

PROGRESSING NATIONAL SDG IMPLEMENTATION REPORT 2023

I. GOVERNANCE, INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND ENGAGEMENT

Chapter 2: Stakeholder Engagement in 2030 Agenda Governance



PHOTO BY IISD/ENB KIARA WORTH



Chapter 2: Stakeholder Engagement in 2030 Agenda Governance

Introduction

This chapter analyzes the 2023 Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports around four core parameters: institutional mechanisms to foster non-state actor engagement; involvement of non-state actors in SDG priority setting (with a view to accelerating implementation of the Goals to leave no one behind); engagement in the VNR process itself, including the final reports; and the status of civic space and broader civil society engagement.

Slightly more than a third of VNR-presenting countries in 2023 elaborated to some extent on how they are engaging with non-state actors in SDG governance, which constitutes one of the lowest proportions since 2016. A range of independent views from national CSO coalitions notes that some SDG governance structures exist only in theory (**Mongolia, Chile**), while others are fragmented (**Lithuania**), discontinuous (**Timor Leste**), and, more broadly, lack clear remits and accountability mechanisms. In this context, the most tangible policy dialogue seemingly takes place within technical working groups (usually sector-based and used mainly for monitoring purposes). This is particularly the case where the SDGs are embedded within National Development Plans and decentralized governance structures are established to monitor the implementation of such national instruments (**Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Zambia**).

An area of inclusiveness where information is increasingly available for most countries is in relation to non-state actor participation in the review process itself, although the bulk of reports do not offer real insights about the added value of non-state actor engagement, nor explain how such contributions were incorporated in the final VNRs. The CSO Views mobilized in **Burkina Faso** and **Ireland** would confirm the claims made in their countries' VNRs regarding more inclusive VNR processes. However, the CSO view from Ireland would also suggest a broader trend regarding SDG implementation processes seen in previous years: that more open and inclusive VNRs rarely translate into more continuous forms of multi stakeholder policy dialogue, coordination and monitoring beyond the specific review of the VNR.

The state of civic space is also assessed in this chapter, as an important factor that provides the broader context in which the scope and substantiveness for inclusive SDG policymaking and monitoring takes shape.



CREDIT: SEBASTIAN BARROS

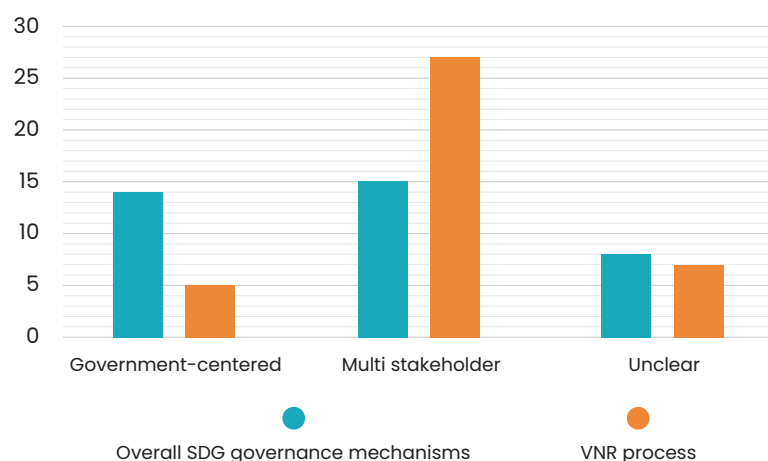
1. Non-state actor official engagement in SDG implementation governance arrangements

While almost all reporting countries claim to have governance mechanisms in place, only 15 out of 39 countries in 2023 (38%, compared to 66% in 2022) report providing space for NSAs to contribute to SDG governance arrangements, a particularly low proportion.

Croatia notes that CSOs are represented on the National Council for Sustainable Development “in an advisory capacity.” Comoros has established Thematic Dialogue Groups that serve as platforms for intersectoral consultation and coordination. **Guyana** mentions the creation of a multi-stakeholder steering committee to oversee the consultative process and implementation of its Low Carbon Development Strategy. **France’s** report outlines participatory structures at the national, local and thematic levels with the National Sustainable Development Council serving as the main hub for dialogue with civil society.

Portugal notes that in tandem with the creation of the new inter-institutional coordinating mechanism, a new monitoring structure has been set up with representatives of the two governments of the autonomous regions, local authorities, the Economic and Social Council and members of civil society “of acknowledged merit in the sustainable development field.” In **Mongolia**, the Multi-stakeholder Council for Sustainable Development was established in 2022 to support the work of the Parliamentary Subcommittee on SDGs and expand the multi-stakeholder cooperation and participation of Parliament, Cabinet, development partners, the private sector, CSOs and academics.

Figure 2: Inclusivity of overall SDG governance and VNR engagement processes in 2023



However, many reports acknowledge the need for further efforts to fully integrate diverse social sectors in SDG policy development, implementation and review. A case in point is **Belgium’s** Federal Council for Sustainable Development which serves as the consultative mechanism for the VNR “as well as overall SDG coordination.” The report notes that the overarching SDG body has been non-functional until 2022 and proposes a greater role for civil society in future, under the recently reactivated Interministerial Conference on Sustainable Development, in which the FCSD will have an advisory role.

