



Commitments and challenges: stakeholder participation in follow up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals, 2019

Results of the 2019 perceptions survey on civil society and stakeholder engagement in national review and implementation of the 2030 Agenda



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This joint Together 2030-Newcastle University project surveys stakeholders on their perceptions of national follow up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes. This is the fourth year this survey has been carried out; this year the survey was expanded to include questions on stakeholder involvement in the implementation of the SDGs, not just in the VNR process.

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Graham Long and Elizabeth Muggleton, Newcastle University, and Arelys Bellorini, Andrew Griffiths, Javier Surasky, Aissata Ndiaye and Margie Simo from Together 2030. The project team from Together 2030 and Newcastle University is grateful to all those that supported the dissemination of the survey and to all the respondents who dedicated time and effort to share their views with us.



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1. Introduction

Inclusive and participatory national review and follow up is a fundamental commitment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Each year, to help assess progress towards realising this promise, this project undertakes a survey to generate new data on how engaged stakeholders feel in national planning and accountability processes, and whether they believe that their voices are being heard. Four years into the SDGs, the survey also asked questions about visible progress and stakeholder involvement in implementation.

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the importance of a robust and participatory review framework to support implementation, promote accountability, and spur partnership. Member states agreed that the national level was central to implementation, and this is reflected in a commitment to inclusive Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of progress to be presented at the annual High Level Political Forum (HLPF).

This report poses three main questions: (1) how extensive is stakeholder awareness of, and participation in, the process of VNRs - including participation by marginalised groups? (2) How, and how meaningfully, are stakeholders involved in review and implementation processes, and (3) Have stakeholders seen progress on SDG implementation since 2015?

Four years in, at the close of the “first cycle” of SDG implementation, these questions are especially timely. In both an HLPF in July and intergovernmental SDG summit in September, states and stakeholders are taking stock of how well SDG review processes are working, and this includes the question of how effectively stakeholders are engaged. Even as high numbers of countries voluntarily review their progress and report positive steps, overall progress on implementation [is judged in the UN’s SDG Progress Report](#) to be “slow or even reversed” on some goals, whilst the global response “has not been ambitious enough”.

The report finds that there has been progress on increasing civil society awareness of, and participation in VNRs – though it is unclear how far this reflects improved government efforts, or greater self-organisation on the part of stakeholders. There is no evidence, though, that this awareness and engagement have made the VNRs more rigorous or effective in catalyzing SDG implementation; most respondents see little progress in their countries after VNRs.

We also find that VNR processes continue to exclude “left behind” groups. Compared to previous years, this survey asked more open answer questions about civil society experiences of good and bad practice in review and implementation. It is clear, from respondents’ answers, that VNR processes have been varied, and not always consistent with the UN’s Guidelines and Handbook for VNRs.

Whilst only looking at one piece of the SDG ‘jigsaw’, the report suggests the need for continued mobilization by civil society beyond national VNR processes, greater attention to how VNRs can promote meaningful progress in implementation, and an effort to identify and spread best practice in inclusive, participatory review and implementation.



Section 2 highlights the report's key messages. After providing some background on the survey itself in section 3, the central analysis of the report follows in sections 4, 5, and 6 below. Sections 4 and 5 address stakeholder awareness and participation – in review and implementation. Section 6 addresses stakeholder perceptions of progress since past VNRs: what has changed, and by what degree. Finally, the report concludes with a summary and brief analysis of key findings and recommendations.

The 47 countries that presented VNRs in July 2019 are: Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, Congo (Republic of the), Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Eswatini, Fiji, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, Iceland, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lesotho, Liechtenstein, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mongolia, Nauru, New Zealand, Oman, Pakistan, Palau, Philippines, Rwanda, Saint Lucia, Serbia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, UK, United Republic of Tanzania, and Vanuatu.

See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs> for details of VNR reporting countries in all years and download the UN HLPF Handbook for the preparation of VNRs

2. Key messages

The overall finding of this report is that while respondents are aware of, and engaged in, VNR processes to a greater extent than in the past, the quality of national processes remains varied. Engagement through these channels has not always yielded rigorous, participatory review or accelerated progress. At the end of this first four-year review cycle of the SDGs, civil society stakeholders see limited progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Their participation and engagement is not being translated into ambitious national action, and some groups are still being “left behind” in national review processes.

1. Stakeholder awareness of, and engagement in, VNRs has improved

This year, 92% of respondents in reporting countries were aware that their country was undertaking a VNR this year, compared to 80% in 2018 and 68% in 2017. Stakeholder awareness of where and how to engage in VNR processes in their country remains lower, at 58%, but is still an improvement on 37% in 2018 and 25% in 2017. The trend on how many respondents saw stakeholder involvement in their country’s preparation is again positive: 62%, compared to 49% in 2018. As always, caution is needed - this might reflect this year’s reporting countries only, and we cannot tell how far this improvement reflects better government approaches and/or effective civil society mobilisation.

2. Despite more engagement, stakeholders see little progress in implementation of the SDGs following VNRs

In most areas - including public awareness, political leadership, implementation of policies, and budget allocation – only a quarter or less of respondents said they saw good progress since a past VNR. In some areas, respondents saw notably less progress than they had last year. Overall, there is no evidence here of the SDG implementation gathering momentum. The area where respondents saw greatest progress, as in last year’s survey, was in the engagement of civil society organisations around the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda where 41% respondents reported good or great progress, but there is no evidence of that engagement being harnessed to drive implementation.

Awareness and engagement is viewed more positively this year. However, the quality and inclusiveness of that engagement is still varied, and there is no overall evidence of it driving ambitious implementation.

3. Involvement of vulnerable and marginalised groups remains low, though improved

Only 27% of respondents said that vulnerable and marginalised groups were involved in the preparation of the VNR. This is an increase, but from a very low base last year of 14%. The continuing low level of involvement of these groups suggests that the core principle of ‘leave no one behind’ within Agenda 2030 is not being implemented and that governments have not, by and large, succeeded in running inclusive review processes focused on the poorest, most vulnerable, and marginalised.

4. VNR practice remains varied and inconsistent

Stakeholder responses have indicated a range of good and bad experiences with this year’s VNRs. Some respondents saw very positive practice in their country contexts – e.g. direct involvement in the drafting of the VNR, CSO presence in national SDG committees and structures, and government responsiveness to detailed written comments on draft VNRs. Others, however, experienced closed and rushed VNR processes with little flow of information from governments – sometimes with the report then presented as a multi-stakeholder effort.

3. About the survey

This report is based upon a survey conducted by Together 2030 to collect evidence on stakeholder awareness of, and participation in, national planning and review of the 2030 Agenda, in partnership with staff from the Politics department of Newcastle University. The survey received 159 responses from a range of stakeholders.

The vast majority of respondents to the survey were from civil society organisations (63% of those who responded to this question) ; a further 15% came from international organisations. Of those from CSOs, 63% were from development organisations (e.g. health, literacy, social services), 59% were from advocacy organisations (e.g. civic action, social justice, human rights, consumer groups), and 32% were from women’s organisations (note that respondents could choose more than one answer to this question). Half (50%) of those from CSOs were from national level organisations, with a further 22% from international organisations/networks and 19% from community/grassroots organisations. Most respondents from CSOs were from organisations with 5-19 employees (38%) or with 20-100 employees (31%).

The survey comprised approximately 20 questions – though not all questions were directed to all respondents. It was issued in three languages: English, Spanish and French, and was shared broadly with civil society and stakeholder mailing lists and via social media from 10 June – 4 July 2019. Most of the respondents (115 respondents) used the English version, with 26 using the French and 18 the Spanish version. The data gathered allowed for disaggregation along combinations of three axes (i) respondent location – country and region (ii) VNR status of respondent country – whether reporting this year, last year or never having reported (iii) respondent organisation.

Methodology and limitations are discussed in the accompanying method note. The Politics Department of Newcastle University, in partnership with the Together 2030 International Secretariat, compiled and analysed the information and prepared this report.

For the purposes of the report, countries were divided into four regional groupings – the allocation of countries to these groupings can also be found in the methodology note. In the analysis below, we sometimes contrast these regional groupings, but it is important to stress these contrasts reflect the particular countries from which respondents contributed (in the case of VNRs, the VNR countries from each region) rather than all countries in each region. Furthermore, contrasts with surveys from previous years have limited value, since different sets of countries are reporting. The number of respondents from each region was: Latin America and the Caribbean – 20, Europe/USA/Canada – 22, Asia Pacific – 42, Africa – 75.

