STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS
Feedback and follow-up
The purpose of the VNR policy briefs is to provide policy makers with practical tools and ideas to address common challenges in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process.

Photo credit: Cover photo by the Government of Timor-Leste during the High-Level Political Forum in 2019.

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I. Integrating stakeholder engagement in the VNR process

Engaging stakeholders in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) can be a powerful way to initiate or build understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. Integrating stakeholder engagement in all stages of the VNR process is vital to ensure that the VNR is based on inputs from all parts of society and government. Good practice engagement in the VNR starts by asking stakeholders (in particular, under-represented and marginalized groups) how they would like to be engaged, what they can contribute and then inviting them to make a constructive contribution through different channels. Stakeholder engagement should not be viewed as a one-off consultation event but an integral part of each phase of the VNR.

Figure 1. Integrating stakeholder engagement into the VNR process


The importance of a VNR stakeholder engagement plan

Creating a stakeholder engagement plan is a crucial way to ensure that the objective of each VNR activity is clear and to outline how different stakeholders will be involved in each stage of the process. Some elements of a stakeholder engagement plan could include:

- Mapping of stakeholders
- Objectives for engagement
- How stakeholders will be engaged
- Communication activities
- Plan to engage vulnerable groups
- Topics/areas/themes for consultation
- Budget & timeline for consultation
- Contact details for more information
Mapping of stakeholders: A stakeholder map is not a 'shopping list' of all the key actors in a country but involves mapping different groups of institutions and individuals and analysing the influence and interest of key institutions and individuals in the VNR process. It can include outlining how/if they were engaged in the 1\textsuperscript{st} or 2\textsuperscript{nd} VNR process, analysing whether they are hard to reach and the barriers that need addressing in order to meaningfully involve them throughout the VNR process.

Questions to consider in the plan: How will stakeholders be engaged?

1. What topic/areas? e.g. economic growth, gender equality, VNR timeline, stakeholder engagement plan
2. When and how much? e.g. at start of process, but once off, continually throughout process
3. What process? E.g. reviewing drafts, validating data, decision-making about report
4. What means? e.g. 1:1 meeting, surveys, thematic workshops, multi-stakeholder meetings

Key message: Creating a stakeholder engagement plan can help ensure stakeholders, especially the most vulnerable, are meaningfully engaged in all phases of the VNR.
II. Utilising feedback and innovative forms of engagement

Obtaining, utilizing and responding to feedback and stakeholder contributions is a significant task in the VNR stakeholder engagement process. Critical to this process is ascertaining the desired mix of face-to-face and online engagement and creating specific strategies to engage hard to reach and vulnerable groups. In order for stakeholder engagement to be meaningful, feedback and contributions need to be utilised effectively and planned for in the drafting schedule. The purpose of each stakeholder engagement initiative must be outlined, and it must be clear how the different input will be utilised.

Establish clear mechanisms for engagement
- Outline target areas where contributions are specifically requested (providing and validating data, reviewing drafts, commenting on messages, feedback on stakeholder engagement plan)
- Developing clear mechanisms (feedback forms, surveys, validation workshops, 1-on-1 meetings) which are appropriate to the targeted groups
- Developing clear topics/themes where contributions are requested (e.g., causes of malnutrition, tackling exclusion, strengthening youth employment)
- Develop tailored outreach strategies to reach different groups based on analysis of key barriers.

Plan ahead to manage large amounts of contributions
- With many consultations it can be difficult to have time and space in the report to include all input and incorporate feedback. Try to align the VNR process into existing policy and M&E meetings to make the best use of feedback.
- Organising large scale consultations can also generate lots of input, not all of which can be used directly in the report. However, it can be used in wider initiatives around SDG monitoring.
- Ensure that workshops on the first or second drafts of VNR are scheduled early enough, so there is adequate time to incorporate feedback and make revisions in the final draft.
- Budget and schedule post-VNR follow up activities in advance, so stakeholders are aware of opportunities to engage after the VNR and how their input will feed into wider SDG processes.

Types of engagement and ways to get contributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In what areas do you want contributions?</th>
<th>Different ways to engage stakeholders</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on 1st drafts (see below as well)</td>
<td>Online or offline feedback forms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Input on stakeholder engagement plan</td>
<td>Survey on different options</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDG progress overall and how the country is doing</td>
<td>Town hall meetings/multi-stakeholder meetings on issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical contributions on specific topics</td>
<td>Technical working groups &amp; submissions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data validation</td>
<td>Online platforms</td>
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Obtaining feedback on 1st and 2nd drafts of the report
What is the best way to obtain input, contributions, and comments specifically on the drafts of the VNR? There are different ways to get input on the drafts, these include:

- Circulating the whole report or sections/chapters of the report
- Asking for input and feedback on different parts or section of the report (i.e., next steps)
- Requesting input on different topics/SDGs (health or economic growth) in the report
- Being clear on what type of input you want and on which parts of the VNR

Synthesising and responding to feedback
When obtaining feedback from stakeholders it is important to listen and acknowledge their concerns and outline on how their input will be represented in the report. This could include:

- Outlining which comments and ideas were incorporated.
- Sending an update to participants on how their input and feedback was used in the report.
- Producing a newsletter or video summarising the key points from consultations.
- Including a case study box or chapter in the VNR with specific input.

