



Report of the Workshop on engaging multiple perspectives for the 2030 Agenda *23-25 August 2017, United Nations Conference Centre, Bangkok*

Background

Stakeholder engagement is central to the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Connecting and integrating diverse perspectives through effective stakeholder engagement is the foundation of policies and plans that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

Structured, well-planned and meaningful engagement creates opportunities for social transformation - promoting understanding, developing ownership, and facilitating the emergence of well-aligned partnerships.

However, development effective stakeholder engagement needs to address both systemic and capacity challenges. It requires dedicated capacity and institutional support, policies and legislative frameworks, accountability mechanisms, as well as clear communication, good planning, a genuine desire to include all stakeholders in all their diversity, effective methods, tools and committed leadership, from local to national levels.

Engagement for the 2030 Agenda is expected to go further – to ensure that no-one is left behind, and promote an integrated approach to the delivery of the 2030 Agenda that recognizes the interlinkages between the goals.

Two years into the implementation of the SDGs, the levels of interest in participation are high, and stakeholders expect to be fully engaged and are ready to participate. However, engagement processes, where they exist, are often rushed and under-resourced. There are instances of exclusion, and stakeholders' trust in the genuine intention of governments to engage is low, in general. A review of the Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports support assertions that engagement needs to be strengthened. On the other hand, there is evidence that many governments understand the need to engage, but face several challenges and experience their own frustrations.

In this context, ESCAP¹, along with partners, organised a workshop on engaging multiple perspectives for the 2030 Agenda from 23-25 August 2017 at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok. The workshop brought together a small group of 20 invited participants from government, academia, civil society organisations as well as the UN to facilitate intensive and open discussions. The International Association for Public Participation² played an important role in bringing its professional experience to the group.

Workshop outcomes

The workshop resulted in a shared understanding of the engagement context, barriers and challenges. The meeting worked towards a preliminary framework of indicators of quality engagement that, with further development, can be used to support engagement planning and also assessment of the quality of engagement. The meeting also concluded with specific recommendations on action to be taken to improve both systemic and practice barriers to effective engagement.

Initial observations

Many governments have expressed interest in improving engagement with stakeholders. This is raised in several forums, in particular, capacity building workshops in the context of VNR support. However, even in the most progressive situations, stakeholders are still dissatisfied, and experiencing a high level of frustration from often ‘tokenistic engagement’ either with the perceived lack of commitment, active exclusion, or lack of follow-through where inputs are not recognised. Urgent action to strengthen engagement is needed, as a foundation of the transformative approach that the 2030 Agenda requires.

- Within Governments, institutional structures are complicated, and often the responsibility for stakeholder engagement is not properly defined or resourced.
- There are existing good practices relating to stakeholder participation, but basic questions such as “how do you choose the ‘right’ NGO to work with?” or “how do we reach out to the public?” are frequently raised and there is a lack of awareness of the sheer diversity of stakeholder groups and constituencies.
- There is a lack of understanding, appreciation and proactive implementation of the human rights frameworks underpinning the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

¹ The United Nations system has long promoted the engagement of multiple perspectives as a pillar of effective governance. More than ten years ago, the United Nations partnered with the Queensland Australia local government to organize the International Conference on Engaging Communities.¹

² The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) is a global body dedicated to public participation and strengthening engagement process. Its Australasia affiliate facilitated the development of the “Brisbane Declaration on Community Engagement” resulting from the 2005 international conference which called for all actors in societies to work together to expand and promote participatory, transparent governance for the benefit of their people. This call for action echoed the outcome of the Sixth Global Forum on Reinventing Government organized by the United Nations and hosted by the Government of the Republic of Korea

- While governments go to great lengths to create an enabling environment for the private sector, the corresponding environment for civil society organisations seems to be de-prioritised and in many countries of the region, severely at risk.
- Many of the engagement practices have become standard – consultations (ad hoc), or incorporation of selected stakeholders on thematic committees and similar bodies. There is substantial need for innovation, particularly innovation that engages the wider public and youth. Engagement for the 2030 Agenda context needs to go beyond consultations. It must help create a sense of ownership of the Agenda, support policy coherence, integration of the three dimensions, heighten the degree of inclusion and outreach and support societal transformation.
- Even within the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development, CSOs and other stakeholders have very limited space for formal engagement with governments. Raising the voices of the most disadvantaged groups continues to be a challenge, despite the emphasis in the 2030 Agenda on leaving no one behind.

