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# Are governments delivering on the Capacity Development of Civil Society to ensure a successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda?

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# An analysis of the 2019 VNRs to evaluate the activities of national governments on the capacity development of civil society.



● 2017   ● 2018   ● 2019
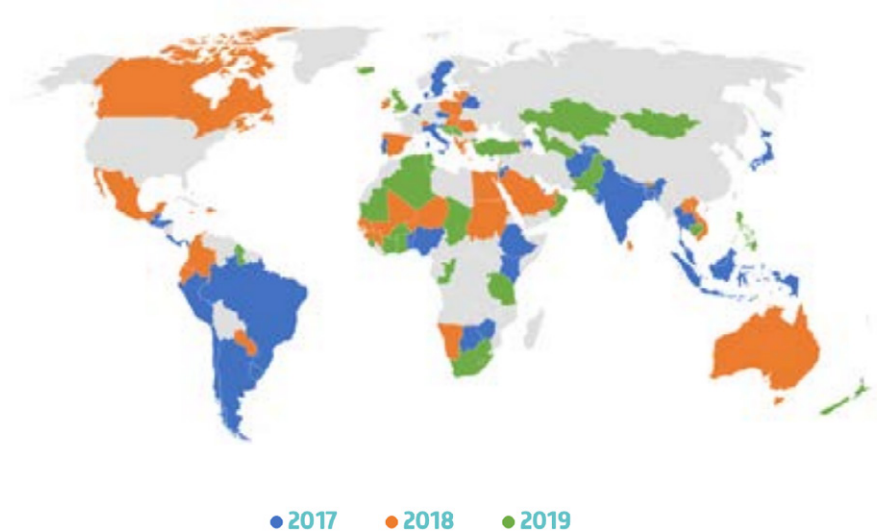
Figure 1 VNRs presented in 2017/2018/2019

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## Key Findings

### Capacity development not mentioned by one third of reporting governments in 2019 VNRs

▶ Of the 47 VNRs presented to the HLPF by governments in 2019, 13 did not mention capacity development[1]. This is despite the fact that SDG 17 underlines the importance of capacity building as a key means of implementation of the SDG agenda and this SDG is reviewed by the HLPF each year.

### No clear definition of capacity building/capacity development informs the 2019 VNRs

▶ Capacity development is used as an all-encompassing term in VNRs to describe everything from education to vocational training in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted by governments between the years 2017 - 2019.

### Key capacity development gaps in SDG implementation identified by the 2019 VNRs

▶ Of the 34 VNRs which did mention capacity development, 12 highlighted specific gaps linked to SDG implementation. These gaps concerned a range of issues including formal education, women's empowerment and economic and productive capacities.

▶ The 2019 VNRs specifically mentioned the need for capacity development to improve health systems (Goal 3), education and vocational training (Goal 4 and 8), women's economic and democratic empowerment (Goal 5), and society's resilience to climate hazards (Goal 13) were mentioned.

### Little evidence of systematic capacity development of CSOs despite their key role in SDG implementation

▶ Although a huge majority of VNRs highlight the key role of CSOs for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, there is an obvious gap between the supposed importance attributed to the role of CSOs and the actual efforts made to strengthen them and their capacities.

▶ The capacity development civil society, and indeed of broader national stakeholders, linked to the 2030 Agenda, appears to be heterogenous, fragmented, and irregular based on the VNRs.

▶ The role and input of CSOs to the VNR process is highlighted but its contribution to longer-term SDG monitoring and implementation tends to be overlooked. This calls into question the probability of effective capacity building being provided for civil society going forward.

▶ The failure of governments to live up to the clear commitments of Goal 17 of the agenda to provide for the capacity building of civil society and other stakeholders is difficult to understand. Properly designed and planned capacity development could greatly enhance the ability of different stakeholder groups to monitor and contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda**.**

### Little reference in 2019 VNRs to government support for domestic capacity development

▶ The 2019 VNRs contain few references to the financing of, or support for domestic capacity development by UN Member States. In fact, capacity development appears to be largely understood as a tool for international cooperation employed by high-income countries. Governments often highlight capacity development in the context of international cooperation without mentioning capacity development in their domestic contexts. This is despite the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda and the need for VNRs to reflect domestic as well as international progress on implementation.

▶ High-income countries often highlight their contribution to the financing of programmes/initiatives run by international and regional institutions to illustrate their commitment to capacity development globally. Little detail is provided however, which makes it difficult to measure how the contribution of governments to these regional and international organisations contribute to supporting concrete capacity development initiatives on the ground.