Fiji acknowledges that the compartmentalized governance structure with multiple bodies involved in SDG implementation and monitoring also has an impact on limiting the engagement of non-state actors. Improving collaboration with CSOs and the private sector is identified as an area for improvement by the new coalition government.

Lithuania openly admits that the existing State Progress Council lacks NGO representatives, hence this should be taken into account as part of proposals to rejuvenate the body. Saint Kitts and Nevis explains that the process of preparing its first VNR has highlighted “the urgent need to strengthen the National Sustainable Development Coordinating Committee” including through instilling stronger coordination and harmonization of efforts between governmental bodies and other stakeholders.

While welcoming efforts by the Prime Minister’s Office to promote a law on civil society support to continue work on social auditing of government programmes, the **Timor-Leste** CSO platform FONGTIL stresses the importance of expanded dialogue and coordination to better integrate CSO recommendations into official reports, as well as maintaining “a culture of following development processes for effective priority management and better citizen life.”

Regarding possible new frontiers in stakeholder engagement, the first regional voluntary review by the EU (**EUVR**) reflects on some outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe, held between 2021 and 2022, which adopted new policy initiatives encompassing a range of relevant SDGs. It highlights the establishment of a new generation of citizens’ panels set to deliberate on initiatives on food waste, learning mobility, and virtual worlds.

CSO View: Multistakeholder Council on the SDGs in Mongolia



*In **Mongolia**, the Multi-stakeholder Council for Sustainable Development was established in 2022 to support the work of the Parliamentary Subcommittee on SDGs and expand the multi-stakeholder cooperation and participation of Parliament, Cabinet, development partners, the private sector, CSOs and academics.*

According to the Spotlight report by the Mongolian CSO Network on the SDGs, the Multi-Stakeholder Council on the SDGs, placed under the SDG Parliamentary Subcommittee, was established in principle in late 2021. However, to this day it has had extremely limited meetings. The CSO Network on the SDGs is currently advocating for the full establishment of this permanent mechanism, in which government and non-government stakeholders could engage in continuous dialogue on sectoral, national, and local development policies. If implemented as originally conceived, this mechanism would hopefully lead to the development of a genuinely participatory multi-stakeholder partnership for planning, monitoring and policy coherence in the implementation of the SDGs.

Although the establishment of the Multi-Stakeholder Council can in theory be seen as an institutional innovation, the ex-officio character of the Council without the necessary human and budgetary resources currently prevents it from regular and effective functioning.

Source: Adapted from the Spotlight Report from the Mongolian CSO Network on the SDGs



Croatia notes in its report that CSOs are represented on the National Council for Sustainable Development “in an advisory capacity.”

According to the Croatian Platform for International Citizen Solidarity (CROSOL), it is inaccurate to claim that CSOs are represented in the National Council, even in an advisory capacity. While the Council does exist, and comprises over 20 members, every single one represents state institutions, including the prime minister’s office, president’s office, all ministries, government entities such as the Government of the Republic of Croatia Office for Cooperation with NGOs and the Government Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities, as well as a few state offices/agencies.

This aligns with a broader trend marking an erosion of the enabling environment for civil society in Croatia, characterized by a decline in funding options from public sources and restricted entry to policy making mechanisms. In this context, interaction with institutions regarding advocacy, public consultations, and decision-making is very limited and frequently symbolic. For instance, while Croatian civil society can engage in online public consultations for legislative acts, CSO comments and contributions are rarely incorporated into actual policy proposals.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with CROSOL

BOX: Creating fit-for-purpose governance mechanisms – Reflections from Chile

Chile’s VNR report highlights the importance of political will in institutionalizing engagement between government and a wide variety of civil society and other stakeholders. While a multistakeholder body to coordinate SDG implementation and monitoring has been in place since the adoption of the SDGs in September 2015, its work has been highly dependent on the government of the day, with the VNR process revealing the need for major efforts to create an institutional structure that is truly multi-level, multi-stakeholder, and ensures that the voices of the most marginalized groups are recognized. The report emphasizes the need to update the country’s SDG governance mechanisms “to facilitate the effective and articulated management between various actors.” It identifies three key challenges identified during the multistakeholder dialogues: redesigning institutions to work with multiple actors; decentralizing the SDG implementation process, including through the participation of regional governments and municipalities in governance; and strengthening gender and social inclusion.

According to information obtained by the national CSO platform ACCION, the National Council on Sustainable Development has not convened in the past year, although the body overseeing the 2030 Agenda has met at the executive level (Inter-ministerial) since the VNR and the SDG Strategy were launched.

Regarding the Council's restructuring (an aspect highlighted in the SDG Strategy, and to a lesser extent in the VNR), some progress has been made in the overall process, but very few concrete initiatives have been taken. There have been talks on the decentralization front, since the government is considering establishing "regional coordination councils" through a pilot program. This initiative aims to select certain regions to establish preliminary regional chapters of the Council, serving as a test before nationwide implementation. The specific regions for these pilot councils are still to be determined, and the role of civil society in these regional Councils, as well as at the national level, remains unclear.