Challenges to engagement

Challenges to effective stakeholder engagement were identified on two levels – “systemic” and “practice.” Both dimensions are important and are often interlinked. Systemic issues (for example, cultural and political factors, or lack of civic education and a legal mandate) influence commitment to engagement and this in turn limits investment in effective engagement practice (where there is good planning and design of processes and delivery through the right methods, to meet well-defined engagement objectives).

Systemic barriers and challenges to quality engagement:

- The workshop started to explore seven foundations for effective engagement that were tabled, focusing first on legislative mandates for engagement. It was not clear that, beyond the constitutional rights that may be enshrined re: participation and decision-making and the sectoral rights for engagement in a limited number of fields, that the legislative mandate was sufficient. Still, participants felt that legislation was needed to be able to hold governments accountable, even if it does not always lead to the desired result.
- The principle of subsidiarity is central to engagement, and governments have the challenge of establishing effective engagement internally – within governments – both horizontally and vertically. Internal engagement within government is needed to strengthen implementation success and action by local governments. External engagement with other stakeholders is also a component of subsidiarity. A great deal of implementation will take place at the local level, and that is where capacity needs to be built.
- There is a lack of political will and governance approaches do not connect decision-makers with the “doers.” Policy was seen as being developed as an “elite agency tool” where policy development does not normally involve society or subnational and local governments.

- Reduced interest in inclusion and engagement when it is “inconvenient” is a major problem. There is the perception that states’ investment regimes or inter-state relations can hinder commitments to engage, and that dominant “paradigms” of development give priority to economic objectives at the expense of social and environmental concerns.
- There is often fragmentation and “siloed” thinking, as well as excessive bureaucracy, which can hinder attempts at integration and effective engagement with key stakeholders who are dispersed throughout society.
- There are limited or no institutional, cultural or other kinds of incentives for effective engagement.
- There is a lack of democratic ownership of the 2030 Agenda and a lack of legal, institutional, operational or a de-facto framework to engage different stakeholders in line with SDGs 16 and 17 notably, in the context of open governance.
- There is a lack of safe spaces to engage, including a lack of recognition of public freedoms and rights to participation, association, expression, assembly and information in governments. Moreover, there is increased suppression of dissent (threats, human rights violations, harassment etc.).
- Socio-cultural barriers continue to exist and persist, such as pre-conceived biases (racism, classism, ageism etc.).
- There is a perceived lack of “professional,” accountable NGOs.
- There is a lack of technical facilitation capacity and inclusive or collaborative engagement, with a pre-occupation with time efficiency, rather than the quality of outcomes. It was stressed that important issues must be given time for adequate debate and processing.

The subsequent discussion on how change could take place pointed out that:

- Advocacy and campaigning for norm-setting in the international community (including at the regional level), more awareness, and possible draft model legislation could all help.
- Space was requested for parallel (shadow) reports on SDG implementation to be presented at the regional level as well as national and global levels.
- At the national and local levels, a shift to underline that participation was a fundamental right of democracy and support for robust civic education was critical.
- Different types of reports and assessment can help – spotlight reports, civic spaces (5 freedoms), the human development index and assessment of the impact on different stakeholders of the SDG implementation efforts.
- Means of implementation need special attention.
- Demonstrate methods of engagement that include partnerships/collaboration between CSOs and governments and provide ***permanent mechanisms*** for the engagement of stakeholders.
- Recognise opportunities for communities to lead action.
- Effective stakeholder engagement is not easy – it is complicated and challenging even in the professional context. IAP2 engagement professionals stressed that even in the developed country context, political commitment and organizational changes that lead to effective engagement are built over time. This process is supported by good

documentation of the outcomes of effective engagement and communication around success.

