacity development activities that can reach targeted stakeholders. Inclusive, participatory approaches to capacity development should be in line with the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda.

### Support capacity development efforts in developing countries for a range of stakeholders to realize commitments under SDG 17 on partnerships for the goals.

Countries have committed to enhance international support for implementing the SDGs. Recognizing the valuable contributions of all members of society to sustainable development, development partners should ensure that their contributions to capacity development target governments, civil society, academia and other stakeholders and are delivered according to internationally recognized good practice.

### Report on and learn from capacity challenges and activities towards addressing them.

To distill lessons on how to scale good practices, countries should improve reporting on their experiences with capacity development for a range of stakeholders. Reporting on capacity development should specify the capacity challenges faced and policies and programs developed as well as monitoring and evaluation of activities. This includes experiences with different initiatives such as scaling guidelines and toolkits, training, specific initiatives, multi-stakeholder working groups and committees, and international support. Developing countries should report on good practices with respect to support from the international development community.



How to cite this document: Kindornay, Shannon, and Kocaata, Zeki. 2019. *Capacity development for 2030 Agenda implementation*. Good Practice in 2030 Agenda Implementation Series. Vancouver and Ottawa: British Columbia Council for International Cooperation and Canadian Council for International Co-operation.

The authors thank Deborah Glaser and Laurel Wayne-Nixon (BCCIC), Deirdre de Burca (Forus), and Fraser Reilly-King (International Development Research Centre) for their review of this policy brief. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.