### Different roles of low, middle and high-income countries linked to capacity development

▶ Lower-income countries appear to be targets or beneficiaries of capacity development in the context of international co-operation. The capacity development activities described in their VNRs tend to be targeted at state officials and financial institutions, justified by a need for greater state efficiency in the area of tax collection.

▶ Middle-income countries appear to function both as funders/supporters of capacity development and as beneficiaries/targets.

▶ High-income countries tend to be providers of capacity development for overseas partners.

▶ A clear lack of reciprocity appears to characterise the approach to international capacity development cooperation, which is mostly considered as a unilateral process initiated by high income countries. However, Wales provides a counter-example. The: "Wales and Africa" initiative provides funding for small scale Wales-Africa projects and exchanges of skills (education, health, funding), presenting this as an international learning opportunity for both sides.

## Key Recommendations

### New global co-ordination and financing system for capacity development needed

▶ The capacity development of civil society and other stakeholder groups linked the 2030 Agenda should be subject to a global, multi-level capacity development coordination system. Civil society and other stakeholders should play a key role in the governance of this global co-ordination system.

▶ The capacity development of CSOs should be financed from a new Global Fund linked to Goal 17 and its provisions on Multi-Stakeholder participation. This fund should provide financing for the capacity development of civil society and other stakeholder groups in High, Medium and low- Income countries. In this context, Capacity development should be understood not as a unidirectional process between high and low- income countries but as an exchange of experience and learning between all countries and partners.

▶ National, regional and global-level indicators should be developed which measure the extent to which the capacity development of civil society and other stakeholder groups have been enabled at each level, including indicators which measure the financial resources dedicated to capacity development for civil society each year.

### The 2030 Agenda capacity development needs of different stakeholder groups should be identified

▶ The systematic and objective identification of the capacity development needs of civil society, and other stakeholder groups, linked to the 2030 Agenda is required as a matter of priority.

▶ The capacity development needs of each stakeholder group, including civil society, should be identified and determined by themselves.

▶ Capacity development programmes for CSOs linked to the monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda should be developed and strengthened.

▶ Data collection and analysis should form a key component of CSO capacity building. as citizen-based information is key to monitoring the SDGs.

### Joint capacity development should be used to encourage and strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships

▶ There is little reference in the 2019 VNRs to using the opportunity of joint capacity development of different stakeholder groups as a strategy for building & strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships. This is despite the fact that these partnerships are seen as a key means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

### Clear definitions of capacity development should be agreed by all UN MS for VNRs

▶ Clear definitions of capacity development (capacity building) should be agreed upon by all UN member states These definitions should inform reporting on progress related to capacity development in the VNRs submitted by governments each year to the High-Level Political Forum.

▶ Agenda 2030 -related capacity development should not just to the focus of the 17 goals and targets, but also to the ambitious vision and potentially transformative principles of the Preamble and Declaration of the 2030 Agenda.

### Domestically oriented & multi-level capacity development for CSOs & other stakeholders should be ensured

▶ A greater focus should be placed on domestically focused capacity development (ie directed at the national level) in addition to capacity development in the context of international development, as described by SDG 17.

▶ Capacity development should be encouraged at multiple levels, including the regional and local levels.

▶ Capacity development efforts should be strengthened at the regional level, involving multiple stakeholders in order to promote greater partnership and links to regional 2030 Agenda priority areas.

▶ Official spaces should be created within official regional/ international forums for innovative peer exchange, learning and capacity development between CSOs and other stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Agenda 2030.

# ARE GOVERNMENTS DELIVERING ON THE CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY TO ENSURE A SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA?

## INTRODUCTION (full report)

*"Effective follow -up and review of the 2030 Agenda through peer learning is essential for renewed action and progress in achieving the ambitious and interlinked SDGs."*

LIU Zhenmin (Under-Secretary-General UNDESA)



### Voluntary National Reviews

The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) has established a process of voluntary national reviews (VNRs), which have become a tool for the review and implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. Between the years 2016 and 2019, 142 VNRs[2] have been submitted by governments to the HLPF and 51more will be submitted in 2020[3]. Since its inception, the HLPF peer review system has been used by governments as a means of monitoring their country's progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda and its sustainable development goals, and of learning from the experiences and best practices shared by other governments.

### Goal 17 & the capacity development of stakeholders

Capacity Development is fundamental for achieving the goals set by the 2030 Agenda. Goal 17 is therefore essential to the success of the 2030 Agenda and to the achievement of all the sustainable development goals. Goal 17 recognizes the role of Capacity Development[4] as an important means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Although civil society is not specifically mentioned in this regard, the need for enhanced capacity development for all stakeholder groups involved in the 2030 Agenda monitoring and implementation is recognised.