The survey gathered a lower number of responses than last year (159 versus 264 in 2018). The dissemination methods and context, differences in the surveys and the different countries involved across the two years make it difficult to determine the cause of this drop in responses. Causes could include (i) differences in timing (as the survey took place slightly later in the year this year) or promotion of the survey; (ii) more responses on behalf of a number of organisations (iii) different levels of engagement in the national contexts of countries under review and (iv) lower engagement with the SDGs by stakeholders in general or (v) ‘survey fatigue’ by stakeholders in the context of a number of other surveys being run.

Download the methodology note and the survey text in English:

<http://www.together2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Methodology-Note-2019-Perceptions-survey-v1.pdf>



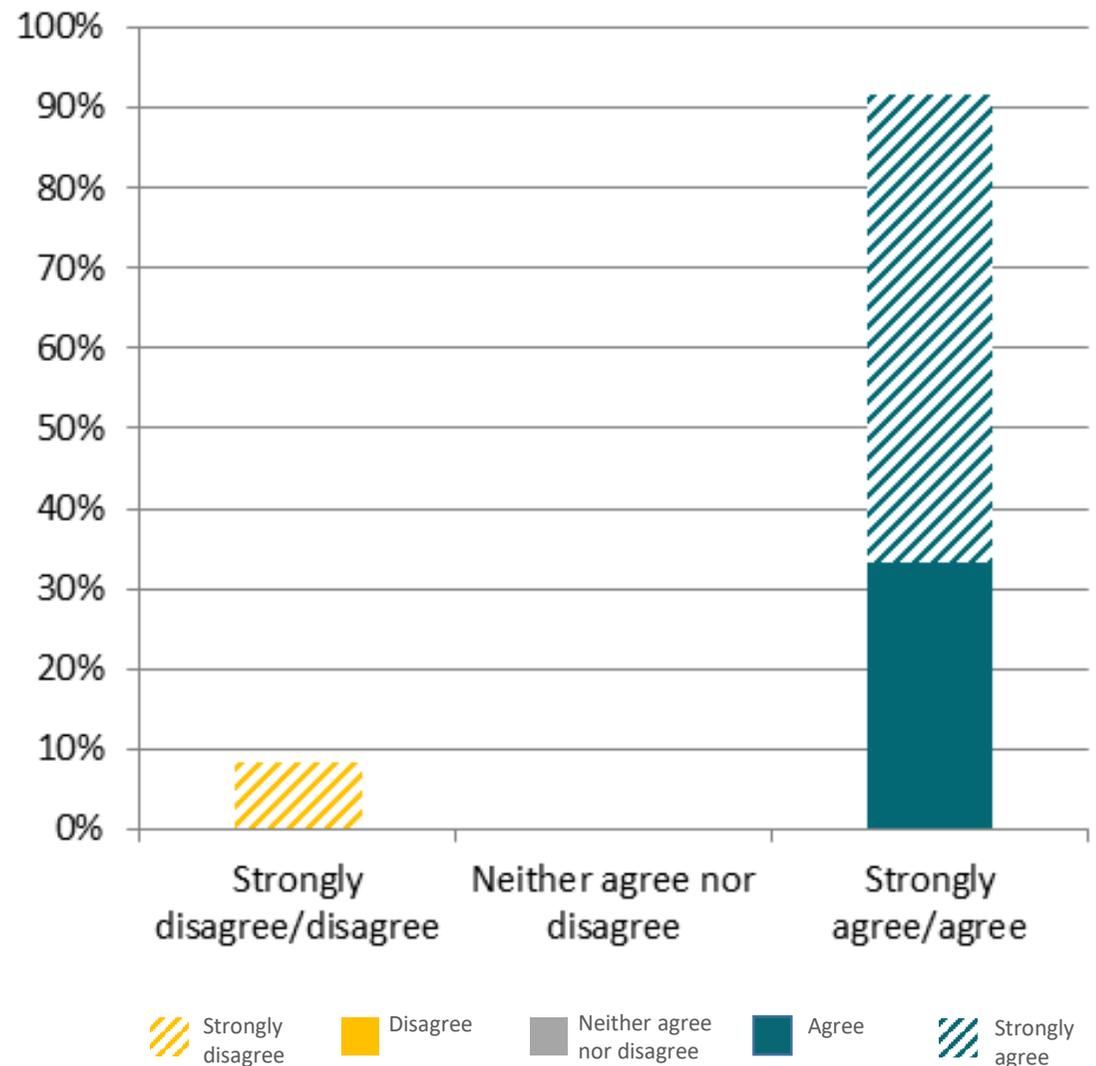
4. Stakeholder awareness of VNRs and the SDGs

4.1 Awareness of VNRs

The vast majority – 92% – of respondents from VNR countries were aware that their country had volunteered to undertake a VNR (44 of 48 respondents agreed or strongly agreed). Only 8% were not aware (disagreed or strongly disagreed).

This figure has consistently increased over the four years of this survey (from 80% in 2018, 68% in 2017 and 66% in 2016). While we cannot be certain whether this is a result of the different country contexts in each year of the VNR, it seems likely that this represents a genuine trend of greater global awareness.

I am aware that my country has volunteered to engage in a VNR, to be presented during the 2019 session of the HLPF



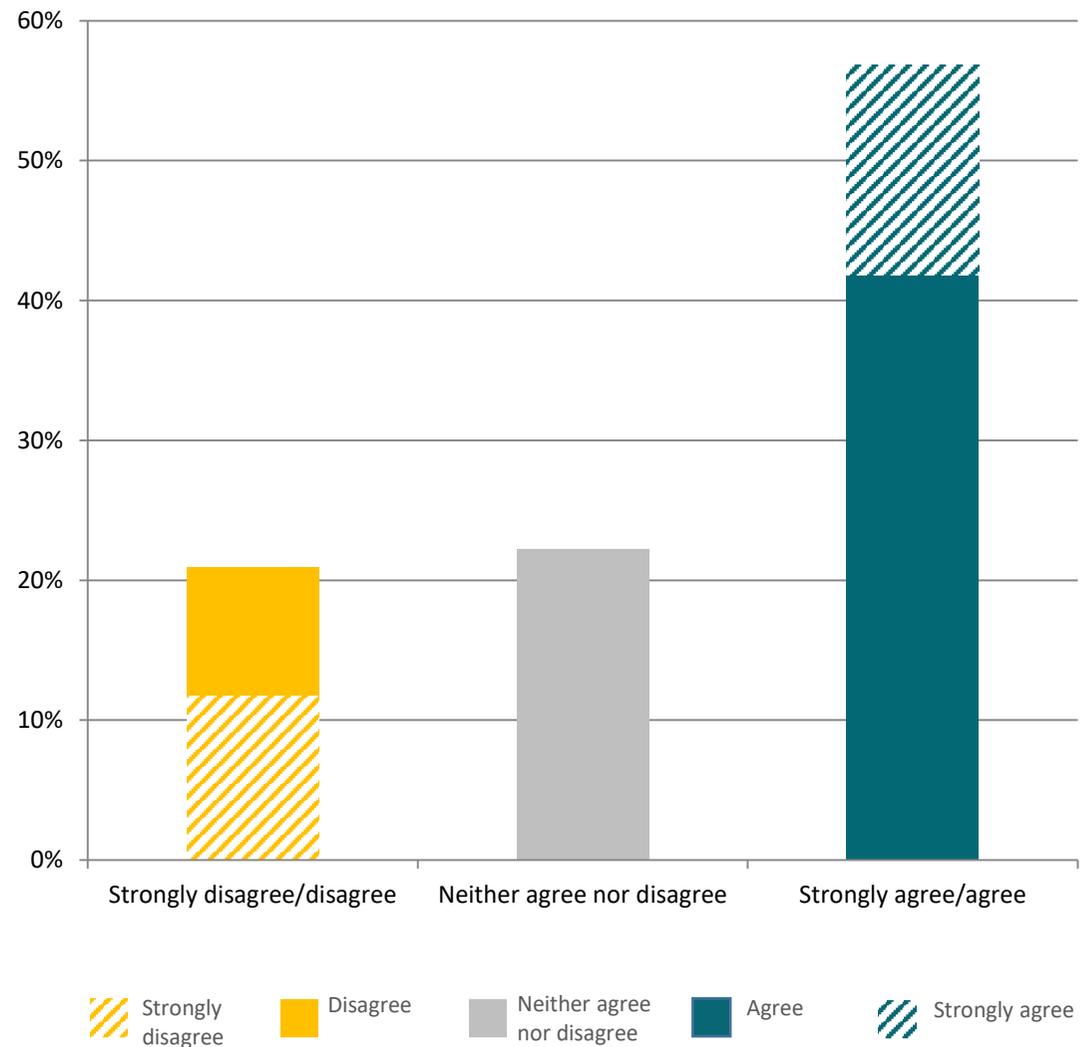
4.2 Awareness of national SDG planning

All respondents were asked about their awareness of national SDG planning. The results allow us to gauge a wider awareness of the SDGs and a sense of their national implementation.