Despite ongoing efforts, the establishment of links between the National Council and broader policy initiatives like the one involving the modification of the law on Citizen Participation has not been achieved yet. The slow and laborious nature of the process highlights the challenges to improve coordination within the government, as well as between the government and societal stakeholders, even when there seems to be a degree of political will.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with ACCION

CSO View: Institutional adaptations for SDG governance in Lithuania



*In its VNR report, **Lithuania** openly admitted that the existing State Progress Council lacks NGO representatives, hence this should be taken into account as part of proposals to rejuvenate the body, in the context of the SDG implementation process.*

According to the Lithuanian Development Cooperation Platform (VB Platforma), the State Progress Council does include two NGO representatives within its Lithuania 2030 working group: the National NGO coalition (of which the VB Platforma is a member) and the Environmental Forum. It was collectively decided among Lithuanian civil society that only broader coalitions are to represent CSOs in this process. The level of coordination provided by CSO representatives towards wider civil society is satisfactory, given that there's a good information flow, and CSOs are able to provide inputs in consultation processes. The National NGO coalition actively participates in every meeting, and VB Platforma considers the process rather positive since agendas are sent beforehand and all meeting minutes are published afterward.

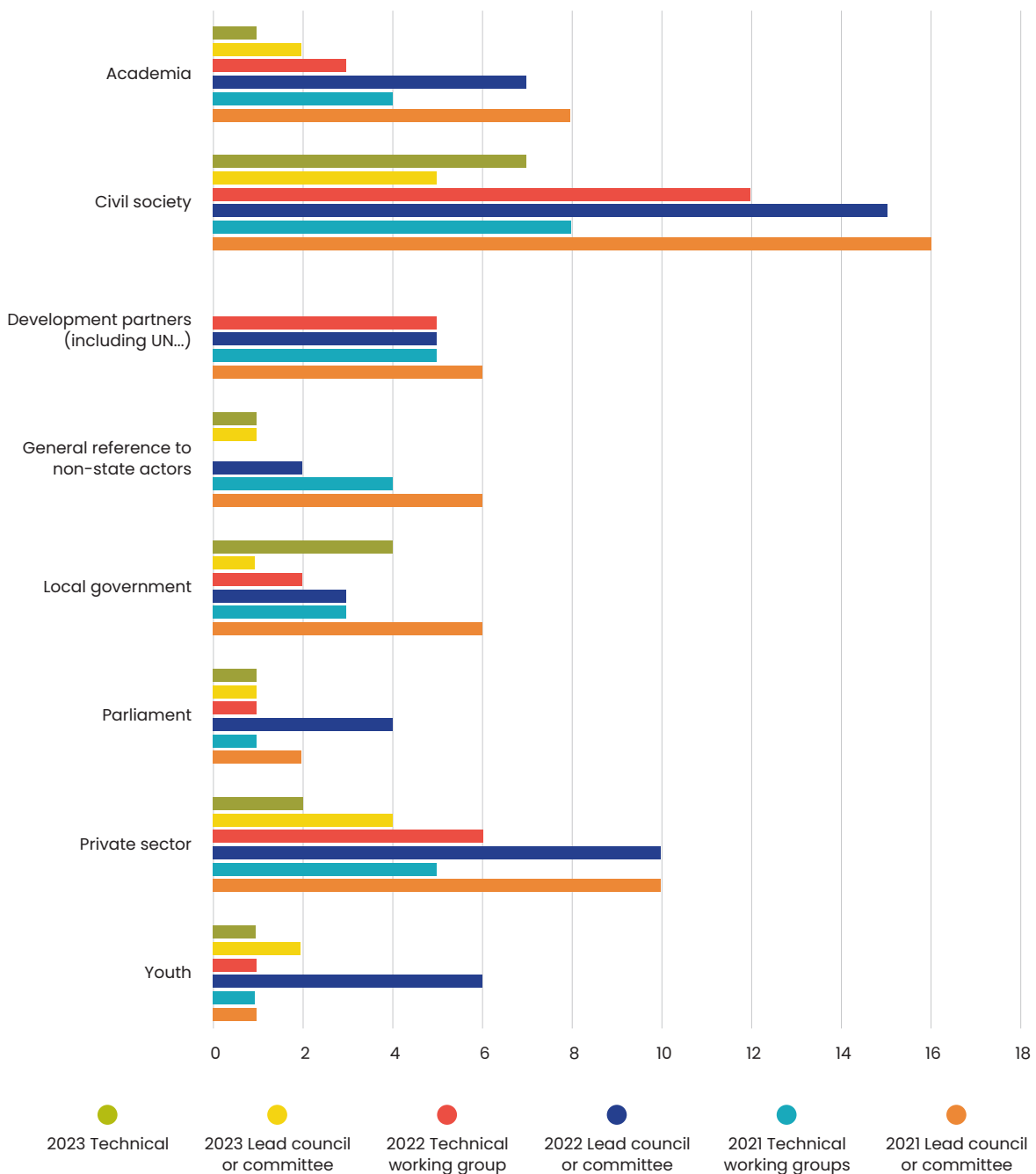
However, VB Platforma also notes that while the State Progress Council currently focuses on monitoring the implementation of SDG-related strategies, some indicators do not align directly with the SDGs, which can create confusion. This observation stems from VB Platforma's experience preparing a data-focused report on SDG indicators in 2018.

