



Stakeholder engagement in VNRs 2015-2019

Four years of the Together 2030/Newcastle University stakeholder perceptions survey

Introduction

Since 2016, Together 2030 and a team from the Politics Department at Newcastle University have collaborated to produce an annual survey on stakeholder participation in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At the end of the first four year “cycle” of review at the High Level Political Forum, this paper brings together and summarises the main trends and findings of the surveys over the years, reflecting on how the survey – and the SDG context – has changed over this period, and where it might go next.

The results of the survey over the four years since 2016 speak to two key tensions at the heart of the SDGs.

- First, the SDGs are universal and global, but nationally owned and implemented. Whilst global reviews have highlighted limited progress and a corresponding need for greater action,¹ VNRs, as presented at the HLPF, have been more positive about concrete national progress and activity – posing the question of how this apparent gap can be explained, and how it could be closed.
- Second, national SDG processes are agreed and controlled by states and governments, even though the SDGs demand much broader ownership by stakeholders. Again, this poses a question, of how, and how far, these two elements – state leadership and control of implementation and review, and meaningful, inclusive participation by stakeholders – can be reconciled in practice.

The survey has addressed both of these areas, yielding evidence on how involved stakeholders have been in national reviews, and whether they see the progress in national implementation that VNRs have often testified to.

Data compared across the surveys show some areas where there are positive trends: especially on growing stakeholder awareness of the system of VNRs. It also reinforces some of the ongoing challenges – translating awareness into inclusive stakeholder participation, and into national progress and planning. Overall, the expectation might be that since 2015, stakeholders have seen

¹See, for example, UN, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals Report of the Secretary-General (special edition)*

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/22700E_2019_XXXX_Report_of_the_SG_on_the_progress_towards_the_SDGs_Special_Edition.pdf

progress across these areas as more countries take on and accelerate implementation and review of the SDGs: however, this is not borne out in our evidence.

Changes - Survey and Context

The survey has changed over the four years of collaboration. In part, this has been driven by a continued drive for clarity and comparability across the questions. Length and simplicity are significant constraints for the survey: it is not possible to ask every interesting question. Over the four years, questions have been swapped in and out to reflect particular concerns, whether a focus on “left behind” groups from 2018 onwards, or a greater focus on implementation (as in 2018 and 2019). These changes are, in part, a response to the changing context for the SDGs. Questions on progress since VNRs become more relevant as more countries have past VNRs to look back on, and questions have had to “branch” to allow for cases where countries have now undertaken multiple VNRs.

There are many methodological challenges for survey work in this context. These should serve as cautions in interpreting the data, but also as challenges for anyone trying to assess national SDG contexts globally and over time. The first is that an online survey offered in three languages (even when accompanied by offline version), distributed by SDG-focused channels is by its nature biased in who will respond. It is, unavoidably given time and budget constraints, most likely to reach those already aware of - and engaged around - the SDGs. It is reasonable to assume that beyond these likely respondents, there is a much larger set of organisations who have lower levels of awareness and participation around the SDGs in all respects.

A second limitation to the survey is the composition of responding stakeholder organisations. The majority of respondents each year, and in total, have identified themselves as being from civil society organisations (roughly 60%). Further questions from 2018 and 2019 indicate that respondents come from a mix of national-level, international, and grassroots organisations.

The third challenge is the variation in countries year-to-year. The fact that different countries are reporting each year means that comparisons across years, and between regions where the responses of sets of countries are summed together, must be taken with caution.

Lastly, in some respects, 2016’s survey (reviewing the 2015-16 VNR cycle) was an outlier in terms of method. Before the partnership had been fully established, statistical capacity was not available to examine the differences between regions: instead, language was the focus of disaggregation. Results in subsequent years did not find clear evidence that responses systematically differed depending on whether respondents answered in English, French or Spanish. From year to year, though, different regions have seen contrasting results.

Trends

In this section, we present areas of progress and challenges. To present the graphical information as simply and comparably as possible, we present only those “agreeing” or “strongly agreeing” (or equivalent) across comparable questions of the four years of the survey. Slight differences in the wording and scoring of these questions across the years - most noticeably between 2016 and 2017 – mean the results should be treated with caution.

A reasonable starting point would be that, as processes and norms for SDG review became more established and understood through subsequent HLPFs, preparatory meetings, stakeholder networks, and UN guidance, we would expect to see stakeholder perceptions improve. The evidence from four years of the survey, however, does not really show this.

