

Global Forum think piece: a research agenda for mechanisms for whole-of-society engagement

Introduction

Members of the Global Forum take many forms, ranging from umbrella organisations for civil society to government units mandated to progress the SDGs. What unites them is that they **exist to facilitate engagement** between national government and other sectors of society in order to find fair and effective ways of achieving sustainable development goals.

This paper builds on the **processes and mechanisms used for engagement** that the Global Forum has already documented. This is a useful benchmark for what has been effective so far, but we also know that the world is not on course to achieve the SDGs. What is needed is for a massive acceleration in the rate of progress, and a step-change in the level of engagement between government and the rest of society is a key part of this.

To respond to this urgent need more, and better, mechanisms are needed to support cross-society engagement on a wider range of topics and tackle the most challenging barriers to progress. This think piece proposes a **research agenda** for expanding the range and quality of engagement processes and capturing and sharing practical guidance on how to select and implement the most effective mechanism for any particular development challenge.

What we already know: types of mechanisms documented in Global Forum reports

This section builds on the Global Forum's 'Pieces of the Puzzle' reports, which analyse the institutions and processes used for collaboration on VNRs in 12 countries, and 'Unite to Ignite', a groundbreaking report on the global ecosystem for supporting multi-stakeholder partnership that the network contributed to.

A number of different types of process are evident from the Pieces of the Puzzle reports. Many of these types are not completely distinct from one or more other type, but have enough different features to be worth separating or exist in different forms according to their purpose.

National coordination mechanisms include high-level ministerial committees and multi-stakeholder councils for ongoing coordinating implementation of the SDGs and other national priorities. For example, Tanzania has a Sustainable Development Coordination Mechanism (SDCM) and Ghana has an SDG Implementation Coordination Committee.

There are broadly similar **policy development and planning processes** that contribute to roadmaps and action plans, policy alignment and the integration of the SDGs in national planning frameworks.

There are also a wide range of **local implementation mechanisms** that can include Regional/Provincial coordination bodies, municipal networks and platforms and community consultation processes. As examples, Peru has a Mesa de Concertación para la Lucha contra la Pobreza (MCLCP) at local level and Costa Rica a Network of Cantons Promoters of SDGs (Cantones PrODS). Kenya utilises County SDG Champions and local consultation forums and Uganda has district level SDG coordination mechanisms.

There are also **technical committees and working groups** which can also be involved in implementation and draw on expertise from across societal groups. These have some of the same features as the above processes but work at different levels on more technical aspects than the national or local coordination mechanisms.

VNR processes are concerned with reporting progress on implementation. They can include some or all of: multi-stakeholder consultations and inputs; validation workshops and reviews; data collection partnerships; and collaborative drafting processes. Structurally they can also include temporary technical committees and working groups and often feature national-level coordination chaired by a minister. For example, Nigeria has a Core Working Group including government and non-state actors and Ecuador has run a participatory VNR process with civil society inputs. In some situations there can be parallel VNR processes, one led by government and then a 'shadow' process that only involves civil society.

National dialogues and consultation processes are often used for a VNR, but also for many other purposes. They take the form of national conferences on sustainable development or a national pacts and agreements, such as Costa Rica's National Pact for Advancement of SDGs signed by multiple stakeholders. They wide range of multi-stakeholder consultations that can have a sectoral or thematic focus, such as public-private dialogue forums and thematic working groups.

Collaborative **monitoring and reporting systems** are also often used for VNRs but have many other applications. These processes can take the form of statistical working groups, multi-stakeholder data partnerships and platforms, and joint data collection initiatives. For example, Vietnam has a statistical working groups for SDG monitoring and in Costa Rica there is a private sector-led data partnership for SDGs. Kenya has joint monitoring through Technical Working Groups and Tanzania utilises joint government-civil society monitoring systems.

What we already know: key success factors for engagement processes

Key success factors identified in the reports include the level of institutionalization of the processes and/or clear roles and mandates, and whether there are adequate resources and capacity. Strong political commitment is very helpful and enough trust existing between stakeholders is essential. Incentives must exist for collaboration and national policies and regulations must support, not block, collaboration. Flexible and adaptive processes may be more likely to succeed.

The role of government and its openness to partner is a critical factor in having engagement processes that are able to affect public policy and implementation and enable transformative change. Non-state institutions that support effective processes include SDG advisory committees, civil society platforms and reference groups, private sector advisory groups, and national councils for sustainable development

Countries have adapted these processes to their specific contexts while maintaining similar core functions. Some countries show more advanced development of certain mechanisms while others are still working to strengthen specific aspects of their collaborative frameworks. The most successful processes tend to have strong political backing, clear mandates, adequate resources, and genuine multi-stakeholder engagement.

Research agenda

The Global Forum can expand knowledge of processes and mechanisms for engaging the whole of society by working with other partners with an interest in these processes to building on what members of the network know.

An expanded **typography of engagement processes** will be useful, building on what is in this think-piece. This can be both broader and deeper, in the sense that there are processes that the Global Forum reports don't document, but also a greater refinement of the main features of each process.

Linked to the typography, it will be useful to have a more complete record of the different **purposes** that engagement process are used for, as the processes documented so far are focussed on those that help to progress the 2030 Agenda.

The typography can be complemented by **mapping** the types of process to the purposes, and capturing the reasons why this process has been used in terms of factors such as theme, political context, level of trust, resources available, institutions that exist and other factors to be determined. This information can be the basis for governments and other

stakeholders to better enable them to **select the types of process to employ** that is most suitable to their objective and context.

It will be useful to know more about the **success factors** that enable effective engagement processes. This will require codifying what ‘success’ is in terms, for example, of how many different stakeholder groups were engaged, whether they were able to express their views openly, what data there was to support their positions, and whether people with the least power (and most disadvantage) were part of the process. It will also be necessary to assess whether the process then effective in offering a more equitable solution to a challenge or breaking down barriers between different stakeholder’s fixed positions. This can be used to identify metrics for how the different factors combine to increase the **‘quality’ of the process**.

Practitioners will need **guidance** on what actually works when planning and implementing a process for engaging multiple sectors of society. This extends to practical information on how to develop the right kind of institutions to support the process. This can draw on the large body of information that already exists on what makes a multi-stakeholder partnership effective. Global Forum member case examples of effective engagement processes can be used to bring the guidance to life.

Output

The output must be focused on practitioners, including members of the Global Forum but extending to any organisation that organises or support engagement processes. Ideas for outputs include:

- Creation of a **multi-stakeholder engagement process in a box** toolkit with elements such as:
 - The capabilities and resources required
 - Directory of useful tools and resources to build institutional capabilities
 - Resources and tools for assessing a context
 - Template Terms of Reference for facilitators of various processes
 - Adaptation strategies for challenging political environments
 - Alternative models for thematic implementation, for example: city-level; energy transitions; landscape approaches etc
- Inspiring and insightful mixed-media **case examples**
- Accessible short **guidance materials** such as ‘how to’ notes and checklists