Regarding the current fragmented governance arrangements in the country, the government seems to propose in its VNR to assign SDG governance exclusively to

the State Progress Council, to streamline governance, but VB Platforma has not observed any concrete initiative in this regard. If the government proceeds with this plan, VB Platforma suggests merging the existing multi-stakeholder working group at the Ministry of Environment with the Lithuania 2030 group within the Council. This merger would boost participation and foster multi-stakeholder dialogue within a more coherent governance mechanism.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with VB Platforma

Figure 3: Participation in SDG governance mechanisms



2. Consultation with national stakeholders on SDG priorities

16 out of 39 countries (41%, compared to 55% in 2022) report having organized inclusive consultative processes to identify national SDG priorities and pathways. The formulation of plans, strategies and action plans is key in translating the SDGs into a contextualized, integrated and actionable set of policies. Such inclusive planning processes can therefore play a role in engaging societal stakeholders in a meaningful way and fostering consensus-building around sustainable development pathways. However, very few VNR reports elaborate on how such processes have unfolded: neither in terms of societal stakeholders involved, or tangible contributions to the final outputs.

Barbados' VNR, for example, states that on 1 May 2023, the Social Partnership comprising government, workers and employers, signed the Declaration of Mission Barbados to collectively transform the country into a sustainable, prosperous, inclusive and resilient society by 2030. How citizen's groups are to be continually engaged in the called-for "shift in mindsets towards engaging as citizens and stakeholders in collaborating, innovating, and investing to shape Barbados' future" remains unclear.

Canada mentions the involvement of civil society and other stakeholders in the formulation of the national SDG strategy, as well as a series of Together|Ensemble, conferences, describing the latter as "the first multi-stakeholder symposium in Canada dedicated to tracking progress on the SDGs." **Burkina Faso** highlights technical contributions by the national NGO coordinating body (SPONG) during the various national and regional dialogue for the formulation of the country's National Development Plan, as well as in performance monitoring and review frameworks – which is confirmed by SPONG in their spotlight report. However, these reports do not specify the extent or depth of such engagement in actual policy formulation and implementation.

Chile, in the context of the formulation of its first SDG strategy, describes "extensive online and in-person decentralized dialogues" in seven regions of the country in 2022, in which approximately 2,000 people and organizations participated. **Croatia's** report states that official NSA advisory bodies, such as the Youth Council and the Council for Civil Society Development, "play an important role" in the formulation of public policies.

In the **EUVR** report, the Conference on the Future of Europe is highlighted as a unique opportunity for structured debates with citizens on key priorities, including how to deliver on the SDGs. According to the report, more than 750,000 participants shared and debated close to 19,000 ideas and resulted in commitments for new policy initiatives, "often contributing to a range of relevant SDGs."



Canada's VNR report repeatedly mentions a “whole-of-society” consultative process in SDG strategy formulation process and the VNR.

According to Cooperation Canada, the initial consultation process for “Moving forward together: Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy” was notably robust in terms of engaging stakeholders. Significant efforts were made to facilitate discussions involving various groups, with active participation from CSOs. The government sought to amplify its outreach efforts by leveraging existing coalitions and regional and provincial councils and networks. Numerous civil society organizations actively participated in these consultations, including those facilitated by the Ontario Council on International Cooperation (OCIC) between March and April 2019. Through partnerships with members of diverse communities, OCIC engaged with 27 organizations, 22 key informants, and 148 individuals, resulting in 43 recommendations to inform the strategy’s implementation. OCIC employed various engagement methods, including surveys, Open Consultation Strategy Labs (both online and offline), and invitation-based consultations in collaboration with Indigenous, Disability-inclusion, and Diaspora communities.

Additionally, the government’s SDG Funding Program facilitated the organization of over 11 in-person meetings with Indigenous organizations, involving approximately 200 Indigenous individuals and communities in community-led events, as well as 40 community consultations, 65 in-person conversations, and the production of 20 policy briefs. Cooperation Canada received funding from the SDG Funding Program to do some of the policy briefs aiming to inform the strategy.

The government made sincere attempts; however, there was a noticeable decline in stakeholder engagement between the formulation phase and the implementation stage. Cooperation Canada attributes this decline partly to inadequate funding for backbone organizations, resulting in a lack of coherence and coordinated efforts towards implementing the strategy. This decrease in engagement became particularly evident in the Voluntary National Review process. Consultations were held with very short notice, leaving little room for meaningful stakeholder participation. Some efforts were made to highlight actions taken by partners and stakeholders to localize the SDGs; however, we would have preferred a collaborative approach with stakeholders co-authoring the chapters for a more inclusive process.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with Cooperation Canada



Ireland highlights two public consultation processes held during the development of the Second National Implementation Plan, including through the National SDG Stakeholder Forum.

