



Global Forum 'how to' note

How to assess multi-stakeholder engagement in the VNR process

The following tool proposes indicators that can be used to assess multi-stakeholder engagement (MSE) in the VNR process. It can be used to assess how inclusive the process has been to develop a VNR in a structured way, or to provide a checklist of factors that can be considered when designing the process for a forthcoming VNR.

Background

The Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies hosted an HLPF side event at HLPF 2025 in New York on Monday 21st July. Speakers from four member countries of the Global Forum, including three that presented VNRs during HLPF, shared insights on the extent to which the most recent VNR's from their countries were able to adopt an inclusive, whole of society approach. This tool has been derived from the insights shared during the side event.

The tool

Capacity to engage inclusively



Low capacity to engage

High capacity to engage

Definition: The capacity that stakeholders have, both within government and among non-state actors, to engage meaningfully in the VNR process

Indicators of high capacity:

- Government officials leading the VNR process demonstrate a good understanding how to make MSE effective
- The government ensures that all stakeholders have adequate resources to play their role in VNR preparation
- Government ensures that all stakeholders engaged in the MSE have the internal capacity to participate in the VNR process

Description: Countries are less likely to foster inclusive processes when there is a lack of knowledge among key government staff on how to conduct meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement (MSE). Conversely, when government leadership understands how to structure and implement inclusive engagement, outcomes tend to be more positive. This challenge links closely to the broader issue of capacity across stakeholders.

Commitment to inclusion



Weak commitment to inclusion

Strong commitment to inclusion

Definition: The level of commitment among stakeholders to having a VNR that reflects a whole-of-society approach

Indicators of strong commitment:

- VNR process engages a large number and wide variety of different types of stakeholder
- Government demonstrates and communicates a strong commitment to producing a whole-of-society VNR
- Measures are in place to ensure that there is a broad-based commitment to inclusion such that it is not subject to changes in government

Description: Political leadership is important if there is to be an inclusive VNR process and it should extend as far as possible beyond political cycles such that there is a consensus to inclusivity across different parties and groupings. In practice, if the process engages a wider variety of stakeholders then this is an indicator of strong commitment to a whole-of-society approach.

Awareness of SDGs



Low awareness of SDGs

High awareness of SDGs

Definition: The level of awareness of the SDGs across society.

Indicators of strong commitment:

- High rate of awareness of the SDGs in cross-societal surveys
- Government ensures that all stakeholders engaged in the MSE have a good understanding of the SDGs and the purpose of the VNR

Description: When awareness of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs among stakeholders is low, engagement tends to be focussed on a small number of stakeholders with specialist knowledge of the role of Agenda 2030 in sustainable development. By contrast, inclusive VNRs are more likely when stakeholders, including marginalised groups, understand and identify with the SDGs.

Openness to criticism



Government intolerant of constructive criticism

Government welcomes constructive criticism

Definition: Tolerance to non-state actors expressing criticism of government policy and performance

Indicators of strong commitment:

- Government encourages input to the VNR that may be critical of the government
- The VNR process is perceived to be a safe space for stakeholders to make inputs that are critical to the government
- The government is comfortable with material that is critical being included in the VNR text

Description: Governments that are unwilling to hear criticism from civil society or marginalised groups are less likely to conduct inclusive VNRs. Inclusivity improves when governments value critical feedback as a way to improve implementation.

Process enables inclusion



VNR process works against inclusion

VNR process enables inclusion

Definition: The extent to which a process intentionally or unintentionally enables inclusion or works against it

Indicators of strong commitment:

- Multiple multi-stakeholder meetings held as part of the VNR process
- MSE is built into development of the VNR
- Stakeholders are engaged frequently during VNR process
- There are multiple opportunities for stakeholders to review drafts of the VNR and they have the time and resources to make meaningful comments
- The processes for non-state actors and engaging public sector agencies are fully integrated into one process
- There is sufficient time in the VNR development process for NSS to consult within their networks

Description:

A VNR process is less likely to be inclusive if it is rushed, with short consultation timelines, limited opportunities to review draft text, or limited outreach. When the process is planned in advance with dedicated time and resources for engagement, inclusivity tends to rise. Inclusivity suffers when governments treat stakeholder engagement as a one-off event or box-ticking exercise. However, when inclusion is embedded as a principle throughout the VNR process, including follow-up and review, the process becomes more meaningful.

How control is shared



Government has sole control of the VNR process

Control of the VNR process is shared between all stakeholders

Definition:

Control of the design and implementation of VNR process and of the different measures that are used for engagement

Indicators of strong commitment:

- The process for engaging stakeholders is co-created by government and non-state actors
- The agenda for meetings and consultations is set collaboratively by all participants and has the flexibility to introduce new topics that stakeholders believe to be important
- There are opportunities within the VNR for text to be added by stakeholders from outside the government
- There is a VNR chapter written by non-state actors and/or sections of the VNR are co-created by all stakeholders and have un-edited content contributed by stakeholders from outside the government

Description: Inclusivity is undermined when governments control the process entirely, without involving stakeholders in decision-making. Where shared ownership and co-creation are enabled, stakeholders feel empowered and the process is more representative.