Overall, 57% of 153 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were aware of the plans in their country for implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. This figure has remained static over the four years of this survey – 61% in 2018, 58% in 2017, 57% in 2016 (although it should be noted that the response options offered were slightly different in the earlier years).

Awareness was higher, at 71% of 48 respondents, in countries with a VNR in 2019, than in those countries not undertaking a VNR this year, where only 51% of 105 respondents said that they were aware of national plans for SDG implementation. It is important to note that this assesses only *awareness* of national plans, and not the merits of those plans in terms of the SDGs.

I am aware of the plans in my country for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

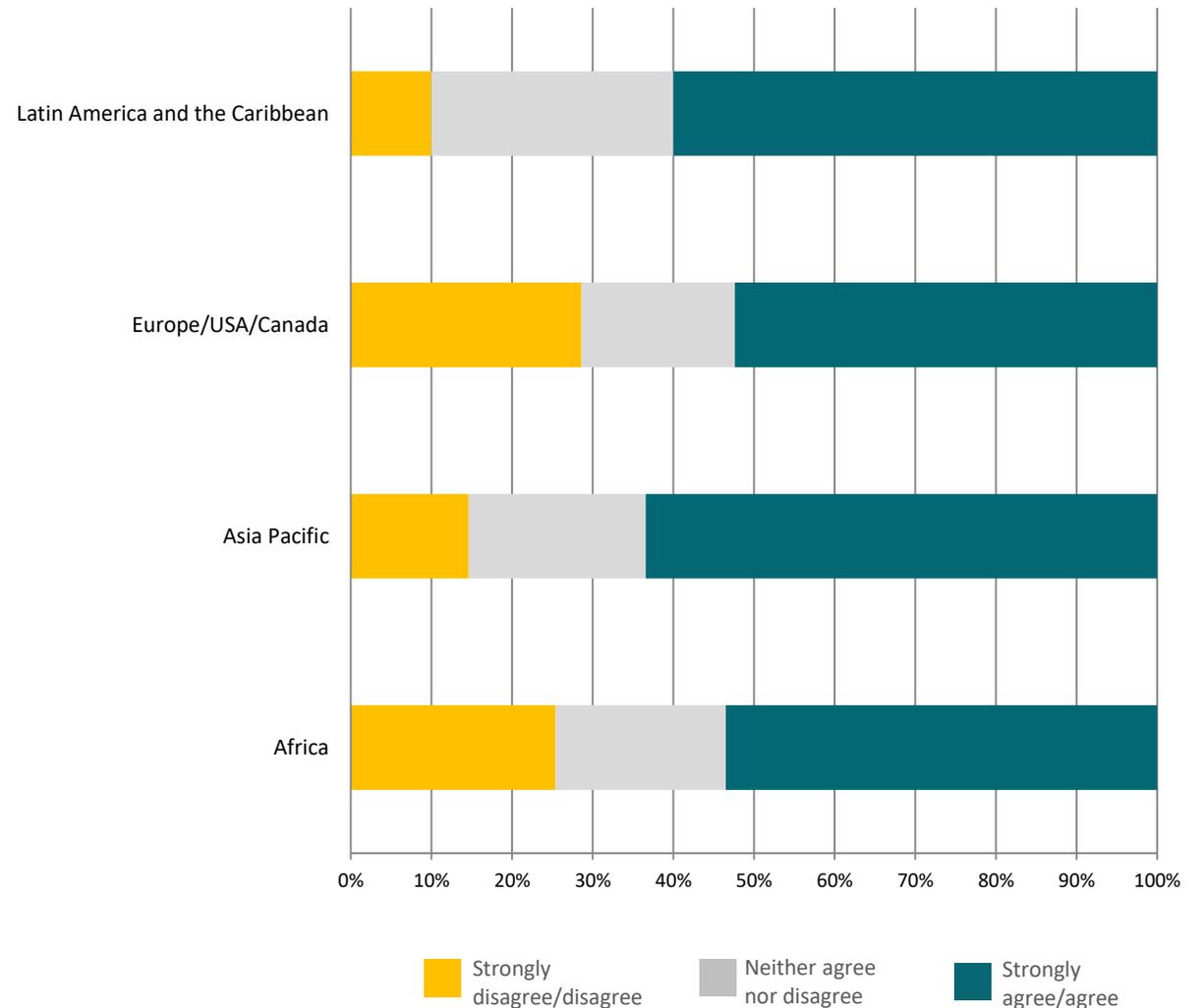


Regional disparities

Across the different regions, there were some disparities in the level of awareness of national SDG planning. Levels of awareness are lowest in Europe/USA/Canada and in Africa; and highest in Asia Pacific - where 63% of respondents said they were aware - and in Latin America and the Caribbean - where only 10% of respondents said they were unaware.

Respondents by region (excluding 'don't knows'): Latin America and the Caribbean - 20; Europe/USA/Canada - 21; Asia-Pacific - 41; Africa – 71.

I am aware of the plans in my country for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs



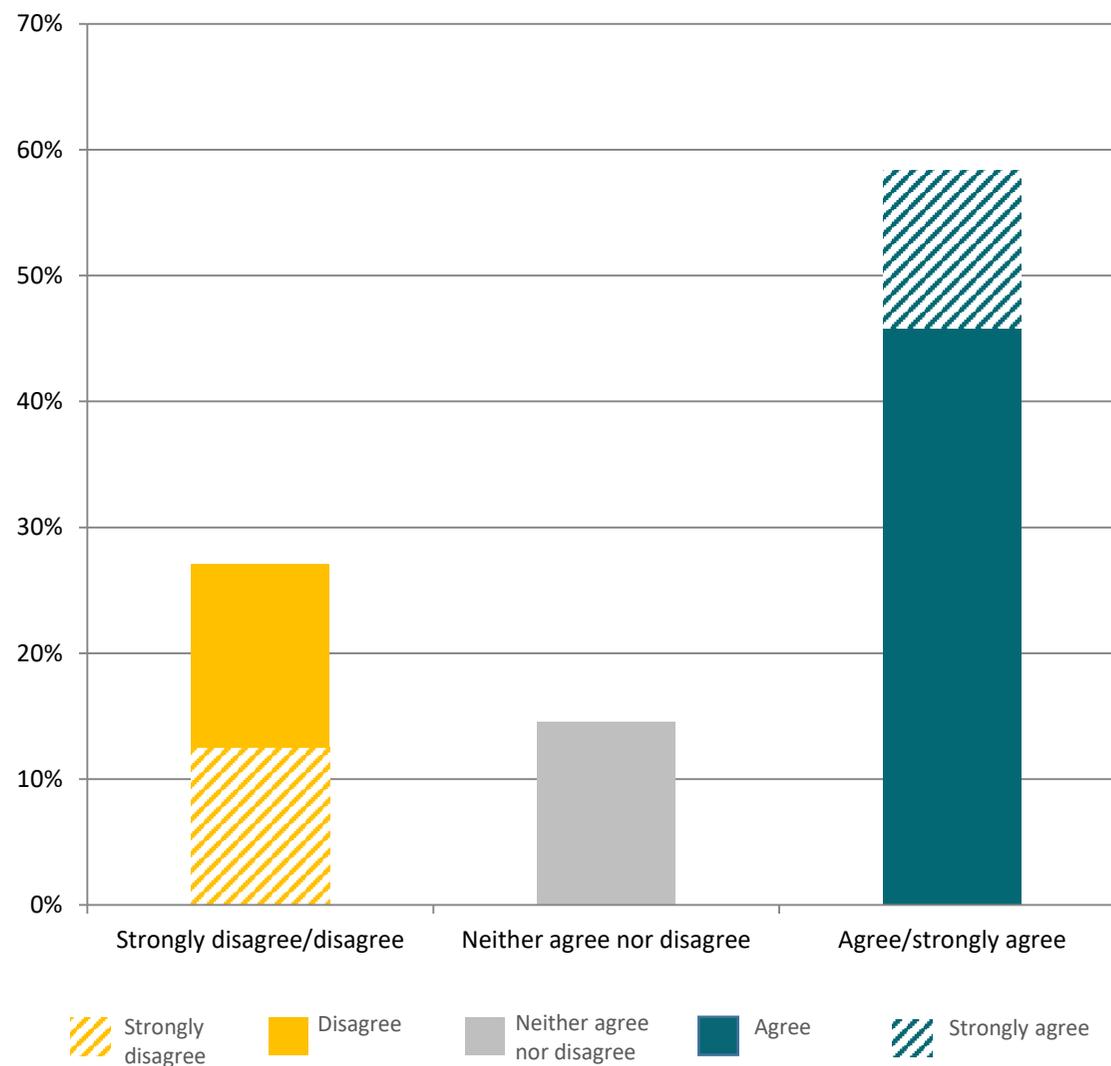
4.3 Awareness of how VNR processes are being conducted

Awareness that a country is undertaking a VNR (4.1) and awareness of any national planning underway (4.2) are both distinct from knowledge amongst stakeholders of *how* a government is undertaking its VNR.