Coalition 2030 (Irish civil society coalition comprising 70 CSOs), acknowledges the two organized consultations—preliminary and on the draft—as positive steps. Process-wise, the overall consultation period for survey completion was deemed adequate. Coalition 2030 also notes that a significant amount of feedback gathered from the consultations did influence the content of the Second National Implementation Plan. Between the draft and the final plan, there were 1320 total changes, most of it based on input from the consultations, with 635 replacements, 495 insertions, and 190 deletions, which underscores the substantive nature of the consultations. That said, in terms of representativity and diversity, the majority of the responses were from National and Local government surveys, as to a lesser extent, CSOs. Furthermore, there is no evidence that vulnerable or marginalized groups were actively targeted as part of the consultation.

In relation to the National SDG Stakeholder Forum, Coalition 2030 provided feedback based on prior fora, and submitted specific recommendations for the June 2022 edition mentioned in the Irish VNR. Notably, Coalition 2030 contributed to drafting questions for breakout rooms, and was given speaking slots in the Forum. However, policy options have never been meaningfully shared or explored at the fora, and the facilitator’s report was delivered more than two months post-Forum, which is deemed insufficiently prompt.

Coalition 2030 additionally notes that the Second National Implementation Plan is set to be completed in 2024 and there is no successor in plan, nor has there been any communication regarding the development of a successor plan.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with Coalition 2030

BOX: Further examples of civic engagement to progress the SDGs

Burkina Faso’s report offers one of the more explicit examples of civil society engagement, highlighting the involvement of the umbrella CSO body in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of the SDG-aligned national development plan. **Iceland** lists a number of multistakeholder consultative mechanisms including the youth and sustainability councils, awareness surveys, and an online SDG portal launched in 2019 that gives individuals, NGOs, business, institutions, municipalities, and others the opportunity to introduce projects that contribute to Iceland’s progress towards the SDGs. In addition to the project portal, the government’s SDG website features an online dashboard featuring the government’s assessment of Iceland’s progress towards the SDGs, toolboxes for municipalities and businesses, and other practical material on sustainable

development and the government's actions. **Belgium** has established an annual *SDG Forum* that brings together hundreds of participants from diverse backgrounds with an accompanying web portal that brings together the main *SDG* initiatives. Among diverse citizen engagement mechanisms, the **EU** has established a Sustainable Development Observatory to foster “the active participation of citizens and civil society in making the shift towards a more sustainable Europe aligned with the *SDGs*.”

Canada mentions the involvement of civil society and other stakeholders in the formulation of the national *SDG* strategy, as well as a series of *Together | Ensemble* conferences, describing the latter as “the first multi-stakeholder symposium in Canada dedicated to tracking progress on the *SDGs*.”

According to Cooperation Canada, while the country has made strides in involving civil society and Canadians in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals there remains ample opportunity for enhancement to foster a more inclusive and participatory approach. The *Together | Ensemble* conferences serve as a vital platform for sharing best practices, innovations, and insights gained from *SDG* implementation and monitoring efforts. Attendees have the opportunity to highlight successful initiatives, exchange experiences, and collectively address challenges, thereby expediting progress towards *SDG* attainment. That said, while these symposiums are commendable as a first step, Canada must strive for greater depth and sustainability in its engagement with civil society organizations, moving beyond superficial interactions to establish enduring partnerships that yield tangible outcomes over the long term.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with Cooperation Canada



CREDIT: ACTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

3. Non-state actor engagement in VNR processes

The 2030 Agenda pledges participatory follow-up and review processes as one of the entry-points for making SDG implementation a whole-of-society effort. The UN Secretary-General's Voluntary Reporting Guidelines prompt governments to detail how they have engaged societal stakeholders in the formulation of their VNRs. In this regard, past reviews reveal governments generally comply at a basic level, but the depth of information varies greatly – especially in terms of direct consultations with historically marginalized communities. Regarding the different approaches taken, these range from inclusive consultations and unedited written contributions to involving non-state actors in drafting teams. In 2023, 37 out of 39 countries (95%) mentioned some type of NSA engagement in their VNR processes, reinforcing the high levels seen in previous years (with 93% in 2022).

The following are some types of NSA engagement highlighted in the VNR reports.

Providing direct input. Following the reactivation of **Belgium's** Inter-Ministerial Conference on Sustainable Development in 2022, CSOs were given the opportunity to provide input into the VNR process. The report notes that the FCSD facilitated consultations in two phases: compilation of a summarized overview of the SDG implementation of these groups; and a joint opinion by several advisory councils on the draft VNR. **Bahrain** highlights six multi-stakeholder consultation workshops to develop the VNR. **Portugal** describes a broad VNR consultation process that included a 2030 Agenda "Tour" and focus groups bringing together representatives from civil society as well as regional and local administrations in the five regions of mainland Portugal as well as two autonomous regions. **Zambia** reports on various stakeholder engagements, including with special and marginalized groups such as women, children, youth, persons with disabilities and albinism. In **France**, civil society was invited to contribute throughout the development of the VNR in several ways, including through identifying their most significant actions as well as levers and obstacles to progress by 2030, and contributing to a national conference, organized by the Open Diplomacy Institute. **Mongolia** and **Poland** highlight the mandate given to their respective VNR coordinating entities to ensure multi-stakeholder input.