Progress - Awareness of VNRs

Both stakeholder awareness of the decision to undertake a VNR (fig. 1 below), and awareness of how a VNR is being conducted by governments (fig. 2) have risen since 2016, though in slightly different patterns. The limited awareness of *how* a VNR is to be conducted - uniformly 30%-40% lower – poses a significant question around the transparency of VNR processes over the last four years.

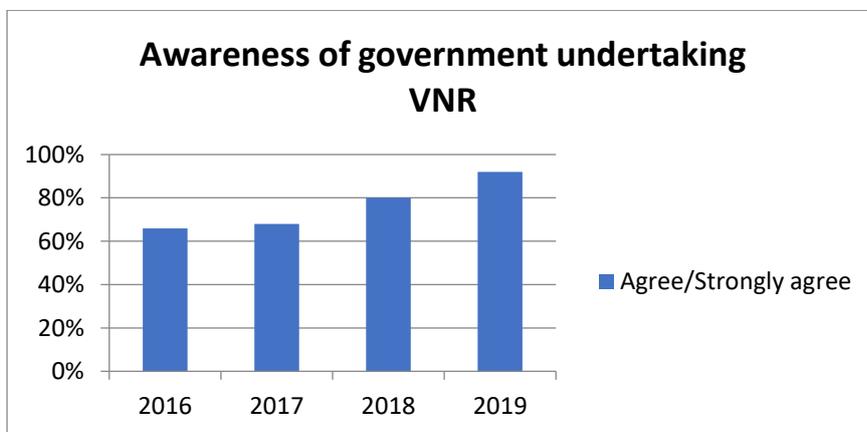


Fig. 1

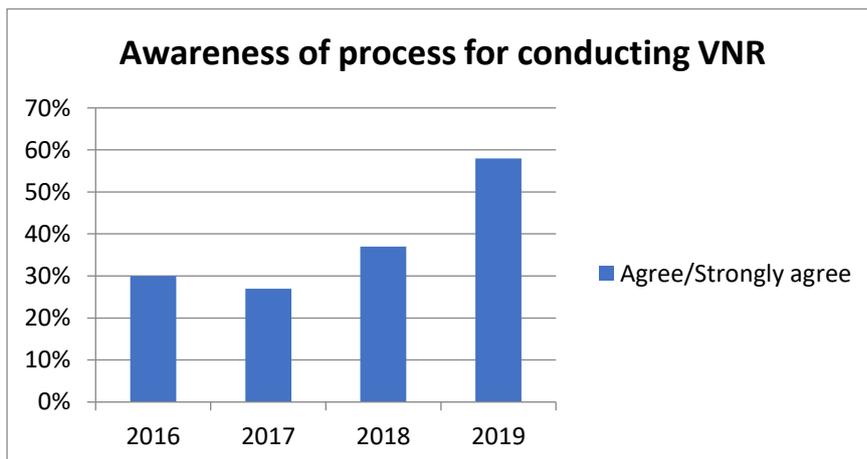


Fig. 2

Nevertheless, there are clear upwards trends in both these areas.

Challenges – engagement and implementation

(i) Stakeholder participation

Trends in other areas year-on-year are far less positive. There is no clear trend in the percentage of stakeholders who felt there were opportunities for meaningful engagement in the VNR (fig. 3):

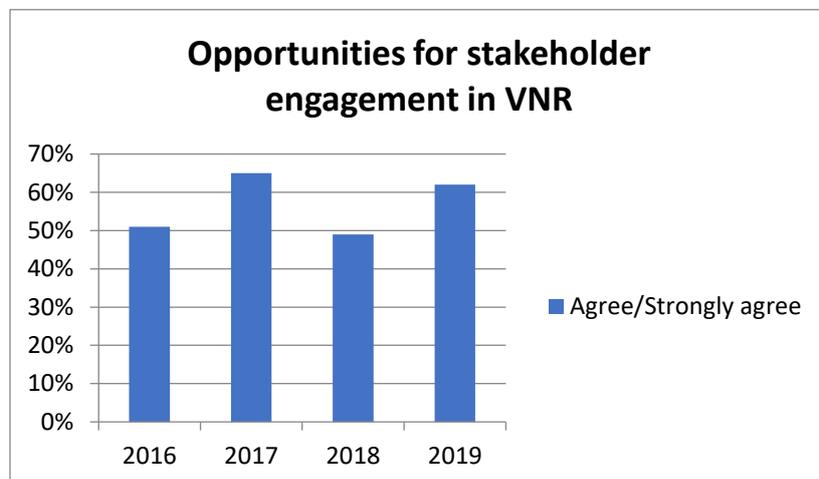


Fig. 3

A problem for the survey over the last four years has been finding the right language to test how far stakeholders were “permitted”, or “able” to participate: these are different, and respondents can interpret both in different ways. In particular, a range of *internal* obstacles - e.g. lack of capacity, funding, or knowledge - can frustrate stakeholder participation, as readily as *external* ones (such as inaccessible processes or poor communication by government).