58% of 48 respondents said they knew the process their government followed to prepare the VNR (strongly agreed or agreed), while 27% said they did not (strongly disagreed or disagreed).

This year, the question was asked in the past tense, as the survey was carried out immediately before and after the 2019 VNRs were due to be submitted, rather than earlier in the process as in previous years. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the results were an improvement on 2018, when only 37% said they knew the process, and they were outnumbered by the 44% who said they did not.

I am aware of the process my government followed to prepare the VNR





5. Participation of stakeholders and marginalised groups in VNRs and SDGs

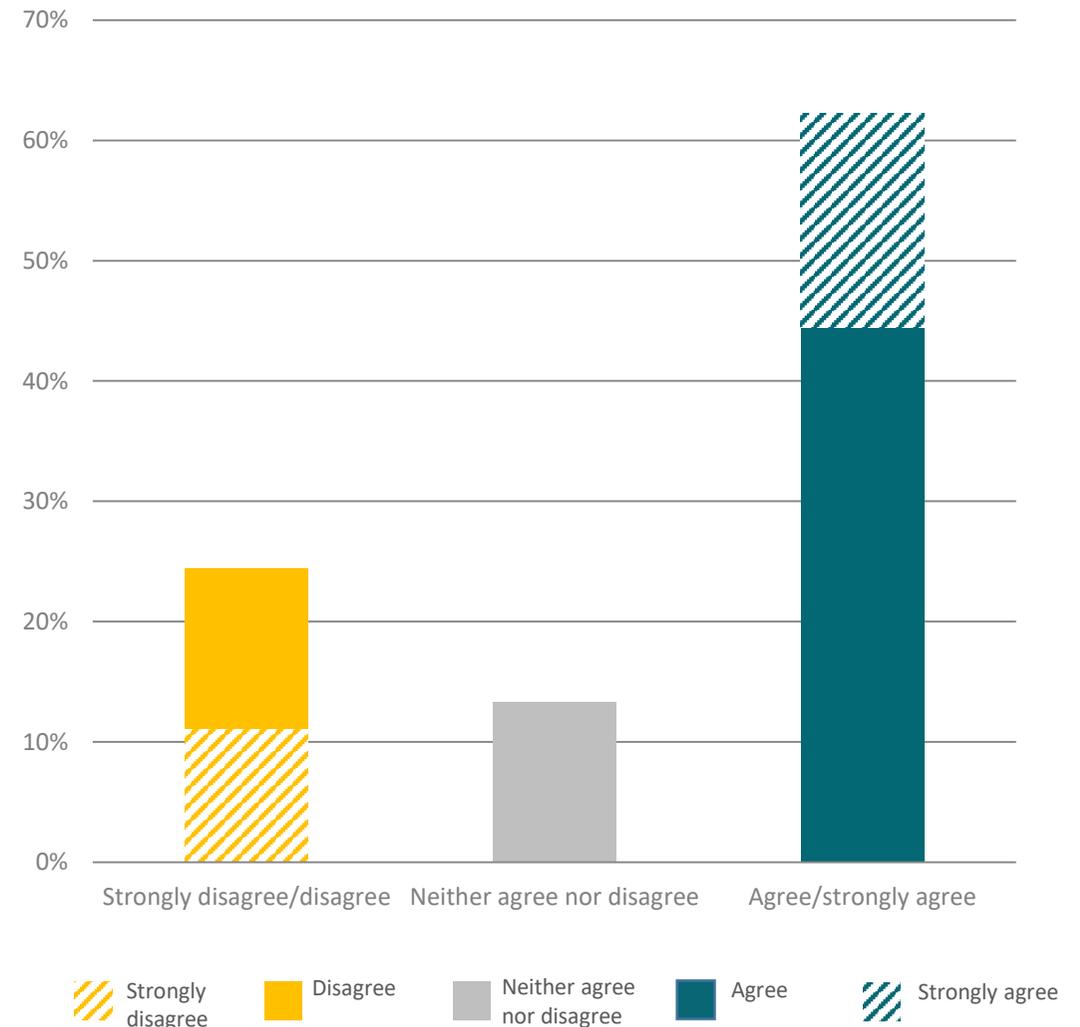
5.1 Stakeholder participation in VNR processes

62% of 45 respondents agreed (agreed or strongly agreed) that civil society and other stakeholders were involved in the preparation of their country's VNR, while 24% disagreed (disagreed or strongly disagreed).

This is an increase from 2018, when only 49% agreed with the statement (worded instead in the present tense) that 'civil society and other stakeholders are involved in the preparation of their country's VNR'.

The survey questions, though, do not allow us to say how far this involvement amounted to meaningful *influence* in the review process.

Civil society and other stakeholders were involved in the preparation of the VNR in my country



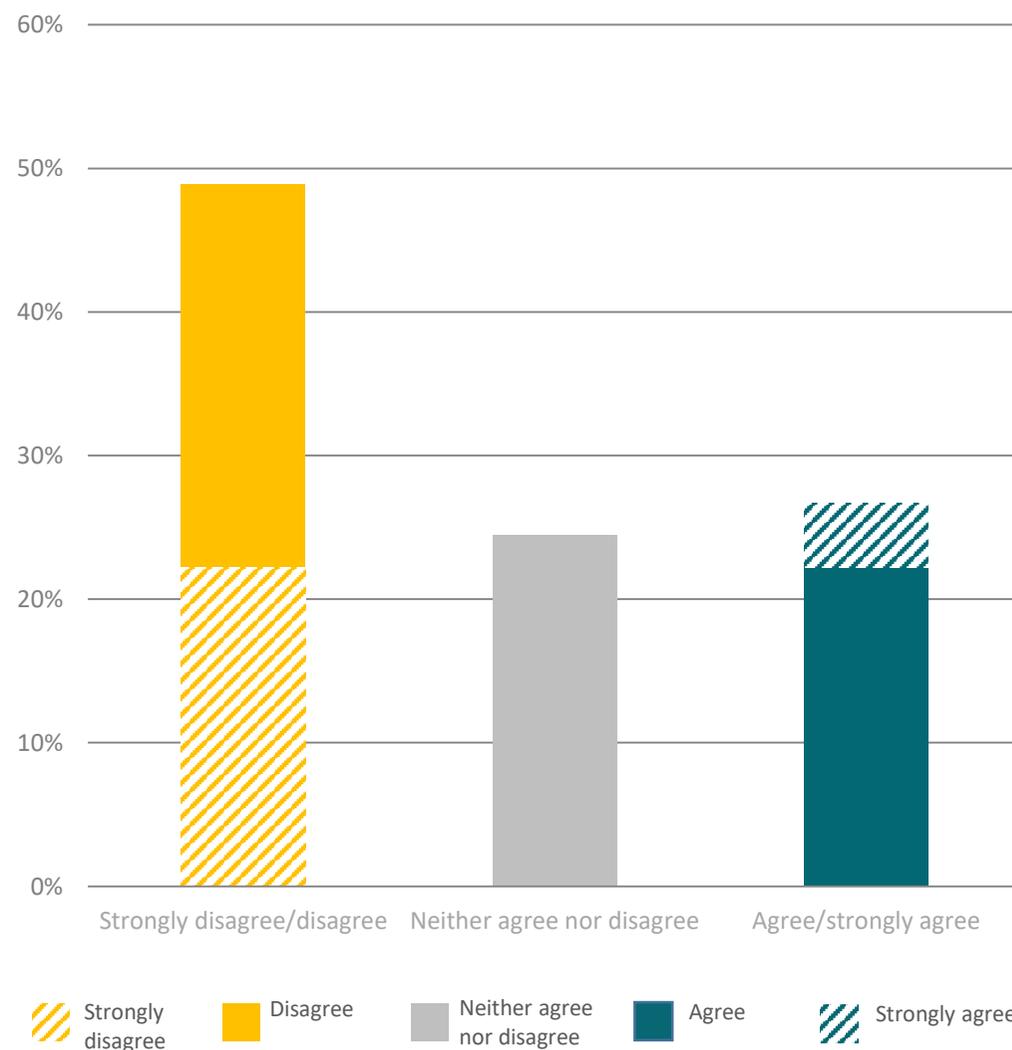
5.2 Inclusion of vulnerable/marginalised groups in VNRs

Respondents were asked about their perceptions of the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups, since the inclusion of these groups is a key principle of SDG follow up and review (para 74c of the 2030 Agenda).