Bridging data gaps. **Cambodia's** report underlines the open and inclusive nature of the process through the collection of a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative information provided from a number of stakeholder sources. **Chile's** VNR includes input from different societal actors that was based on a questionnaire distributed by the government inviting contributions on NSA activities relating to each SDG. **Burkina Faso's** report highlights the role of the multistakeholder Technical Editorial Committee in data collection, analysis and consolidating diverse contributions made throughout the process. **Liechtenstein's** report highlights a "high" response rate to its VNR survey and states this indicates growing public awareness on the importance of the SDGs or sustainable development in general. Tajikistan's report describes the VNR approach as consisting of: an information platform for assessments and recommendations based on available data and departmental monitoring reports; diagnostics of progress in country's development with coverage of key areas and focus of actions; and focus group discussions with direct participation of civil society on a set of issues aimed at clarifying the results, opportunities and limitations.

Building national coalitions for greater impact. **Bosnia and Herzegovina** highlights a workshop organized with the Green Network, a coalition of 22 civil society organizations

working towards mitigating the adverse effects of climate change on local communities. **Brunei** states that its national consultative process also helped raise broader awareness and understanding of SDGs, and served as a platform for establishing cross-sectoral alliances. An ad hoc working group co-chaired by two **French** NGOs, Coordination Sud and the Institute of Sustainable Development and International Relations, was formed as part of the consultative body developing the VNR.

Innovating VNR consultations from process to outcome

Several countries, including **Saint Kitts and Nevis, Rwanda, Lithuania, Iceland** and **Viet Nam** highlight efforts to engage children and youth in the VNR process. **Viet Nam** produced a user-friendly format of the draft VNR report with diagrams and images so that children can also provide inputs. **Iceland's** final report includes a contribution from the SDG Youth Council and a message from Iceland's UN youth delegate for sustainable development, a government assessment made by specialists from the ministries and Statistics Iceland and a civil society assessment made by a group of civil society actors.

Croatia notes that examples of SDG projects successfully implemented by CSOs and NGOs from 2019 until the preparation of the second VNR, were included in the report. **Poland** and **Romania** created virtual working platforms where individual files uploaded by participants in the multistakeholder consultations were later aggregated. In addition to inviting CSO and private sector representatives to participate in Technical Working Group meetings.

CSO View: Innovative mechanisms for VNR engagement in Fiji



Fiji's VNR team encouraged non-state actors to share relevant insights through a new online platform.

The national CSO coalition Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS), confirms that the VNR process was more participative this time, given that an online CSO consultation was indeed organized to gather information from societal stakeholders in the context of the formulation of the VNR report.

Despite this positive development regarding the VNR formulation process, the country still doesn't have an overarching SDG governance mechanism. Limited stakeholder engagement with relevant line agencies and ministries happens mostly at project implementation level .

FCOSS further notes that this siloed and limited approach to participation is broadly reflected in the implementation of the Fiji National Development Plan (NDP) -which is aligned to the SDGs- as each line ministry and agency develops its own strategic plan and annual corporate plan according to the priorities articulated in the NDP. This is then reflected in each sector's annual budget. Although civil society has little to no input in the process at policy level, CSOs have been making budget submissions, with the hope to influence budget allocations.

Source: Adapted from FCOSS entry to the Global SDG Scorecard survey

CSO View: Open drafting in Ireland's VNR



Operating on the principle of “open drafting,” Ireland invited key national stakeholder groups representing a variety of sectors to contribute a chapter for inclusion in the VNR report. Public submissions of up to 800 words were also invited from national stakeholders to form part of a compendium of stakeholder contributions to this report. Contributions were not edited to demonstrate inclusivity and transparency in the SDG reporting process.

Coalition 2030 (Irish civil society coalition around the SDG group on 70 CSOs) confirms that they were given complete autonomy to write the dedicated civil society chapter, and that it is also correct that the chapter was published unedited. They also point out that the draft chapter submitted exceeded the established word count and was accepted nonetheless. The time frame provided by the government for drafting was also deemed satisfactory.

Providing more detail into the process, Coalition 2030 asserts that the government asked for a rough overview of what they would include by early February 2023, and were told about this time frame just before Christmas. Although it was a challenging time frame to organize internal consultations, eventually it didn't constitute an impossible task. Coalition 2030 was then granted until April to complete their dedicated chapter for the VNR, which was considered sufficient.

That said, from a wider policy perspective, this positive channel for participation in the VNR hasn't really enabled civil society to increase dialogue with the government around the specific policy issues highlighted in the chapter, as the government hasn't provided feedback or convened further talks.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with Coalition 2030

CSO View: Participatory drafting in Burkina Faso's VNR



Burkina Faso's VNR report highlights the role of the multi-stakeholder Technical Editorial Committee in data collection, analysis and consolidating diverse contributions made throughout the process.

