

# From principle to practice: stakeholder participation in Voluntary National Reviews, 2018



“Governments talk when in New York but upon return nothing is implemented.” – *anonymised survey response*

*Together 2030 and Newcastle University's annual perceptions survey gathers stakeholder perspectives on national follow up and review of the SDGs. The 2018 survey received 264 responses. The resulting report, **From principle to practice: stakeholder participation in Voluntary National Reviews, 2018**, offers new evidence on the difficulties in translating the lofty global commitments of the SDGs into meaningful participatory processes in national contexts – full report available at [www.together2030.org/2018-perceptions-survey](http://www.together2030.org/2018-perceptions-survey)*

## Four key messages

### 1. Awareness of VNRs and national planning is relatively high, but knowledge of national VNR processes is much lower

While 80% of respondents in VNR countries reported being aware that their country is undertaking a review, awareness of VNR processes in these countries – **knowledge of whether, and how, respondents can engage – remains low at less than 40%**. Three years into VNR reporting, these figures indicate that follow up processes are still falling short in terms of participation and transparency. Further progress is still urgently needed to ensure awareness of the VNR reporting process for all civil society stakeholders in reporting countries.

### 2. Clear obstacles to CSO participation

Respondents expressed frustration at the challenges to participation, citing a range of external obstacles – from lack of government transparency and superficial consultation, to lack of funding and government repression of NGOs. Many of these echo, and add to, the challenges identified in Together 2030's exercise to map national civil society coalitions on the SDGs. Despite the 2030 Agenda's emphasis on broad-based participation and ownership in implementation and review, the results indicate that these principles have not yet been translated into practice in at least some national contexts.

### 3. VNRs are not perceived as inclusive of marginalised groups

**Only 14% of respondents** regarded the most vulnerable and marginalised groups as being included in national review. Although 'Leave no one behind' is a key commitment of the SDGs, and a guiding principle of follow up and review processes at all levels, the survey indicates that this is not reflected in this year's VNR countries.

### 4. Limited progress perceived since previous VNRs – especially in Europe

Respondents indicate that progress on implementation following a country's VNR is best in planning, policy implementation, and civil society engagement. Although these are positive findings, **only 10-15%** see 'great' progress. Political will, public awareness and budgeting, by contrast, are regarded as showing relatively little progress. Worryingly, most stakeholders do not see good progress in review and monitoring following a VNR. This suggests that VNRs, run as standalone exercises, are not being translated into longer lasting structures and processes. Europe lags behind in stakeholder perceptions of key aspects of implementation, and, along with North America, fares worst at a regional level for inclusion of marginalised groups.

**Progress on these areas is essential: the SDGs will only be achieved if reviews are followed up by long-term political leadership and adequately resourced implementation. VNRs are not a substitute for ongoing, participatory national processes.**