Only 27% of the 45 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the most vulnerable and marginalised are being included in follow up and review processes, while 49% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is an improvement – but from a very low base – from a figure of 14% in 2018.

The continuing low level of involvement of these groups suggests that the core principle of ‘leave no one behind’ within Agenda 2030 is not being implemented in review processes. This, in turn, raises the question of how far “leave no one behind” is being taken into account in national implementation efforts.

The most vulnerable and/or marginalised groups within my country were included in the preparation of the VNR



Observations

Respondents were additionally given the option to add comments on the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Some representative responses can be seen on the right.

‘The VNR report has been prepared amongst closed circles within the government, and very few broad-based consultations have been held (conferred with many NGOs and INGOs in my country to reconfirm). People affected by government policies were not prioritized in the handful of meetings that were called by the government. ‘

‘la cible la plus vulnérable étant les femmes indigentes, sont généralement absentes dans les réunions pour les prises de décision’.

(‘the most vulnerable target, destitute women, are usually absent in meetings for decision-making’).

‘Les groupes vulnérables notamment les personnes handicapées sont peu consultées à la formulation des projets et programmes de développement, leur participation ne répondant pour le plus souvent su, à une simple formalité (ateliers de validations)’.

(‘Vulnerable groups, particularly people with disabilities, are poorly consulted in the formulation of development projects and programs, as their participation is often only a matter of formality (validation workshops).’)

5.3 Obstacles to civil society participation in VNRs

Respondents were asked about obstacles to their participation in their country's VNR. This was an open question, giving participants the opportunity to identify both internal and external obstacles.

The most common obstacles were around lack of information and not being given the opportunity to participate. Other obstacles included lack of funds and language barriers. In addition, a number of respondents noted that they did not face any obstacles.

Some representative responses can be seen on the right.

'Absence de consultations, manque d'informations, méconnaissance du mécanisme (RNV) '.

('Absence of consultations, lack of information, lack of knowledge of the mechanism (VNR)').

'We have participated in the big national consultation the state has organized. However, neither the resulting documents nor any information about the process have been shared with us. '

'Only government official prepare such tasks and very rarely they engage communities'

'Not being informed by the government about the schedule of consultations, unless I repeatedly call their office asking for information and manifesting interest to participate'

'Main obstacle was lack of information because the draft report was not shared and we got the final version'.

5.4 Good practice

A further open comment field invited examples of good practice. This year, roughly the same number of respondents identified examples of good practice as had identified obstacles. This stands in contrast to 2018, when there were far fewer examples of good practice than obstacles identified.

A sample of the responses can be seen to the right.

‘OUI , des forums ont été réalisés des commissions ont travaillé sur les objectifs ODD liés a la vocation des chaque ou groupe de ministères des réunions pour rectifier ou modifier le rapport en présence de la société civile’
(‘YES, forums have been made and commissions have worked on SDG objectives related to the vocation of individual ministries or groups of ministries, via meetings, in order to rectify or modify the report in the presence of civil society’).

‘The final draft of our VNR was done by civil Society and approved by the government’.

‘During consultations, they listened and noted the input and feedback of the participants. The representatives explained the process and content of the VNR and answered questions to the best of their abilities. Overall, there was effort on the government’s part to listen and include civil society, private sector, and children and youth in the process.’

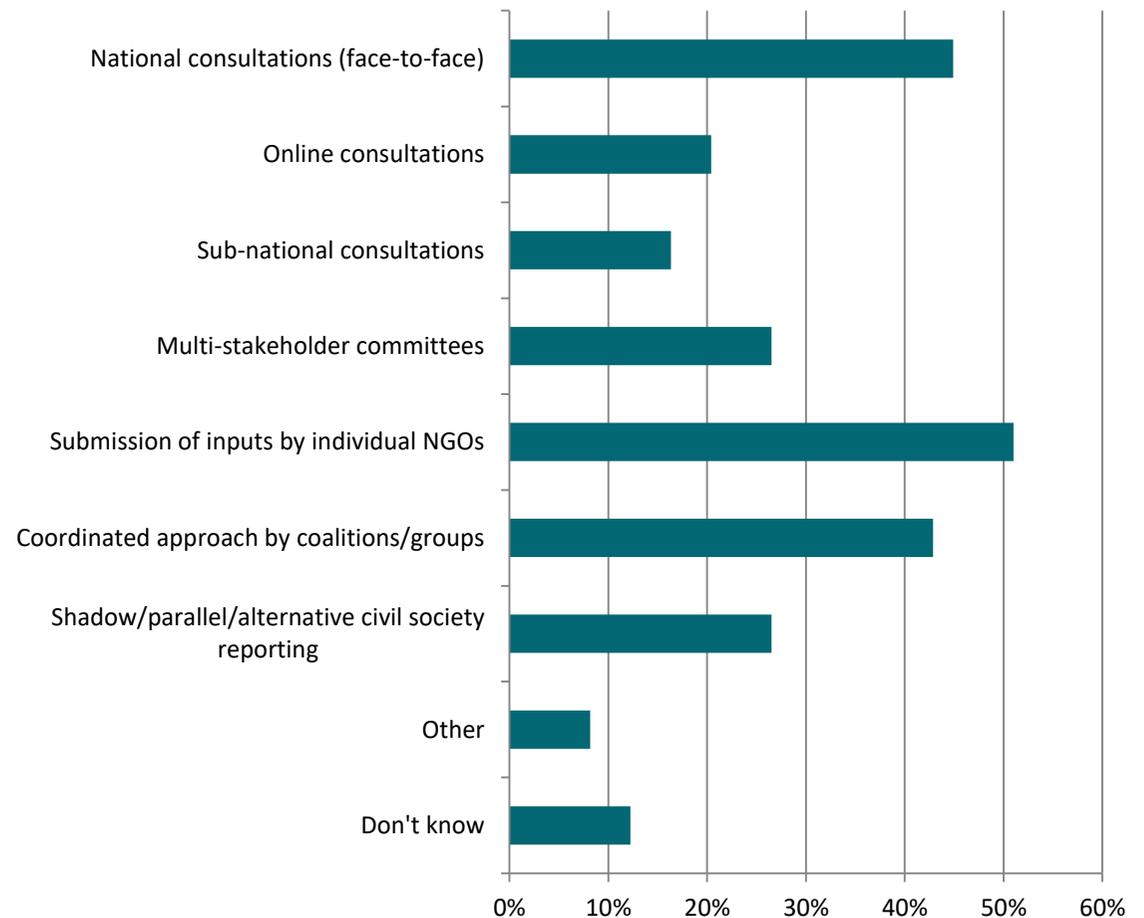
5.5 Mechanisms for engagement in VNRs

As in previous years, questions were included on how stakeholders have engaged with the VNR process, and how they would like to have engaged.

The most common ways that the 49 respondents said that stakeholders had engaged were submission of inputs by individual NGOs (51%), national face-to-face consultations (45%), and coordinated approach by coalitions/groups (43%) (see graph on right).

As above, a question for further research is how far engagement by these channels had resulted in genuine influence on the process or results of the review.

How did civil society and other stakeholders engage in the VNR process in your country?



How stakeholders would like to engage in VNRs

The second question about engagement asked ‘How would you have liked your government to have involved you in your country's Voluntary National Review process?’ (amended from last year’s question to be presented in the past tense). The response format was amended this year to allow respondents to write their own description of up to three mechanisms.

A selection of responses is shown on the right.

‘By engaging at the start of the process to help define the process’.