According to the Secretariat Permanent des ONG (SPONG, Burkina Faso's NGO platform), for the 2023 VNR the government made efforts to involve civil society from the early stages - including in defining the terms of reference, organizing scoping meetings, facilitating workshops for data collection in various regions, and participating in group work.

SPONG, as an umbrella organization for Burkina's NGO sector, along with other civil society actors, were thus involved in the Editorial Committee. However, there was limited representation of NGOs (3 members), which should be increased.

In practice, civil society was able to organize a pre-consultation with their member organizations to contribute inputs through a document that was considered by the drafting team. The government also conducted sectoral consultations with various stakeholder groups across the entire territory. However, the challenge lies in the limited capacity within civil society itself to systematically monitor the SDGs ahead of reviews. Furthermore, even after six years of SDG implementation, knowledge and ownership remain limited among many communities and civil society groups, as they rarely see a direct cause-and-effect relationship between SDG implementation and their daily experiences.

Among their recommendations, the NGO platform calls for more support to both the government and NGOs in enhancing communication about the SDGs. Additionally, support should be provided to NGOs for specific monitoring of certain SDGs before the reviews to have continuous material for discussions with the government.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with SPONG



CREDIT: CONSEIL DES ORGANISATIONS NON-GOUVERNEMENTALES D'APPUI AU DÉVELOPPEMENT - SÉNÉGAL

4. Civic space: How countries are engaging with non-state actors more broadly

The concept of civic space encompasses various political rights and freedoms such as association, expression, peaceful protest, participation, and access to information. The legal frameworks that regulate their exercise, determine the degree of openness in public discourse and deliberation processes in each country, thus shaping the ability of civil society and non-state actors to voice their opinions and influence policy and political processes, including policies, laws, budgets, and political party platforms. Thus, the scope of civic space provides the wider context in which the participatory quality of SDG implementation unfolds.

In 2023, 20 out of 39 countries (51%) addressed the state of civic space in their countries and/or globally, at least to some extent, a higher proportion than in 2022 (27%). That said, approaches shown in reporting on civic space are still far removed from the importance of the civil and political rights and freedoms involved in shaping inclusive sustainable development pathways. This is particularly significant nowadays, given the democratic erosion and growing authoritarianism seen in many countries around the world (see box).

According to a national survey cited in the **Burkina Faso** report, 45.4% of individuals (both men and women) believe that the Central Authority takes into account the concerns of the population. However, around six in 10 of those surveyed said they are not consulted in decision-making processes." Similarly, the **Comoros'** VNR concludes that citizen participation in decision-making was "very limited" with the absence of disabled people and young people, as well as the underrepresentation of women due to the dominant socio-cultural norms. **Lithuania** and the **Maldives** further draw attention to under-the-radar human rights issues, notably the protection of personal data and the right to be forgotten, as well as the impact of evolving labour market trends amongst such as virtual work and the gig-economy on young people and people living with disabilities.

These insights echo global trends towards the shrinking "space for maneuver" for civil society, as noted in the latest CIVICUS Monitor (see box). The **EUVR** points to a degradation of civic space "throughout the EU," a trend further accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. **Lithuania** and **Poland** also highlight increased threats to universal values such as democracy and human rights in the face of crisis situations such as the war in Ukraine, with Lithuania's report stressing that this occurs "not only in everyday situations, but also in the long term."

A number of countries, including **Viet Nam, Kuwait, Fiji** and **Uzbekistan** refer to their constitutional or legislative provisions to safeguard human rights. **Iceland** emphasizes the low prevalence of violence in the country, with robust legislation guaranteeing freedom of expression and access to information, as well as principles of democracy, human rights and rule of law. **Ireland's** report describes the country as "a leading advocate for human rights, civic space and multilateralism; values which underpin and cut across all the SDGs."

On efforts to strengthen civic engagement, the **EUVR** highlights the European democracy action plan as an initiative to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU by promoting credible, transparent, and inclusive elections, strengthening media

freedom, and countering disinformation. The report emphasizes that anyone – not just EU citizens – can provide feedback online throughout the entire policymaking cycle via the Commission’s “Have Your Say” portal.

Other countries highlight how the SDG implementation process contributes to reinforce more rights-based approaches to the concept of civic space. **Portugal** underscores the importance of building capacities of CSOs to mobilize communities and citizens “to defend civic space” in the context of the 2030 Agenda. The report also highlights the country’s support for direct engagement mechanisms with civil society in priority partner countries. Making the link to broader civil society engagement processes, **Timor-Leste** highlights the opportunity that SDG implementation processes provide for drawing “valuable insights into the respect for civic freedoms.”

CSO View: Expanding the right to participate in public affairs in Chile



Chile highlights its policies aimed at improving participation within governance and protecting journalists by giving them a “human-rights and democracy defenders” status.