Point 63 of the Declaration of the 2030 Agenda states:
*"Processes to develop and facilitate the availability of appropriate knowledge and technologies globally, as well as capacity-building, are also critical. We commit to pursuing policy coherence and an enabling environment for sustainable development at all levels and by all actors, and to reinvigorating the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development."*

Target 17.9 of Goal 17 states:
*"Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the Sustainable Development Goals, including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation."*

Target 17.18 states:
*"By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts."*

In relation to technology transfer, Point 70 of the Declaration of the 2030 Agenda states:
*"The United Nations inter-agency task team on science, technology and innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals will promote coordination, coherence and cooperation within the United Nations system on science, technology and innovation-related matters, enhancing synergy and efficiency, in particular to enhance capacity-building initiatives. The task team will draw on existing resources and will work with 10 representatives from civil society, the private sector and the scientific community to prepare the meetings of the multi-stakeholder forum on science, technology and innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as in the development and operationalization of the online platform, including preparing proposals for the modalities for the forum and the online platform".*
*"The multi-stakeholder forum on science, technology and innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals will [...] provide a venue for facilitating interaction, matchmaking and the establishment of networks between relevant stakeholders and*

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*multi-stakeholder partnerships in order to identify and examine technology needs and gaps, including on scientific cooperation, innovation and capacity-building, and also in order to help to facilitate development, transfer and dissemination of relevant technologies for the Sustainable Development Goals."*

**Point 74 (h) of the Declaration to the 2030 Agenda on Follow Up and Review states:**

*"They will require <u>enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries</u>, including the strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programmes, particularly in African countries, least developed countries, small island developing States, landlocked developing countries and middle-income countries."*

Considerable reflection is required in relation to how Goal 17's various commitments on capacity development can best be delivered upon for different stakeholder groups, in light of their diverse needs, geographical spread, and with a particular focus on the parts of the world where capacities are weak due to a lack of resources and limited, if any, capacity development opportunities.

## A clear rationale for the capacity development of Civil Society Organizations

The capacity development for CSOs should be a central objective for the international political community. This is because:

▶ CSOs support and defend democratic values, universal human rights, as well as facilitate and promote the achievement of shared goals.

▶ CSOs perform a useful watchdog role in monitoring the adherence of national governments to the implementation of international and regional agreements and conventions to which they are signatories.

▶ Civil society plays a critically important role as an active advocate and "transmitter" of new ideas and values at many different levels, from the local to the global.

▶ Ensuring greater capacity building for CSOs means that civil society can play an important role in acting as opinion maker, working with governments, international institutions and other relevant actors to push back against regressive and illiberal political trends that have become evident in recent years.

## An analysis of the capacity development content of 2019 VNRs

Forus carried out an analysis of the 2019 VNRs in order to determine how capacity development is being implemented by national governments and whom it benefits. This analysis draws on the findings of the fourth edition of the Progressing National SDG Implementation Report (2019), produced by the Canadian Council for International Co-operation.

The methodology used for this analysis included gathering all information on capacity development in the 2019 VNRs, understanding and categorizing the different types of capacity development mentioned and the target groups, developing conclusions on the capacity development efforts of governments as reflected by their VNRs and formulating recommendations for the future.

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## Capacity Development in the Voluntary National Reviews 2019

### General findings

▶ Of the 47 VNRs presented to the HLPF by governments in 2019, 13 did not mention capacity development[5].

▶ Of the 34 VNRs which did mention capacity development, 12 highlighted specific gaps linked to SDG implementation. These gaps concerned a range of issues including formal education, women's empowerment and economic and productive capacities.

▶ The 2019 VNRs specifically mention the need for capacity development to improve health systems (Goal 3), education and vocational training (Goal 4 and 8), women's economic and democratic empowerment (Goal 5), and society's resilience to climate hazards (Goal 13).

▶ Although a significant majority of VNRs highlight the key role of CSOs for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, there is an obvious gap between the supposed importance attributed to the role of CSOs and the actual efforts made to strengthen them and their capacities.

▶ The capacity development civil society, and indeed of broader national stakeholders, linked to the 2030 Agenda, appears to be heterogenous, fragmented, and irregular based on the VNRs submitted between 2017 & 2019.

▶ The role and input of CSOs to the VNR process tends to be highlighted but civil society's contribution to longer-term SDG monitoring and implementation tends to be overlooked. This calls into question the likelihood of effective capacity building being provided for civil society moving forward.

▶ The 2019 VNRs contain very few references to the financing of, or support for domestic capacity development by UN Member States. In fact, capacity development is mostly understood as a tool for international cooperation that is employed by high-income countries.