‘I would have liked more strategically located sessions around the country rather than just one review session in the capital.’

‘Institutionalize mechanisms for meaningful civil society participation in the review process. One of the simplest is to issue a template for reporting so CSOs can submit their inputs and have the chance to be considered and incorporated.’

‘I would have liked for more specific targeting of diverse local NGOs to really cull out accurate information.’

‘Publicly announcing the stakeholders and their respective roles ‘

‘prendre notre organisation dans le cadre du suivi de la mise en œuvre des ODD Agenda 2030’.
(‘take our organisation as part of monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda SDGs).

‘Attend the meetings on an equal footing, with a more transparent participation process’.

5.6 Stakeholder participation in implementation of SDGs

This year, new questions were added around stakeholder participation in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, beyond involvement in the VNR process.

We asked firstly for whether respondents had seen examples of good practice of governments' collaboration with civil society and other stakeholders in the implementation and for such good practices to be identified, and secondly for how respondents would additionally like their government to involve them.

Many respondents answered that there were no good practices to highlight, or used their response to highlight problems. A sample of some of the good practices identified is shown on the right.

'Civil society are represented on both coordination and technical committees working on the implementation of Ghana's SDGs to the extent that an SDGs Indicator Baseline report has been developed to help track progress of the goals.'

'There is an office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs which works with the private sector and civil society organization around mobilisation.'

'The Government has created a National CSR Foundation under a Finance Bill (2008) to provide project fund to NGOs'.

'sim, em 2018 o governo brasileiro organizou o prêmio ODS onde pode conhecer várias boas iniciativas de prefeituras e organizações da sociedade civil'.

'yes, in 2018 the Brazilian government organised the SDG award where it can learn about several good initiatives from local governments and civil society organisations.'

'The access to information and regular government reporting mechanism accessibility, coupled with Civil Society collaboration with other non state actors, has greatly contributed good and positive practices which in turn has contributed towards achievement of Agenda 2030'.

How stakeholders would like to engage in the implementation of SDGs

We asked respondents how they would like their governments to involve them in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

While some respondents simply expressed their wish to be involved, or their concerns that they would not be, many made specific suggestions. A sample of these are shown on the right.

These open questions on good practice in review and implementation yielded a rich set of responses that can't be fully summarised here, but will be addressed in future research.

'Inform us of activities for the SDGs, especially those involving review of targets and indicators, implementation, progress, and accountability. Make us part of the proposed Sub-Committee on SDGs. Include, recognize, and harmonize the efforts of civil society organizations in implementing the SDGs, including data and research generated. Have a clear plan for SDG implementation and how civil society can participate.'

'We are the world's first UN recognised Local2030 Hub. We are a replicable, apolitical, independent city-level platform to accelerate awareness, collaboration and impact. Govt could learn from our successes and failures.'

'By strengthening the partnership at the local or sub-national levels where the interventions occur'.

'Sector based development action plan would be great so that sectors from government organizations will collaborate with the existing INGOs, NGOs and CSOs and also strongly encourage for greater and expended collaboration'.



6. Progress since past VNRs

Perceptions on national progress since past VNRs

Respondents were asked about progress since the last VNR in seven areas (see box to right), rating progress from least (no progress) to greatest (great progress), on a five point scale. The graph on the following page displays the responses (all figures exclude the 'don't knows').

Overall, there is no evidence here of the SDG implementation gathering momentum. In six of the seven areas, over 40% of respondents saw little or no progress, and in three areas – public awareness, political leadership, and increased budgets – the figure is over half (51%, 52% and 58% respectively). The exception was civil society engagement, where 35% of respondents saw little or no progress.

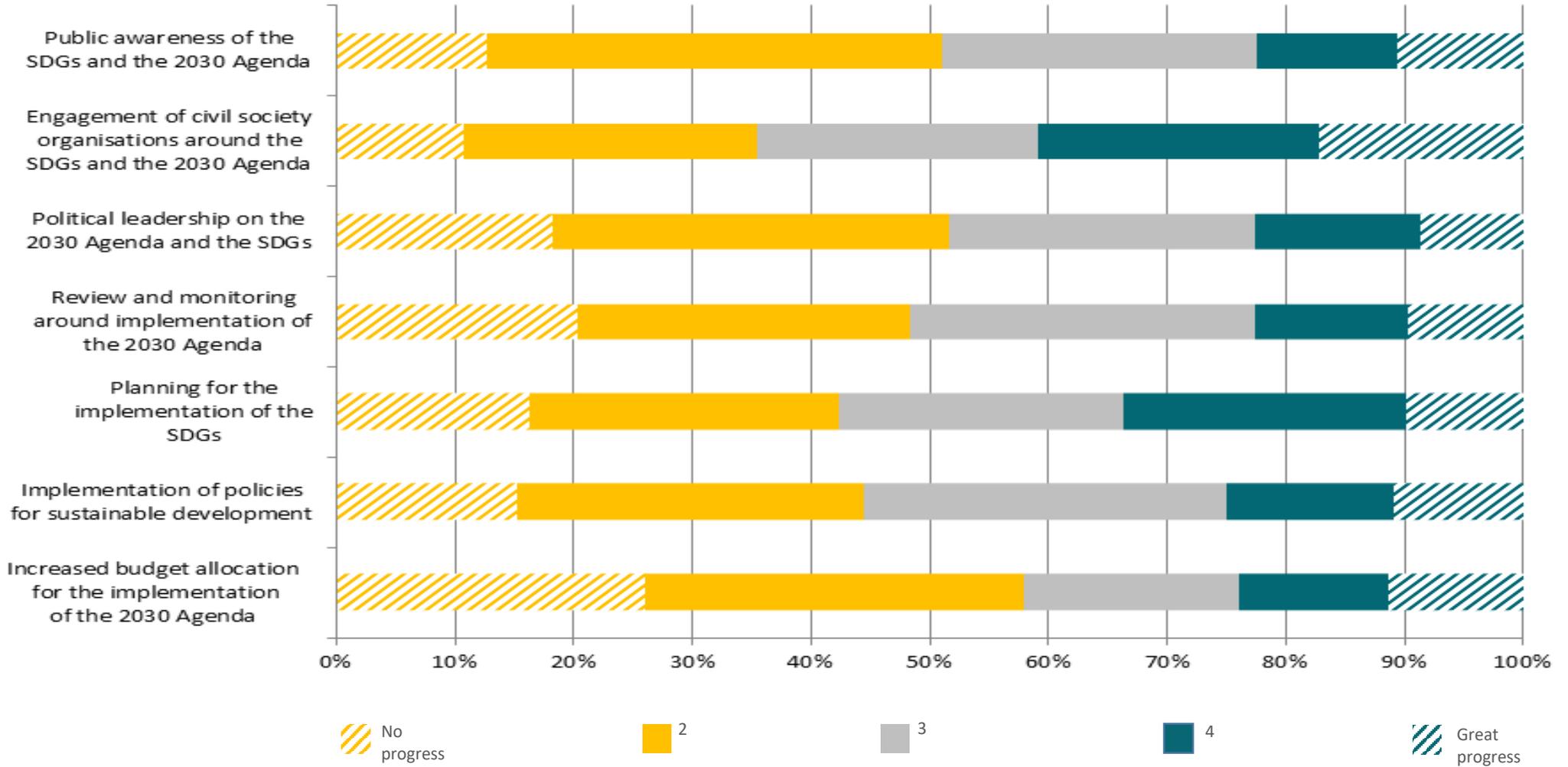
In terms of respondents who saw good or great progress, the most positive areas are civil society engagement (41%) and planning (34%). In the other five areas, only 22-25% of respondents saw good or great progress.

In the areas of political leadership, review and monitoring, and planning, respondents saw notably less progress than they had last year.

The seven areas of progress:

- **Public awareness of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda**
- **Engagement of civil society organisations around the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda**
- **Political leadership on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs**
- **Review and monitoring around implementation of the 2030 Agenda**
- **Planning for the implementation of the SDGs**
- **Implementation of policies for sustainable development**
- **Increased budget allocation for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda**

Since your country's VNR, please rate your perception of these aspects of your country's progress in implementation of the 2030 Agenda



Number of respondents varies slightly by area: average=92 (excluding 'don't knows')

Observations on progress

A box was included in the survey for respondents to comment on progress in implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Some raised similar points to those identified elsewhere in the survey, such as political will, while others considered other issues.

‘Si bien la Agenda 2030 es un compromiso de Estado, los cambios de gobiernos, inevitablemente, influyen en los avances.’