National NGO platform ACCION notes that the current government is indeed in the midst of reforming the country’s Law on Participation in public affairs. Although the Bachelet government had established a civil society advisory body in order to formulate a set of recommendations back in 2017, successive governments haven’t taken any initiatives based on these. There is hope that the current government will indeed use the civil society recommendations as the foundation of their reform proposal, as they have also launched an online public consultation in order to receive additional inputs and test specific draft proposals.

For civil society, a proper reform of the Participation law is essential, since the perception regarding institutional participation spaces established under the law is that these are not conceived as decision-making bodies but are mainly informative in nature – or consultative at best. This greatly diminishes the impact that civil society can have on the development and monitoring of laws and public policies, ensuring the right to participate in public affairs in an incomplete and nonsubstantive way.

It is also hoped that the restructuring of the National Council on Sustainable Development could also benefit from this process, in terms of making participation more substantive at national and subnational level. However, information obtained by ACCION would suggest that the link between these two processes still hasn’t been fully made by the government.

Source: Adapted from ACCION’s Spotlight report

CSO View: Stakeholder consultations within budget formulation and tracking in Zambia



Zambia highlights its “Beyond The Numbers: Making the budget work for people” initiative to promote greater accountability and better public service delivery through increased capacity and engagement of citizens and civil society in the formulation, enactment, implementation, and oversight of Zambia’s national budget.

According to the civic space report from the Zambian Council for Social Development (ZCSD), in November 2023 the National Budget and Planning Act underwent a review, and ZCSD along with 3 other NGOs that have a nation-wide scope were indeed invited to provide submissions to this process. At the district level, ZCSD has been able to work on a pilot project that establishes Community Budget Groups in the districts of Chawama, Hillview and Kabwata. These Community Budget Groups are based on Community-based organizations and citizens developing joint budget-monitoring exercises in their districts.

However, in order to be truly inclusive, consultations should also seek the involvement of NGOs and Community-based organizations established in rural areas. Consultations should thus not only involve organizations based in the capital, but should as well seek to reach all provinces and districts in order not to leave anyone behind.

Source: Adapted from ZCSD’s Civic Space report + email exchanges

CSO View: Participatory policy making and monitoring in Timor Leste



Timor Leste’s VNR cites data from the Varieties of Democracy index on civil society organization consultation scale, which asks, “Are major CSOs routinely consulted by policymakers on policies relevant to their members?” Timor-Leste scored 1.04 (on a scale of 0-2), ranking ninth in the region in 2020.

According to the Forum NGO Timor Leste’s (FONGTIL) report on the state of civic space in the country, there are various channels for civil society to influence development programs, policy and law making.

For the State Budget discussion, the government provided a roadmap about the process to prepare the budget, starting from ministerial level up to the National Parliament for final approval. This road map is publicly available and it is calendarized which provides civil society organizations and other interest groups the opportunity to decide the best route to influence the state budget. In this context, FONGTIL, as umbrella organizations for NGOs in Timor Leste, usually provides a platform for policy dialogue to take place by bridging NGOs with relevant government ministries.

On social policies, there is a joint Government- NGO initiative called Social Audit where NGOs can access the Civil Society Fund to do social audits to the government development programs and projects, as well as asking accountability when policies are not implemented according to the approved roadmap.

There are other venues that enable CSOs and citizens to participate in policymaking and monitoring, mostly at sector level (health, education, infrastructure, Official Development Assistance), or at the village level.

FONGTIL further notes that, although sector-based participation is well established, the structuring of integrated SDG governance structures hasn't translated into stable institutional spaces. The National Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation Agency (ANAPMA) under the Prime Minister's Office was initially designed as a platform for policy dialogue and participatory monitoring of the National Strategic Development Plan (through which the SDGs are embedded), but its remit underwent alterations in the current government. For FONGTIL, it would be beneficial if the ANAPMA could be re-established as a continuous overarching monitoring mechanism.

Source: Adapted from FONGTIL's Report on Civic Space

BOX: Civic space: a global fact check

Reinforcing the SDG-specific country examples highlighted above, the 2023 [CIVICUS Monitor](#) found that civic space in the bulk of African countries – including most of those presenting their VNRs – remains “repressed.” Only Tanzania and Burkina Faso, ranked “obstructed,” are doing slightly better on this front. In Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina has moved down to the “obstructed” category. In the Asia and Pacific regions, Viet Nam remains in the “closed” category, Brunei and Cambodia are categorized as “repressed,” Fiji is “obstructed” and Mongolia’s civic space is “narrowed.” However, Timor-Leste’s performance has been upgraded to the narrowed category. The report describes the Middle East and North Africa region as home to “some of the most repressive governments in the world” with “no significant improvements” in civic space in the past year.

At a global level, the 2023 Democracy Index report from the Economist Intelligence Unit asserts that nearly half of the global population (45.4%) resides in some form of democracy. However, only 7.8% live in a “full democracy,” down from 8.9% in 2015. Meanwhile, over one-third of the world’s population (39.4%) lives under authoritarian regimes, a proportion that has been gradually increasing in recent times.¹

1. Democracy Index 2023, Economist Intelligence Unit, p.3.