An open answer question has been asked each year on obstacles to stakeholder engagement with national reviews. A review of the overall pattern of responses, and the summaries of responses in each year’s report, shows a striking, constant set of external challenges. There is no trend of improvement visible in numbers or content of responses between years. Instead, the most common obstacles seem constant: (i) a lack of information and communication from government; (ii) no invitation to be involved in the process; (iii) too little time allowed for stakeholder engagement; and (iv) no feedback on how, if at all, stakeholder engagement has mattered in the final report.

An assessment of the involvement of marginalised groups in review processes, reflecting the SDG commitment to “leave no one behind”, has been a question on the survey only since 2018. Here we see improvement between 2018 and 2019, but from a very low base – from 14% to 27%. This result simply underscores the challenge of including such groups, whilst exclusion from the review process reflects, and constitutes, part of their marginalisation.

(ii) National Implementation

Since 2016, the survey has gathered data on stakeholder perceptions of national plans for implementation, given the centrality of states’ committing to develop “ambitious national responses”² to the SDGs (fig. 4).

² Para 78 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

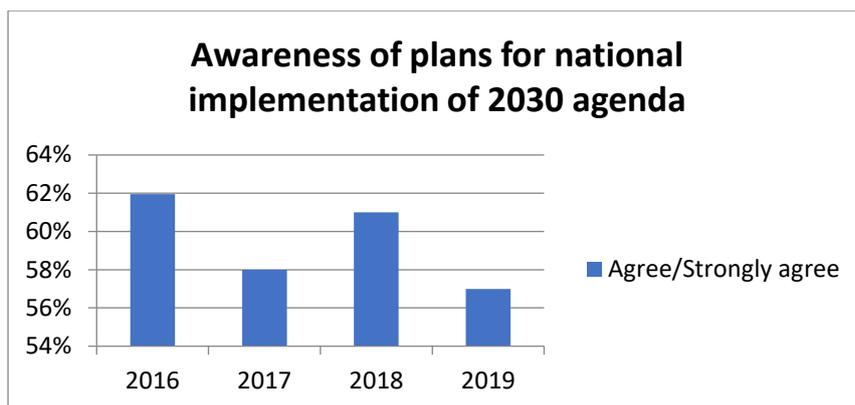


Fig. 4

The close grouping of responses - 54-62% - over the last four years on awareness of national plans indicates that stakeholders have not seen improvement in the public adoption of national responses to the SDGs. It should be noted that given how the question has been phrased in our surveys, limited awareness of plans can indicate that the plan has not been effectively communicated to stakeholders, but also that there simply *is* no plan.

This evidence is supplemented by findings on perceptions of progress since VNRs – asked about in the survey since 2018. Here the trend, across the different components of progress, is unchanged or negative. Beyond progress seen in civil society cooperation – always viewed the most positively – the low levels of progress reported across all aspects of national level implementation since VNRs are striking. The difficulty of translating a commitment to the SDGs into policy change and national finance should not be understated, but it seems that stakeholder perceptions here align much more closely with the UN’s mixed assessment of global progress, than member states’ own VNRs do.

Conclusions

It is perhaps unsurprising that stakeholders see mixed, limited progress in participatory review and implementation of this new and ambitious agenda, four years in. It is important to recognise, too, that the aggregation of responses and the rolling cycle of VNRs can obscure the excellent practice of particular countries. But this picture is still disappointing, indicating that the world is not rising to the challenge of the SDGs, in particular the SDGs’ vision of inclusive, participatory review and ambitious implementation that involves all national stakeholders. The *big* question posed by this data is whether more - and more meaningful - stakeholder involvement could spur more rigorous and catalytic national review, and quicken the pace of implementation (and if not this, then what?). The *smaller* questions ask how this involvement could be achieved: the concrete steps and the best practice needed so that stakeholders in four years’ time will see more progress on the SDGs and more meaningful participation in the processes that should accompany them.

This review report was written by Dr Graham Long and Elizabeth Muggleton from Newcastle University Politics Department for Together 2030, and the draft was reviewed by the core group. Together2030 is grateful to all its members who have participated in the survey since 2016.