‘While the 2030 Agenda is a commitment of the State, changes in governments inevitably influence progress.’

‘The knowledge of SDGs is still very low among political decision makers. A lot needs to be done!’

‘The challenge we have is too many competing needs for few resources’.

‘Public awareness of the SDGs continues to be dismal.’

Regional disparities in progress

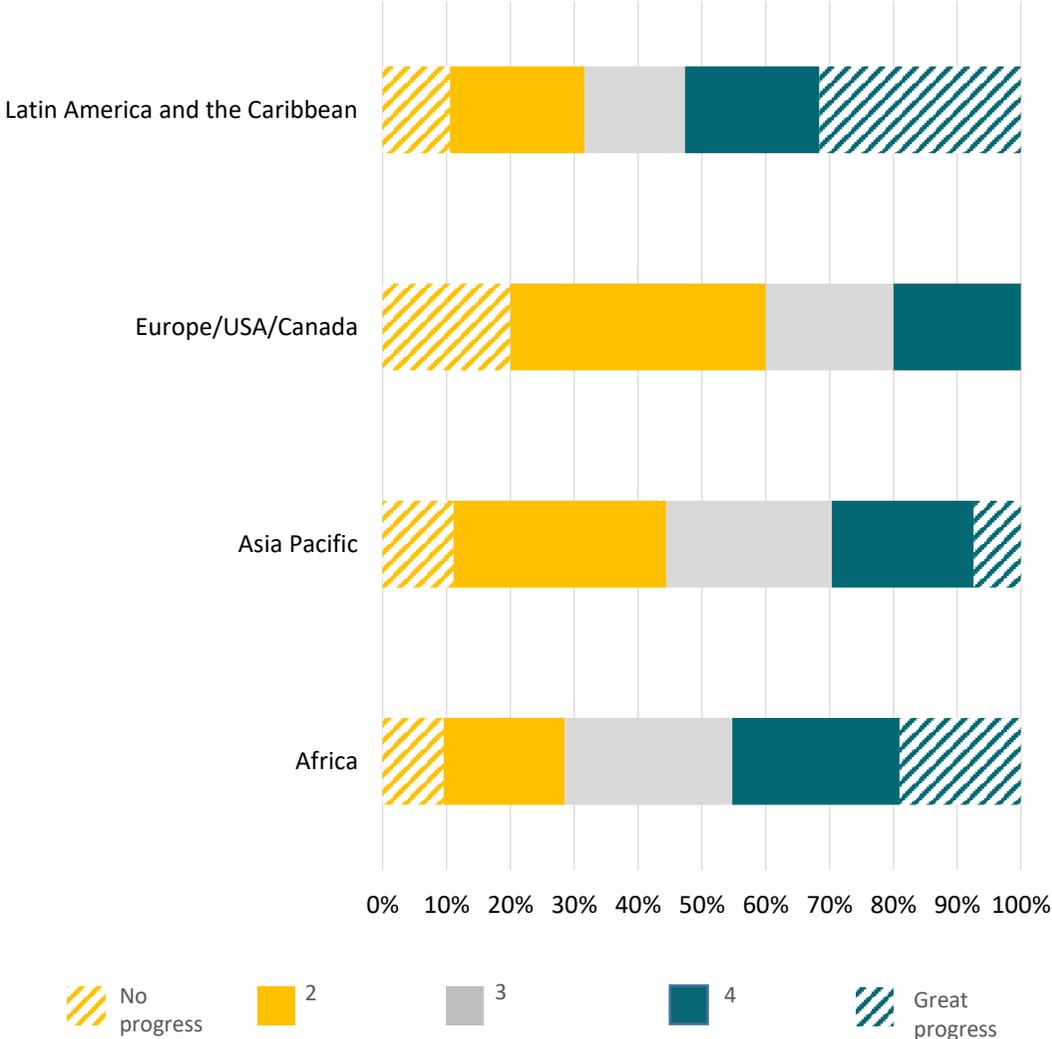
The data allows us to contrast responses for different regions. The largest differences between regions are in the areas of *engagement of civil society, political leadership, and implementation*. See charts on this page and the following two pages.

Overall, Africa did best in terms of progress as reported by respondents: it scored either the lowest numbers of 1s and 2s (little or no progress) and/or the highest number of 4s and 5s (good or great progress) in every one of the 7 areas asked about.

On *engagement of civil society*, 53% of respondents from Latin America and the Caribbean felt there had been good or great progress (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale) compared to only 30% of respondents from Asia Pacific and 20% of respondents from Europe/USA/Canada (although it should be noted that there were only 5 respondents from this latter region).

Respondents by region (excluding 'don't knows'):
 Latin America and the Caribbean - 19;
 Europe/USA/Canada - 5, Asia-Pacific - 27; Africa – 42.

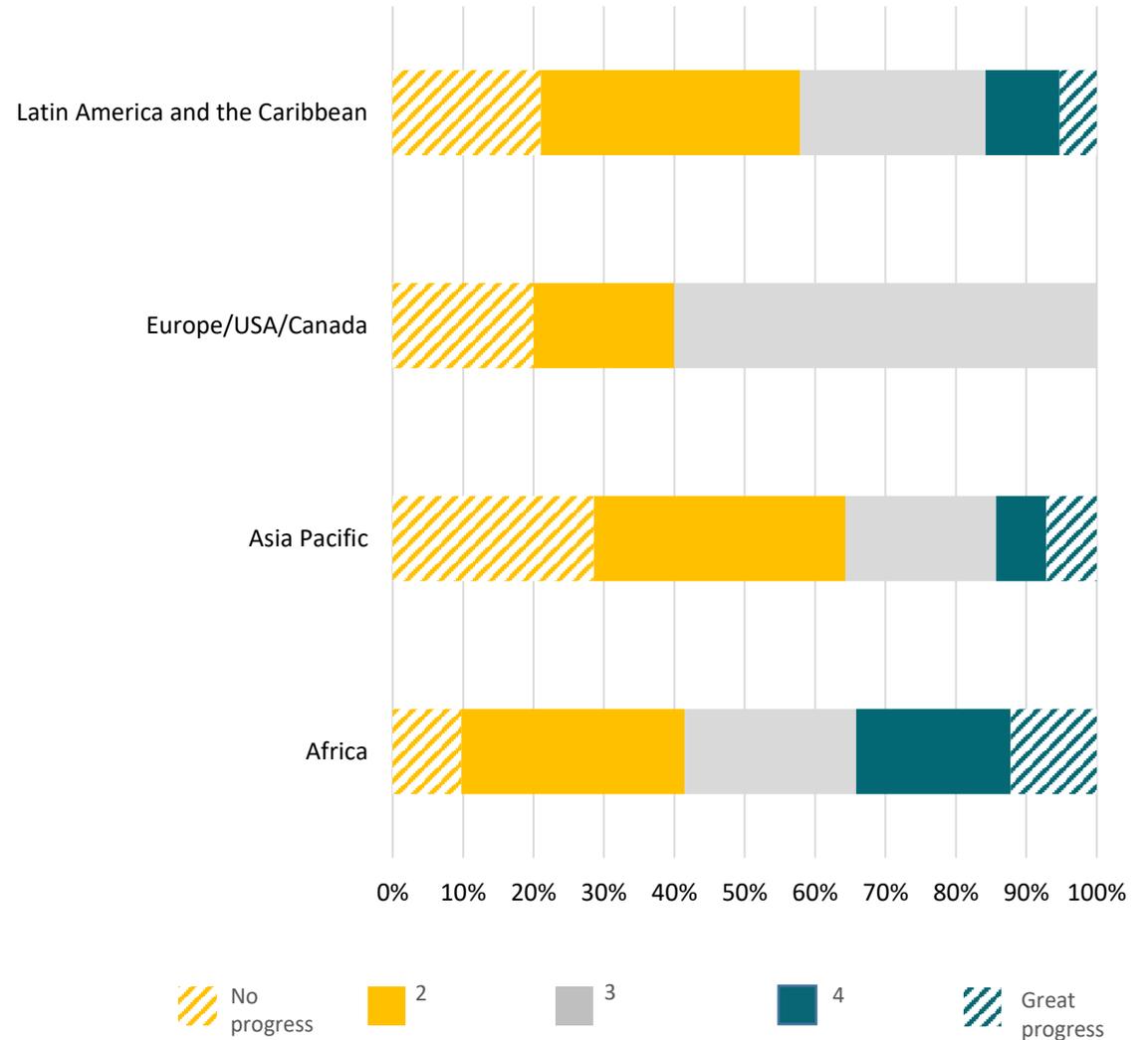
Perceived progress: Engagement of civil society organisations around the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda



34% of respondents in Africa reported good or great progress (4 or 5 on the 5-point scale) on *political leadership*, while only 14% of respondents in Asia Pacific, and none of the 5 respondents from Europe/USA/Canada, gave a score of 4 or more in this area.

