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"Stakeholder Engagement in the VNR Process"

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Part I: Introduction

It is my pleasure to be here. I want to thank ECLAC and this Community of Practices for having me here, sharing some findings of Cepei's work on Stakeholder Engagement in the VNR Process analysis, good practices, and lessons learned.

My name is Javier Surasky, and I am the Program Officer of the Governance for Sustainable Development of Cepei, an independent Global South think tank established in two thousand and two and headquartered in Colombia.

Based on data and analysis, Cepei empowers people and institutions to find pathways towards sustainable development. Even when our activity is primarily focused on Latin America and the Caribbean, we work globally.

Today, my presentation will be focused on three critical questions regarding stakeholders' engagement in the VNRs building process

1. Why is it necessary and efficient to engage stakeholders in the VNR building?
2. Who are the stakeholders?
3. How to engage stakeholders in a meaningful way?

Finally, I will close my participation with some short conclusions.

Question one: Why is it necessary and efficient to engage stakeholders in the VNR building?

There are many formal and practical reasons to include stakeholders in the VNR building process.

Starting with formal reasons, we can underline three main points:

FIRST: Actively engaging stakeholders is aligned with the 2030 Agenda text and spirit: The 2030 Agenda Preamble states, "This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom (...) All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan."

SECOND: Actively engaging stakeholders is a way to fulfill the commitment made in the 2030 Agenda: Article 74.d establishes that the "Follow-up and review processes at all levels will be guided by the following principles... They will be open, inclusive, participatory, and transparent for all people and will support reporting by all relevant stakeholders."

THIRD: Actively engaging stakeholders implies action on one of the areas identified by the 2030 Agenda as "of critical importance for humanity and the planet," best known as the five Ps. When referring to partnership, governments made clear their determination "to mobilize the means required to implement this Agenda through a revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, (...) with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people."

Concerning practical reasons to include multistakeholder in the VNR process, I will also highlight three critical issues.

NUMBER ONE: Stakeholders' engagement promotes ownership and awareness-raising on government efforts to implement the SDGs.

NUMBER TWO: Stakeholders' engagement enlarges the availability of helpful resources, such as financing, technical expertise, analytical assets, and data.

NUMBER THREE: Stakeholders' engagement leads to more cohesive reports. Different stakeholders bring to the discussion their interest issues, promoting a more integrated approach to sustainable development.

If you want, we can come back to any of these issues later. I think the six points I have mentioned are obvious and prefer to devote the necessary time to the following two areas, who are the stakeholder to be engaged? And how to engage them successfully and meaningfully?

When we talk about stakeholders, we usually think of some prominent implementation partners broadly recognized in the 2030 Agenda. Namely: civil society, the private sector, and the academy. Usually, in a debatable decision, local governments are also included among stakeholders.

However, that is a minimal list, and, of course, it is incomplete.

As we know, the 2030 Agenda is a global plan requiring national implementation. Its paragraph five states that the agenda "is accepted by all countries, and is applicable to all, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities."

How does this localization connect with multistakeholder identification at the country level? Stakeholders are not the same in every country at every moment. To rightly identify them is part of the VNR process. Creating a balance between them, their work areas, and their geographical representation is part of the VNR process challenge.

It could be helpful to bear in mind some essential notions while identifying stakeholders to be involved in the exercise:

Civil society is broader than NGOs and NGOs' platforms. It can include, for example, worker unions, university-students' bodies, and professional associations.

Unions are vital in evaluating the SDG 8 on Economic Growth and decent jobs. When companies are part of the VNR process, and unions are not, it creates a notorious disbalance. University-students' bodies could have a lot to say to evaluate the SDG 4 on quality education.

Considering the SDGs' interdependence, excluding those stakeholders would affect the entire VNR process.

In many cases, parliaments, the judiciary, and other governmental institutions such as human rights bodies and supreme audit institutions play significant roles in the SDGs implementation. They would have been heading awareness-raising projects, establishing programs to align their work with the 2030 Agenda, and creating internal operative processes to ensure that the 2030 Agenda principles are considered in their decisions, among a wide range of possible activities. Of course, a VNR could approach their activities as part of State actions and not as stakeholders' contributions. There is no one way to consider them, but they would participate in any multistakeholder dialogue without any doubt.

The stakeholder identification exercise is closely linked to a national vulnerabilities and gaps analysis.

Which groups are being left behind in your country?

Are they organized in some way?

If they have any representation, it should be part of the process. Instead of "giving voice" to the vulnerable groups, let them talk because they have their own voice and exciting perspectives on how the SDGs' implementation affects their lives and what to do to improve them.

To include the UN system at the national and regional levels, representatives, and other international cooperation partners at the VNR dialogues could enrich the results and provide an "external" point of view on the country's efforts.

To invite stakeholders is the first step, but it is far from including them.

Let be clear: Inclusive participation means meaningful participation. Strengthening stakeholder capacities to participate in the VNR building process would be necessary, primarily when referring to vulnerable groups' representation.

The last point leads us to our final question: How to engage stakeholders in a meaningful way?

Six years after the 2030 Agenda adoption, we have good practices and lessons learned on stakeholders' engagement to share. Let me bring some examples, starting by *engaging state brunches*.