Practice barriers and challenges to quality engagement:

- The vision of shared leadership in engagement, in which governments and stakeholders work together collaboratively towards a specific objective was for a few participants, unrealistic i.e. due to the prevailing power imbalances. This view led to a wider discussion on the deep seated political biases and norms, and whether the discussion of building effective practice capacity was realistic in these contexts. Other views expressed were that such contexts were not universal. Where there are entry points and willing governments, engagement can be viewed as a technical capacity building exercise, which opens opportunities for civil society in building collaborative modes of engagement.
- Government experts found that a technical approach was constructive and needed. Engagement cannot solve all of the development challenges, nor can work towards more effective engagement be held hostage to political situations in some countries.
- A question was raised about whether CSOs needed to change tactics as they demand a seat at the table – whether they should improve their capacity to bring the most marginalised to the discussion and to contribute as substantive experts – to complement the traditional “watchdog” function of civil society.
- A punitive approach to engagement assessment is probably not as helpful as a collaborative approach in which CSOs, once given the space, can work with governments towards common goals. Participatory monitoring and evaluation could be one such entry point and environments of collaboration and mutual trust should be fostered.
- At the practice level, to a certain extent, civil society organizations and other stakeholders also lack adequate capacity on how to engage with governments in the context of the 2030 Agenda. As a result, some of the interactions can be characterized by conflict, rather than constructive dialogue, when there are opportunities. Also, there is often a lack of integration between CSOs while engaging with governments.
- Motivation for engagement needs to be strengthened. Local level engagement is critical but since the global level is so far removed from local levels, regional levels need to support national outreach and understanding
- Financial resources for engagement implementation are sorely needed.
- Forums such as the APFSD can be used to share experiences of good engagement among governments, creating interest and awareness. Related to this, good engagement practice that has demonstrably improved decision-making outcomes (including by looking at costs saved and overall stakeholder support for a decision, for example), exist, and can be used to increase political and institutional commitment to engagement.
- There should be regular opportunities for engagement between governments and civil society (and the UN) on opportunities and challenges around building an enabling environment for stakeholder participation. This could be an annual event in the context of the APFSD’s review of SDG 17. It would also take into account SDG 16 perspectives.

2030 Agenda implementation activities where more engagement is needed

The workshop identified some aspects of the 2030 Agenda implementation process which needed strengthening through engagement:

- Context-specific understanding of the SDG implementation process, which respects the rights-based approach and wider development issues.
- Targeted strategies to engage marginalised groups.
- Outreach – taking engagement to people, rather than waiting.
- Appropriate focus on engagement during comprehensive planning will make the task of engagement at implementation, monitoring and review easier.
- Given the complexity of the SDGs, governments need to have a discussion on the bigger picture to facilitate stakeholder engagement, enabling their full contribution on cross-cutting issues before cascading to smaller sectors/themes/activities.
- Localisation of SDG indicators at national/subnational and local levels.
- Development of partnership with civil society by governments and the UN.
- Multi-SDG approaches in the engagement process.
- Monitoring and evaluation (integrated), in particular in relation to data disaggregation and use of third-party (civil society organisation) data in addition to national statistical office data.
- Communities and civil society organisations also need capacity to engage not only in implementation, but also in monitoring and reporting.

(Geographic) Areas where more engagement is needed

Currently, the enjoyment of democracy, participation and engagement differs based on economic strata, culture and religion, rural vs. urban locations and capital vs. other centres. A greater level of engagement is needed in the following:

- Ethnic minority areas, particularly where isolated, and conflict-affected areas.
- It was pointed out that certain countries felt that they had done a good job with engagement, but in reality, this was not the case when geographic and other disaggregated factors are taken into account
- Several countries were identified as needing strengthened engagement activity, which could inform follow-up activity.