Respondents by region (excluding 'don't knows'): Latin America and the Caribbean - 19; Europe/USA/Canada - 5, Asia-Pacific - 28; Africa – 41.

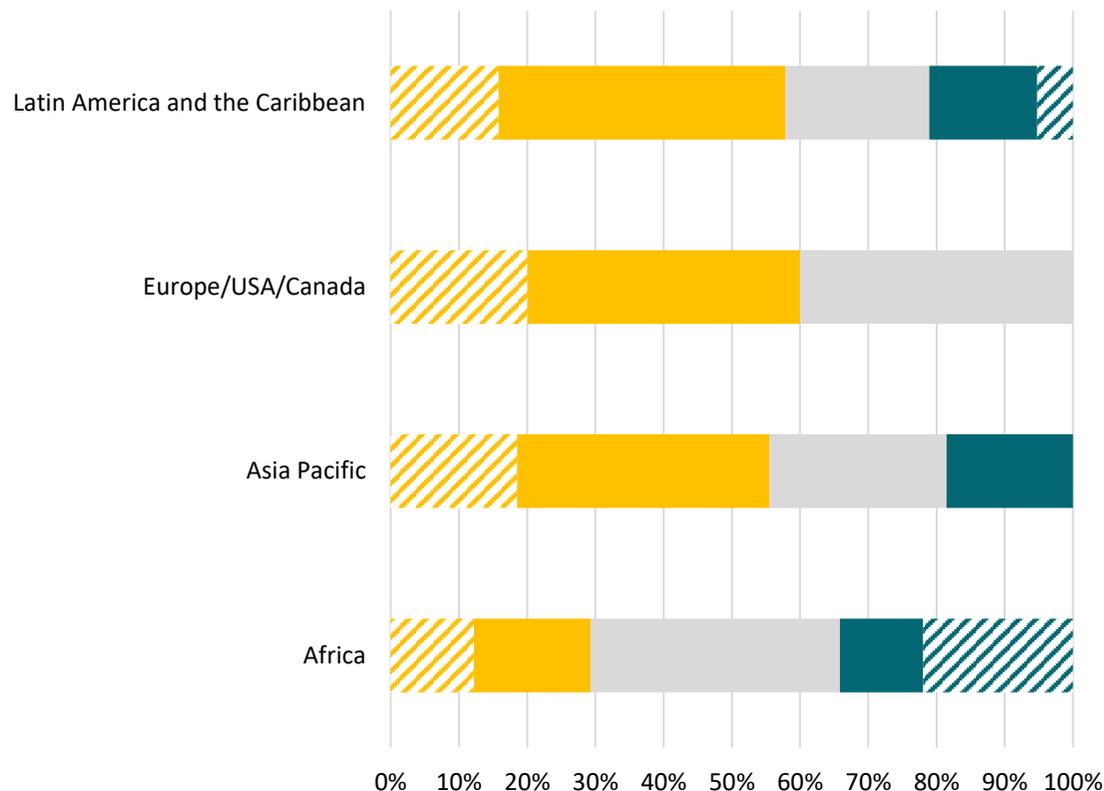
Perceived progress: Political leadership on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs



On implementation of policies for sustainable development, Africa was judged significantly better on progress by respondents than the other regions. Only 29% of respondents from Africa thought there had been little or no progress (1 or 2 on the 5-point scale) in this area, while the figure in all other regions was 56-60%; and 34 % of respondents from Africa saw good or great progress (4 or 5 on the scale) while this figure fell to 19-21% in Latin America and the Caribbean and in Asia Pacific, and to zero in Europe/USA/Canada.

Respondents by region (excluding 'don't knows'): Latin America and the Caribbean - 19; Europe/USA/Canada - 5, Asia-Pacific - 27; Africa - 41.

Perceived progress: Implementation of policies for sustainable development



7. Conclusions and recommendations

On VNR awareness and participation

As last year, **awareness** of VNRs and national planning is relatively high, but knowledge of national VNR processes is much lower. While 92% of respondents in VNR countries reported being aware that their country is undertaking a review, awareness of the VNR process itself remains low – albeit improved from last year – at 58%. As the first four-year review cycle of the SDGs comes to an end, these figures indicate that participatory and transparent follow up processes in reporting countries remain lacking, even though some progress has been made.

Participation of stakeholders in general has improved, although many respondents expressed frustration at a lack of information and a lack of opportunity to participate.

Participation and awareness are both higher than last year, but we cannot tell how far this is due to improved processes, and how far to better self-organisation amongst stakeholders.

On VNRs driving national implementation

This year's respondents report that they have seen relatively little progress across all areas following previous VNRs. In most areas, only 22-25% of respondents saw good or great progress, and in only one area - civil society engagement - did more than 40% of respondents overall report good or great progress.

The lack of progress across all areas is a cause for concern. The survey suggests that the VNRs are failing to catalyse the necessary action towards the achievement of the SDGs. There is no evidence here of civil society engagement being harnessed to drive implementation or matched by new political leadership or wider public awareness.

Recommendations

- Governments should establish participatory and inclusive national review processes that maximise the chance for meaningful engagement by stakeholders. Best practices, lessons and challenges in this area should be a focus for future research.
- Civil society organisations should increasingly work together, through formal or informal coalitions, to ensure that there is clarity and transparency about how the government can engage the sector.
- Further consideration should be given to how VNRs can successfully catalyse policy change, political will and public awareness in reporting countries. Peer-learning, commitment, and leadership amongst states is required to enable governments and stakeholders to make the best use of VNRs as policy windows to drive longer term transformation.

On participation of vulnerable groups

The main area of concern remains the lack of improvement in the involvement of **those 'left behind'**. Four years in, only 27% of respondents find their VNR process to be inclusive of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups. Although 'Leave No-one Behind' is a key commitment of the SDGs, and a guiding principle for follow up and review processes at all levels, the survey indicates that this is still not reflected in this year's VNR country contexts.

On varied practice in VNRs

It is clear that the quality of VNR processes is very uneven. Some respondents identified examples of excellent practice – e.g. direct involvement in the drafting of the VNR, CSO presence in national SDG committees and structures, and government responsiveness to detailed written comments on draft VNRs. Others, however, experienced closed and rushed VNR processes with little flow of information from governments and no chance for participation.

Questions to be answered

The background to the launch of this report is a **striking disconnect** at the four-year point between the narrative of positive progress reported by states in their VNRs, and the insufficient world-wide progress to meet the *global* targets by 2030. The causes of this fundamental tension, and how it could be resolved, lie beyond this report.

Nevertheless, the report identifies some potential factors that need further investigation.

- If left behind groups are not included in national review, we might expect *review* to fail to address the situation of the worst off, most vulnerable and marginalised, but it is unclear, yet, whether this reflects a *deeper failure* to grapple with "leave no one behind" in implementation. Future research could also identify particular groups that might be left behind in different contexts.

Recommendations

- Governments should make determined efforts to ensure that vulnerable and marginalised groups are fully involved in the preparation of the VNR reports.
- Governments should develop and publish Leave No One Behind engagement strategies, which create transparency and awareness of how the voice of those 'left behind' can feed into the national development discourse.
- Greater attention should be paid in future review of VNR reports to the processes countries established for preparing their reports and how inclusive these were.
- Despite greater knowledge and engagement from stakeholders, we cannot tell how far that stakeholder engagement is broad and meaningful, so that it generates more rigorous review and spurring more ambitious implementation – both of which are needed to resolve this disconnect.
- Lastly, our report speaks to the uneven quality of VNR processes, and their limited effectiveness in accelerating implementation. Both of these are areas where further work needs to be undertaken to identify best practice – and poor practice – and to make this best practice the global norm.

Together 2030 - *from policy to action*

Together 2030 is a civil society initiative that promotes national implementation and track progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Initiative, set up in December 2015, aims at generating knowledge and project voices from different civil society and stakeholders around the world on the challenges and opportunities for the 2030 Agenda. Together 2030 brings together actors to discuss the way to formulate and implement roadmaps at the national level and hold governments to account at all levels.

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