▶ Lower-income countries appear to be targets or beneficiaries of capacity development in the context of international co-operation. The capacity development activities described in their VNRs tend to be targeted at state officials and financial institutions, justified by a need for greater state efficiency in the area of tax collection.

▶ Middle-income countries appear to function both as funders/supporters of capacity development and as beneficiaries/ targets.

▶ High-income countries tend to be providers of capacity development for overseas partners.

> **Iceland created an academic diploma to train foreign partners, where**
> "Each year, specialists from developing countries come for five or six months long practical training course […]. This transfer of knowledge and capacity building is an example of how specialised Icelandic expertise and experience can be used in international development. […]. One example of such was the important step taken towards abolishing of child marriage in Malawi, where the former student of the Gender Equality Studies and Training Programme (GEST) played a key role in joint efforts of local civil society organisations and international agencies in leading the fight against child marriage." (Iceland's 2019 VNR page 110).

▶ A clear lack of reciprocity appears to characterise the approach to international capacity development cooperation, which is mostly considered as a unilateral process initiated by high income countries. However, Wales provides a counter- example. The: "Wales and Africa" initiative provides funding for small scale Wales-Africa projects and exchanges of skills (education, health, funding), presenting this as an international learning opportunity for both sides.

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## The capacity development of Civil Society as reflected in the 2019 VNRs

▶ Of the 47 VNRs submitted in 2019, 10 mention the presence of CSOs in lead councils/committee, and 17 in technical working groups.

▶ Multi-stakeholder partnerships including state actors, private sector and CSOs are acknowledged as a key step for the Agenda 2030's implementation.

▶ CSO capacity development is considered essential, especially regarding data collection at a local level to monitor the implementation of SDGs.

**In its 2019 VNR Iraq states that**
"There is no doubt that building strong multi-stakeholder partnerships has been a fundamental basis for knowledge mobilization and sharing when expertise, technologies and financial resources are provided to support implementing the SDGs 2030. Thus, coordination between the relevant institutions was strong and decisive. In this context, the government implemented inter-ministerial activities on SDGs and set up technical working groups to collect, provide and verify data and to conduct follow-up reports in accordance with organized mechanisms. Coordination mechanisms are constantly being developed to facilitate implementation and to report on national goals and indicators. Through dialogue platforms, national committees have provided a high level of direct and sustainable partnerships among various government stakeholders, private sector actors, civil society organizations, NGOs, academia, youth and international community with the common international SDGs."
(Iraq's VNR 2019 page 82)
*(Mongolia's VNR 2019 page 46)*

▶ In terms of concrete implementation, the capacity development of CSOs does not seem to be prioritized, particularly where low-income countries are concerned: These countries seem to target their capacity development actions on state officials and finance institutions, on one hand, justified by a need for more state efficiency, especially for tax collection. On the other hand, capacity building for private sector is also prioritized, to increase productivity and trade, especially within the agricultural sector. Mongolia's 2019 VNR highlighted a more positive approach to involving civil society in SDG implementation:

**In 2019 Mongolia's VNR stated**
"The participation of NGOs in public advocacy on SDGs and independent evaluation of SDG implementation are important. A review of functions of ministries and agencies has begun within the framework of ongoing civil service reforms. This is expected to clarify which services could be transferred to NGOs or professional associations, strengthening the participation of civil society in SDG implementation."

▶ The elaboration of a VNR appears in some instances to be the first occasion for a country to include CSOs in a multi stakeholder process. The VNR process therefore can be considered as a first step toward CSOs capacity building and greater inclusion in the democratic process.

▶ The political role that CSOs can play is often ignored or neglected in official accounts of capacity building in favour of an approach focusing capacity building on "institutions" or "individuals" (women, youth, disabled people). For example, Cameroon mentions the "existence of a document on institutional […] and individual capacity building to facilitate adaptation and mitigation actions, and technology transfer and development activities." (Cameroon's VNR 2019 page 63). This overlooks the important and intermediary role that CSOs can play, between states and citizens, especially to unite around common struggles and to speak for the voiceless.

# Conclusions

▶ The term "capacity development" as it was used in the 2019 VNRs submitted by governments to the HLPF refers to various situations and SDGs, ranging from formal education to women's empowerment to economic and productive activities. No clear or widely accepted definition of capacity development/building informs the VNRs presented.

▶ 37.8 % of the 2019 VNRs do not mention capacity development at all or are limited to merely noting the need for capacity development rather than reporting on progress made.

▶ The nature of the capacity development described in the VNRs seems to be strongly correlated with the income level of each country - high-income countries tend to support capacity development it as a tool for international cooperation.