1. Costa Rica's Judiciary Brunch signed the "National Pact for the SDGs" in 20-16. To institutionalize its commitment, it created an SDGs promotion governance scheme led by the President of the Supreme Court of Justice. As a result, the Supreme Court adopted a Declaration of Institutional Interest of the SDGs, encouraging judicial bodies to promote SDGs compliance into their annual budgets, and aligned the Supreme Court of Justice decisions with the SDGs. Besides, The Judiciary annually publishes a Voluntary Accountability Report on progress in implementing the SDGs.

2. Georgia's Parliament adopted in 2019 a Strategy for Supporting and Monitoring SDGs' national implementation. With technical assistance from UN in-country agencies, parliamentarians developed the "youth policy concept 2030", the country's primary document determining youth policy development for the next ten years. Additionally, this legislative body joined the Open Government Partnership to promote responsible practices, resulting in its building infrastructure adaptation to the needs of people with physical and sensory disabilities and a customized Parliament website for users with disabilities.

3. In 2008, well before the 2030 Agenda adoption, Hungary created the Office of the Ombudsman for Future Generations, tasked to advocate the interests of future generations at the national level, defend the rights to a healthy environment and the preservation of physical and mental health in connection with sustainable development, and to protect the environmental and cultural heritage of the nation. During the VNR process, the Ombudsman supported non-state actor participation and provided recommendations on specific SDGs included in the VNR Report.

Regarding non-governmental stakeholders engagement good examples, we can underline

4. The Denmark private sector engagement. In that country, a business community initiative partnered with the national statistics office to identify better ways to measure the impacts of SDGs related initiatives. The final goal of this work was to create a multi-stakeholder-based dataset to support evidence-based decision-making and the preparation of the government's annual SDGs progress review.

5. In Jamaica, local authorities participated in building the National Development Plan "Vision 2030 Jamaica" and its implementation strategy, the "Medium-Term Socio-Economic Policy Framework (20.18-20.21)." Local governments also joined the European Union-funded project named "Strengthening local government's role as a partner in development" to help local authorities build leadership, institutional and operational capacities to implement the SDGs.

Besides, the number of VNRs transcribing the inputs provided by civil society or opening a space for their representatives to write a short text to be included as part of the VNR is increasing.

6. From a different perspective, the Vanuatu 2019 VNR Report was the first to be peer-reviewed. The government gathered a review team that analyzed the first draft of the Voluntary National Report, providing feedback and recommendations. Senior officials from Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Australia, and a civil society representative from Fiji integrated the review team, assisted by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Reviewers

held consultations with the Vanuatuan government, civil society, the private sector, and international development partners. The final document produced by the experts was shared with all the interviewees to ensure the process's transparency and accountability.

A third issue is related to the VNR exercise. We also have good practices on this.

7. As part of the VNR building process, the government of Samoa organized a multistakeholder "data validation week," considered critical to defining the dataset on which reported information lies.

Before the meetings, national authorities shared an indicator matrix draft for input across government, civil society, and private sector stakeholders. Consultations led to a participatory discussion and validation of the existing data and helped identify better data produced by different actors of the Samoan data community. This way, the data presented in the VNR Report is the result of a multistakeholder validation and enrichment process."

8. Iraq established a public set of principles guiding its VNR methodology, including the voluntariness of participation and contribution to the process and the mandate to ensure the process is open and inclusive at every step, developing high-level networking. As a result, the VNR Report building includes inputs directly provided by a broad spectrum on the Iraqi people, taking gender, geographic areas, and vulnerability as three variables of grave concern. This exercise was complemented by inviting external partners to share their VNR building expertise in the process.

And the last two:

9. Greece established an Economic and Social Committee to promote stakeholder consultation on the SDGs, working under a tripartite structure representing the interests of employers, entrepreneurs, public and private sector employees, and other interest groups.

10. In Jordan, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation leads an exercise to design a strategy to strengthen non-state actors' engagement in SDGs implementation. The strategy-building process considered the need to confront practices that could hinder the expected results, such as having the most marginalized groups apart from the discussions or only including the more powerful organizations. As a result, the process was as expansive as possible, and it resulted in a multistakeholder joint adoption of principles to guide Jordan's SDGs reporting process.

In conclusion,

there are many possible ways to promote meaningful stakeholders' engagement in the VNR building process. Learning from previous efforts done by countries around the world seems as necessary as efficient.

We all know that a VNR building exercise should be participative and guided by the "leaving no one behind" mandate. Those are commitments made in the 2030 Agenda, so working in that manner is part of fulfilling their promises.

There are some other "universal facts" that we learned since 2015: stakeholders' meaningful participation has three prerequisites:

1. They should have broad access to information. Awareness-raising campaigns on sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda, and the SDGs are also necessary for the meaningful inclusion of every stakeholder.
2. Stakeholders' financial and human capabilities will require support if they are called to play a meaningful role in the VNR exercises.
3. A clear government policy decision on opening the process to stakeholders should be made and transmitted.

However, each national context is different and has its specificities. As a result, partners identification and engagement are always a national-specific challenge. Once a state assumes the decision of presenting a VNR, its government may need to:

1. Ensure that institutional channels for dialogue with multistakeholder are created and active.
2. Address power inequalities between and within non-governmental partners to guarantee everyone's voice is heard.
3. Identify which vulnerable groups are "invisible" because of a lack of data and bring them into the process.

One more time, thanks for opening Cepei the opportunity to share some of our main findings on stakeholders' engagement with you today. If it helps you to build inclusive VNRs effectively and efficiently, our work is done.

I thank you.