How to use multi-stakeholder advisory bodies to support an inclusive approach to VNRs and VLRs

What this document is:

This 'How to...' guide is a working document that captures Global Forum members current best practice when supporting the development of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs).

It aims to inspire Global Forum members, and other organisations that are also supporting VNRs and VLRs, to find ways to make them more inclusive. This does not have to be limited to VNRs and VLRs: we believe that many of the ideas captured in this guide will also be of benefit when members are supporting other government-led reporting and planning processes.

Why advisory bodies have a role supporting VNRs and VLRs

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages countries to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels, which are country-led and country-driven."[1]

Advisory bodies have a role supporting VNRs and VLRs because:

- Stakeholders need to hold their government accountable, and engagement in VNRs and VLRs is one way they can do this
- The 2030 Agenda will only be fully achieved when the whole of society is engaged in all aspects of it – and VNRs and VLRs should also reflect this inclusive approach
- In particular, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups are often at the heart of achieving the SDGs and they need to be included in VNRs, but VLRs most of all.

Member voice –"I believe that Global Forum members share the same values, that VLRs should be a way to engage with, and connect to, communities"

The way that advisory bodies work is to bring together all sectors of society. This supports VNRs and VLRs by:

- Giving a seat at the table to diverse groups and voices
- Supporting accountability and broad-based ownership of the process
- Helping to make the process transparent
- Identifying and bringing on board the groups who are often overlooked, and also have data that can be vital for reporting
- Enabling all stakeholder to be honest about who will be winners and losers if real change is to happen
- Building and maintaining good relationships between government and non-state stakeholders
- Supporting effective communication and advocacy
- Making new connections between stakeholders that promote innovation.
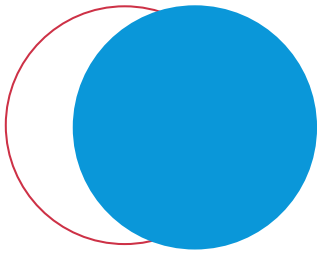
Challenges experienced by Global Forum members when supporting VNRs and VLRs

Very top-down approach with limited opportunities for inclusion or challenge, such that:

- Stakeholder engagement in VNRs and VLRs can be very late, very limited and almost non-existent
- Reports such as VNRs are often written by consultants and hence an engagement process is challenging in such countries
- Many non-state actors have very good data that could enhance VNRs and VLRs but it is not being accessed
- VNRs are more honest and useful when they are co-created with a range of public and non-state stakeholders, but they vary immensely in their level of ambition, and investment, in this.

Member voice – "we are a big nation and it needs a lot of investment to reach to a very local level"

Key issues that members consider when engaging government to support VNRs and VLRs

Build strong foundations for engaging government at all levels through:

- Building credibility and trust
- Using evidence-based data
- Establishing a strong moral position
- Demonstrating to government that the process has value
- Making the effort needed over time to collaborate, and committing to a long-term engagement process
- Being strategic – engaging through government policy and process where possible, and also engaging both civil servants and politicians
- Having the right mechanisms, such as multi-stakeholder partnerships, that includes representatives from all sections of society.

Member voice – "we started working on local measurement of progress with a municipality and discovered that this was something that a lot of other municipalities were interested in as well, so we developed a tool"
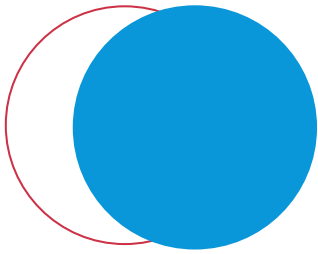
Should there be a formal relationship between an advisory body and the government?

When working through multi-stakeholder advisory body there are benefits and disadvantages of formalising the relationship (sometimes known as institutionalizing):

- FORMALISING: gives credibility and a mandate to engage government in policy, but also can become a blocker as it is hard to 'undo', and risks elite/government capture of agendas, and may lead to a loss of independence
- KEEPING INFORMAL: is more inclusive and promotes ownership by partners, but risks not achieving recognition, by the private sector for example.

BUT this is also always very context specific.

Some of the approaches that have worked for members when supporting VNRs and VLRs to be more inclusive:

- Start with trust building specific to the process
- Always seek to communicate, amplify voices, and make multiple connection between different stakeholders
- Spend time in building the knowledge and capacity of those who are taking part in a VLR
- Focus on the most relevant SDGs in order to get the most buy-in from participants
- It matters who leads the process on behalf of the advisory body – they must be credible
- Create momentum by starting with something where everyone can see benefit
- Identify and work with people on the ground who have the best knowledge and data
- Keep working to give everyone a voice
- Make sure the private sector doesn't get left behind
- Be careful that you don't stay behind closed doors
- Showcase success and present examples of real benefits of being inclusive.

Member voice – "in the first VLR workshop we invited not only members of the municipality but also people from civil society , from most vulnerable groups and minorities"

Member voice –" We're working with the City council to conduct focus group discussions with communities