▶ The provision of capacity development focusing on the 2030 Agenda /SDGs is heterogeneous and fragmented in many countries regardless of their income levels.

▶ Support by governments for the capacity development of CSOs and other stakeholder groups in domestic contexts is not reflected in the VNRs submitted in 2019.

▶ Although a significant majority of VNRs submitted in 2019 highlight the key role of CSOs in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, a real discrepancy remains between the importance attributed to the role of CSOs and the actual efforts made to strengthen and build their capacities.

▶ The 2019 VNRs indicate that governments continue to regard CSOs more as technical allies and overlook the more strategic or political role they can play in society.

▶ The capacity development of all stakeholders and the emergence of multi-stakeholder partnerships is essential for successful outcomes on SDG implementation. However, as of 2019, it is notable that the capacity development efforts of governments linked to monitoring and implementing the 2030 Agenda are not equally inclusive of all stakeholder groups. These efforts seem to be largely targeted at government and state officials and civil society organisations are not included. The 2019 VNRs had little to say about the capacity building of CSOs for future SDG monitoring and implementation.

▶ Governments often highlight capacity development in the context of international cooperation without mentioning capacity development in their domestic contexts. This is despite the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda and the need for VNRs to reflect domestic as well as international progress on implementation.

▶ All stakeholder groups are not equally represented in the capacity development efforts that take place at the national level, and in many cases civil society is completely absent from these initiatives.

▶ There is little reference in the VNRs to using the opportunity of joint capacity development of different stakeholders as a strategy for building & strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships, even though this kind of strategy could be very productive.

▶ There is no reference to capacity development initiatives taking place at the regional level in the VNRs submitted in 2017 & 2018. This is despite the fact that considerable opportunity exists at a regional level, for example during the UN regional sustainable development forums, to organize innovative capacity development forums such as "VNR labs" in which multiple stakeholders including governments could participate and agree on regional priorities.

▶ In many cases when capacity development is provided to third countries, it involves experts traveling to these countries to provide training instead of training local leaders to do so. This is a short-sighted and note very sustainable approach to capacity development.

▶ There are no specific indicators for assessing the extent of capacity development linked to Agenda 2030 taking place in a given country or region each year, nor is any evidence provided that baselines have been established in advance for the purpose of measuring the impact of capacity development initiatives at any level.

# Recommendations

**1** - Capacity development programmes for civil society and other stakeholder groups linked to the 2030 Agenda should be developed and strengthened. Data collection and analysis should be one of the key objectives of CSO's capacity building. as citizen-based information is key to monitoring the implementation of the SDGs.

**2** - More generally, CSOs should be regarded by governments as credible stakeholders, able to participate in strategic discussions about policy making and not purely as technical allies.

**3** - VNRs should focus more on the domestic monitoring of CSO's capacity development. The focus of SDG 17.9 is more on international cooperation for capacity development and not on the national level. The universal nature of the 2030 Agenda means that there is a need for VNRs to reflect domestic as well as international progress on implementation.

**4** - Multilevel implementation of capacity development should be encouraged, including the regional and the local levels, where effective peer-learning could take place.

**5** - The capacity development of different stakeholder groups linked the 2030 Agenda should be coordinated, and civil society should be fully included along with other stakeholders in the design of a global, multi-level capacity development coordination system.

**6** - The capacity development of CSOs should be financed from a new Global Fund linked to Goal 17 and its provisions on Multi-Stakeholder participation. This fund should provide financing for the capacity development of civil society and other stakeholder groups in High, Medium and Low-Income countries. In this context, Capacity development should be understood not as a unidirectional process between high and low -income countries but as an exchange of experience and learning between all countries and partners.

**7** - National, regional and global-level indicators should be developed which measure the extent to which the capacity development of civil society and other stakeholder groups have been enabled at each level, including indicators which measure the financial resources dedicated to capacity development for civil society each year.

**8** - A clear definition of capacity development should be agreed upon by all UN member states and should inform progress reporting on capacity development in the VNRs submitted to the High-Level Political Forum.

**9** - Capacity development needs should be determined by each stakeholder group, based on the entire 2030 Agenda including its Principles and Declaration as well as the 17 individual goals and their related targets.

**10** - Capacity development efforts should be strengthened at the regional level, involving multiple stakeholders and linked to regional 2030 Agenda priority areas.

**11** - Official spaces should be created within official regional/ international forums for innovative peer exchange and learning between CSOs and other stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Agenda 2030.

**12** - Joint capacity development of different stakeholder groups should be encouraged within international, regional and national forums to facilitate the exchange of expertise and to promote peer learning and partnerships.

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