Ideas for getting meaningful input on the 1st draft

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Establish a reference group with key stakeholders and send sections of the report on specific SDGs asking for technical input</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask them to review or provide new data</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Send entire report to key stakeholders asking for comments on 'next steps and recommendations'</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop feedback form on next steps</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Send entire report to key stakeholders asking for comments on certain issues e.g., data, health</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop survey or feedback form</td>
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Key message: Utilising and responding to feedback is a big task that can be managed by establishing clear feedback mechanisms and different options for providing input.
III. Problem-solving key challenges in stakeholder engagement

Managing the stakeholder engagement process can be challenging and is often an area that countries seek to strengthen when they commence their 2nd or 3rd VNR. Building on their 1st VNR, many countries will have learnt which institutions to engage with and what type of outreach strategy is needed to engage meaningfully with marginalised groups. Conducting a follow up VNR is an opportunity to put these lessons into practice to engage more deeply with stakeholders.

What is the best way to deal with critical input? How to reflect a variety of perspectives in the VNR?

While it is desirable to try to accommodate different views in the VNR, on occasion, it may not be always possible to capture all views or agree on specific recommendations. It is important to recognise stakeholders’ views – even if not all groups agree with them. One option is to insert boxes in the report that highlight different views on key issues or include an annex of recommendations from civil society organisations (CSOs). CSOs may also wish to develop a ‘shadow’ VNR report outlining their views on SDG implementation. It may also be useful to include case study boxes with excerpts of the shadow report or ensure that the report is shared with relevant sector ministries. As part of long-term stakeholder engagement plans, it can be useful to schedule engagement activities in advance for the post-VNR period to show that opportunities still exist for dialogue and debate on SDG implementation even once the VNR report is completed.

It can be tricky to balance technical and political engagement with different parts of government.

The VNR is a technical and political process. It is important to engage with ministries, political advisers, and sub-national level government at all stages of the VNR process. Establishing and strengthening institutional mechanisms or taskforces for SDGs are crucial at the early stages of the VNR process. Due to time and budget constraints, stakeholder engagement can often focus on the national level. Involving officials from sub-national levels in the VNR institutional mechanisms is important. In addition, holding consultations at sub-national levels as well as bringing officials to national level initiatives is crucial. It will also ensure recommendations are politically informed and reflect sub-national concerns. It will help align Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), if they are taking place. It is important to engage with both technical and political officials within a ministry. To ensure wide buy-in, it is useful to consult with staff in different parts and levels of a sector ministry not just SDG focal points.

How to moderate online discussions and ensure reliable and genuine input?

Stakeholders, especially those lacking appropriate channels for sharing perspectives, can sometimes use online forums to air grievances. Skilled facilitation and online moderators are needed to appropriately manage potential conflict and to receive negative feedback in a constructive way. It is important to set up moderation guidelines and a code of conduct for participation that applies to online engagement for the VNR process. These guidelines could help moderators distinguish between comments that are critical but substantively useful and relevant and those that could breach the ethical and legal code of conduct. Stakeholder analysis as a part of stakeholder planning helps to identify potentially inflammatory issues that may arise and to design engagement strategies to maintain space for sharing and for constructive use for these important views.
IV. Practical steps to make the VNR process more inclusive

Engaging vulnerable groups is often a substantial hurdle in the stakeholder engagement process and often not enough progress is made due to cost, time and capacity constraints. Anticipated barriers preventing stakeholder participation such as physical, language, economic, communication, cultural or social barriers can be identified as part of the stakeholder analysis and addressed in a stakeholder engagement plan. It is also vital to identify representative voices from marginalized groups. It may be that there are umbrella bodies that can be consulted or there may be a need to organise targeted consultations where there is no existing multi-stakeholder or representative group.

1. Assess how inclusive the stakeholder engagement process was during the 1st VNR

- What feedback did you receive from stakeholders on the VNR process? Was it inclusive?
- Did stakeholders feel engaged in the process and that their feedback was incorporated?
- Did the process build trust between civil society and government? Or was some trust lost?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion in the 1st VNR</th>
<th>Questions to consider for the 2nd VNR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder mapping</td>
<td>Did you map and analyse the context and needs of different stakeholders and use the findings to shape the choice of methods?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity of perspectives</td>
<td>Did you provide equitable opportunities for considering diverse perspectives, including assenting and dissenting views, “grassroots” and scientific inputs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing barriers to participation</td>
<td>Did you identify and take steps to address the factors preventing participation (language, literacy, age, accessibility, gender, technology, cultural prejudice)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of vulnerable &amp; marginalised groups</td>
<td>Did you identify vulnerable and marginalised groups and enable their participation in the VNR process via appropriate methods?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness from cultural perspectives</td>
<td>Did the engagement process and methods demonstrate cultural sensitivity and awareness of tradition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of safe spaces</td>
<td>Did the methods, facilitation and the governance of the VNR team ensure safe space for the participation of all stakeholders?</td>
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2. Put in place practical ways to remove/reduce barriers that make participation difficult