Developing an indicator framework for quality engagement in the context of the 2030 Agenda

A shared understanding of what quality engagement looks like (quality engagement indicators) can facilitate dialogue between governments and civil society around expectations that include questions such as “should we aim for best practice?”, “what is the minimum acceptable level of

quality when we consider dimensions such as ‘inclusion’ and others?”. IAP2 professionals underlined that its agreed indicators of quality engagement reflected some core values. These core values aligned well with the 2030 Agenda context.

- The group reviewed and revised proposed indicators of quality engagement for the 2030 Agenda, drawn from different sources. The exercise took into account the special situation of the 2030 Agenda context with respect to integration, inclusion and others, as well as the context of engagement (such as fear of retaliation/reprisals) and the human rights dimensions of good engagement practice.
- The proposed indicators will continue to be refined and still need to be held up against: existing data and indicators reflecting engagement in any case country; and how the proposed indicators relate to the SDGs indicators and targets.
- The rights to participation, information, freedoms of assembly, association and expression were referred to in terms of good engagement practice. There are existing indicators (structural, process, outcome) that this work could build upon.
- The group also worked towards defining minimum acceptable standards of engagement, as well as what could be considered “best practice” for each of the quality dimensions discussed.
- This allowed for expectations to be openly discussed between civil society and government experts who were present – with surprisingly, not much disagreement, if any. This exercise was marked by discussion around which expectations were realistic, practical or achievable.
- The discussion pointed to the strong potential for developing a shared understanding between governments and stakeholders on the quality of engagement that was appropriate, as a basis for going forward – engagement design and planning itself could be undertaken as a participatory exercise itself.
- The discussions often came back to the need for comprehensive (and participatory) stakeholder mapping, and a well-defined (and ideally participatory) engagement planning process that includes engaging stakeholders through permanent mechanisms that allow for stakeholder and government co-management.
- Other issues were tabled such as who should assess the quality of engagement and how.
- This indicator framework could be used to support stakeholder engagement planning that is fit for purpose for the 2030 Agenda context, as well as assessment of existing engagement, to identify where there are particular gaps.

When discussing the indicator framework participants recommended that:

- Use of such a tool needs to be pro-actively complemented with assistance with planning and implementation.
- Regional level engagement can be strengthened to support national level engagement methods, serving as a model for national governments.
- Any indicator framework tool should be placed in the context of existing project/programme models, like “plan-do-revise,” “where in the cycle does it exist?”, and in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Reviewing some existing engagement tools

- The group learned about the IAP2 Spectrum as a tool to help identify the right levels of engagement, depending on the expected outcome and discussed models of engagement – although there was substantial confusion regarding their application and use.
- There was a strong feeling in the group that tools that were used professionally for planning or other aspects of implementation could be useful, but needed to be adapted and simplified.
- The issue was also raised that some countries might be lacking resources to use some of these existing tools and face severe capacity limitation for implementing these tools. Hence there is a need to pilot these tools within countries and further develop these tools based on practical and political realities.

Next steps

The workshop closed with a session in which the group defined specific actions that could be taken in two areas – the first to address systemic issues, in particular political commitment; and the second, to further develop quality engagement practice, including through the use of a future version of the indicator framework to promote quality engagement.

- Countries that were preparing to present their Voluntary National Review reports in 2019 will require the most urgent support, the group pointed out.
- The group also recognised the role of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in creating political awareness and providing a platform to exchange experiences on innovative practices, potentially in 2019, when specifically relevant areas of the 2030 agenda are to be reviewed.
- The group also called on ESCAP and the UN at large to develop model legislations that can be used to strengthen the legal foundations for the stakeholder engagement process in all stages of policy making, especially in the context of the 2030 Agenda. These should be in line with existing human rights frameworks and model legislation.
- More attention should be paid to strengthening engagement as part of the direct response to the goals – in particular Goals 16 and 17.
- ESCAP should also engage the participants in developing a “community of practice” on stakeholder engagement going forward.