- **Translate the VNR, key messages and consultation documents into the local or official language(s).** Translation can be crucial for enhancing inclusivity. However, translating drafts and consultation documents into local languages takes time and resources. Often the re-drafting process does not stop when translation is taking place. It is important to include translation of VNR drafts into local language in the planning process. It is also important to translate feedback from online platforms and ensure all groups can communicate freely in their preferred language.

- **Organise open calls for contributions** can be an inclusive way to gather ideas and inputs from a wide range of stakeholders.

- **Finance travel costs for marginalised groups and those normally left behind to facilitate their inclusion in consultations or training.** During the stakeholder mapping outline which groups face barriers attending events online or face-to-face. Consider how events could take place in different venues or online and include cost for this in the budget.

- **Provide training or provide access to devices for marginalised groups to facilitate their inclusion in online initiatives.** Providing training to communities on using their mobile phone to access to online surveys, get information and join online forums can make a big difference. Loaning tablets, computers or mobile phones to community centres for groups to use so that they can participate in online forms and events can help those normally left out, engage in online events.

- **Partner with civil society intermediaries who are closer to targeted communities.** Where barriers are high and the cost of surmounting them are equally high, it is useful to partner with civil society intermediaries who are closer to the targeted communities. Setting up a civil society reference group to help identify and engage key communities can prove very helpful.

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**Key message:** Engaging at all levels and parts of government (including at sub-national level) is crucial to manage the political and technical aspects of the VNR process.
Online engagement is increasingly used as a stakeholder consultation platform in the VNR process. It can be a very cost-effective and time efficient way to engage groups that are geographically dispersed. It can also be a useful tool to elicit feedback and input in ways that are more structured than face to face engagement (e.g., using for surveys and feedback forms).

Online engagement has the potential to help tackle several of the challenges encountered in the VNR process but only if there is carefully planning and adequate resourcing. It is also important to recognise that online engagement can still pose a challenge for countries or communities where internet usage is low or cost prohibitive. Many vulnerable groups also lack digital skills to engage online. Without certain interventions, online engagement can often exacerbate digital exclusion in the VNR process.

**Key message:** Plan online engagement in advance and provide tailored training and support to try to reduce the barriers to online engagement.

**Tips for increasing online access and reducing digital barriers**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Provide regional and local training to communities in how to use their mobile phone to access to online surveys, get information and join online forums.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Make websites and discussion forums accessible e.g. closed-captioning and sign language and hold specific training for people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Loan tablets, computers and mobile phones to community centres so groups can participate in online forms and surveys.</strong></td>
<td>Set up online stations at socially distanced consultation events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use radio segments to communicate about online events and encourage communities to visit community centres and regional centres to watch live streaming of events.</strong></td>
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**How to decide which online tools and platforms to use for different topics /different objectives**

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<tr>
<th>Tool/Platform</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Written submissions:</strong></td>
<td>Useful when you request technical feedback and data and when it is more efficient to get written feedback submitted online. Be clear about the language of feedback and whether translation services will be provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Surveys:</strong></td>
<td>Useful when you want to assess different priorities and preferences and get feedback from large numbers of people on different options and ideas. Try to translate surveys and feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussions boards and forums:</strong></td>
<td>Useful when you want to encourage rapid debate and get feedback on different perspectives without getting everyone together in the same room.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social media:</strong></td>
<td>Useful to engage large groups, particularly young people, to engage in debate, share information and communicate about the VNR and the 2030 Agenda.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Live streaming and dedicated virtual meetings:</strong></td>
<td>Useful to promote physical distancing and provide wide coverage of an event that can be recorded and watched by different groups at different times. Organise dedicated platforms for engagement.</td>
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</table>
VI. Key messages

Creating a stakeholder engagement plan can help ensure stakeholders, especially the most vulnerable, are meaningfully engaged in all phases of the VNR.

Utilising and responding to feedback and contributions is a big task that can be managed by establishing clear feedback mechanisms and different channels for providing input.

Key message: Engaging at all levels and parts of government (including at sub-national level) is crucial to manage the political and technical aspects of the VNR process.

Translating the VNR and key documents, and analysing the level of inclusion of previous VNRs can be crucial to enhance inclusivity.

Plan online engagement in advance and provide tailored training and support to try to reduce the barriers to online engagement.

VII. Further reading and support


ESCAP (2021). Putting the Voluntary National Review into Action. Developing practical next steps and planning the post-VNR period. VNR Brief # 1. Available at: https://www.unescap.org/kp

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