



ARE NATIONAL VOLUNTARY REVIEWS PROMOTING AWARENESS AND INCLUSION?

*Perceptions survey on civil society and
stakeholder engagement in voluntary
national reviews and the implementation
of the 2030 Agenda*

REPORT

May 2017

In Partnership with Newcastle University Politics Department



From policy to action

www.together2030.org

Executive Summary

For the second year¹, Together 2030² has carried out a survey to collect evidence on stakeholder awareness of, and participation in, national planning and review around the 2030 Agenda. In 2017, the survey was conducted in partnership with the Newcastle University³. The survey received 461 responses from a range of stakeholders, including national, regional and global organizations. This perceptions survey asked 20 questions in total (though not all questions were directed to all respondents). It was issued in three languages: English, Spanish and French, and was shared broadly with civil society and stakeholder mailing lists and via social media from March 3 to March 24 2017.

The main findings follow below:

- **Awareness of voluntary national reviews (VNRs), and especially how to engage in VNR processes, is low. This constitutes a major barrier to meaningful participation by stakeholders, and to establishing “open, inclusive, participatory and transparent follow up processes at all levels” (2030 Agenda, paragraph 74.d).**

The data shows different levels of awareness in VNR countries and many variations across regions and sectors around reporting and the process for reporting. Nevertheless, the picture is not positive: one-third of respondents were unaware that their countries were undertaking VNR this year; only one in four civil society (CSO) respondents were aware of the process their governments were using to prepare their reports.

- **High expectations for civil society and stakeholder participation in national reviews processes has not universally translated into genuine spaces and opportunities for engagement. At least 1/3 of the respondents did not consider that civil society and stakeholders would be able to participate, or did not know whether they could. This demonstrates, as a minimum, a lack of an optimal enabling environment for participation.**

- **Respondents have shown interest in engaging on national review processes via several approaches, including coordinated spaces for civil society engagement on national review processes. It is clear that stakeholders want to engage in and contribute to national processes, and do so via a range of approaches. There is a desire amongst respondents for coordination mechanisms amongst civil society and other stakeholders.**

¹ Report of the Together 2030 Perceptions Survey (2016) can be found here:

<http://www.together2030.org/2016/05/01/report-together-2030-perception-survey-national-reviews-is-civil-society-already-being-left-behind/report-together-2030-perception-survey-april-2016/>

² **Together 2030** is a global, action-oriented initiative aiming to generate and share knowledge on the implementation and accountability of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and the Sustainable Development Goals, and project the voices of different civil society and stakeholders around the world on the challenges and opportunities of implementing this Agenda. Together 2030 was set up in December 2015 as a self-organized civil society initiative to promote national implementation and track progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

³ Newcastle University is a public research university located in Newcastle upon Tyne in the North-East of England.

- **Global awareness of national plans and the VNR process amongst civil society is limited.** *Whilst varying from region to region, awareness of the VNR system as a vehicle for follow up and review is far from universal. Awareness of country plans that address the sustainable development goals (SDGs) is mixed.*
- **The universality of the agenda is not clearly reflected in data for European VNR countries, nor on awareness of national plans in Europe, Canada and the United States.** *Low figures for awareness of national processes and ability to participate in European VNR countries are a concerning sign for the universality of the Agenda and for transparent, accountable governance around the SDGs in the region. All countries have committed to implement and follow up on an inclusive manner and European countries, as well as other developed countries such as Canada and the USA are not, based on this evidence, taking the lead on this.*

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Are National Voluntary Reviews Promoting Awareness and Inclusion?

Perceptions survey on civil society and stakeholder engagement in voluntary national reviews and implementation of the 2030 Agenda

May 2017

1. Introduction

“We commit to fully engage in conducting regular and inclusive reviews of progress at sub-national, national, regional and global levels”. (Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, para 77)

Inclusive and participatory national review and follow up is a cornerstone of the 2030 Agenda. This report addresses two key questions about people’s participation in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development:

- How extensive is stakeholder awareness of, and participation in, the process of country Voluntary National Reviews which are a central component of the High Level Political Forum.
- How aware and engaged is civil society and stakeholders across the world in national level planning and review of the SDGs?

This report presents statistical, survey-based evidence that helps to address these two central questions. Whilst there is wide agreement that stakeholder participation is crucial to meaningful national planning, review and follow-up, two years into the SDGs there is little or no evidence on how far this is being realized in national contexts. The findings of this report, then, are both significant and timely. **Overall, our findings indicate that there is a long way to go before national processes of review and follow up are “open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people” (Para 74d, the 2030 Agenda).**

Follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

When governments adopted the 2030 Agenda, they emphasized the vital contribution of a robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework. This would support implementation (para 72), promote accountability to citizens,

enable active international cooperation in achieving the 2030 Agenda and foster exchange of best practices and mutual learning (para 73).

Member States also determined that the lynchpin of follow up and review in implementing the SDG is the **national** level. The annual voluntary national reviews (VNRs) undertaken for the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) are one of the core elements of this process. These reviews should assess progress in implementing the universal goals and targets, including the means of implementation.

Civil society and stakeholder engagement is critical if national reviews are expected to follow the principles and agreements expressed in the 2030 Agenda. Governments have committed in the 2030 Agenda to fully engage in regular and inclusive reviews of progress in sub-national and national contexts, in addition to regional and global levels (para 77). Regarding national and sub-national reviews, governments encourage each other to draw on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private-sector and other stakeholders, in line with national circumstances, policies and priorities (para 79).

The regional level has a role to play in conducting reviews and providing the HLPF with critical progress on major policy issues in each region. The Regional Forums on Sustainable Development are expected to become spaces that facilitate regional reviews, and the outcomes of those discussions should be brought to the attention of the HLPF.

The UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) and global review of national progress

The **global** follow up and review process of the 2030 Agenda is expected to complement and support national and regional reviews. It is guided by specific principles: its voluntary and state-led nature; respect for national ownership and for the Agenda's characteristics; its emphasis on means of implementation, inclusiveness, and use of existing platforms; and its rigorous, data and evidence-based nature (para 74).

The High Level Political Forum (HLPF)⁴ is the global structure responsible for assessing progress achievements and challenges faced by developed and developing countries and ensuring that the 2030 Agenda remains relevant and ambitious (para 82). In the 2030 Agenda, Member States have also emphasized that the HLPF should draw high-level political attention to gaps or areas where commitments are lagging behind and provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for follow up to accelerate progress.

⁴ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>



Presentation and discussion of Voluntary National Reviews is a key component of the HLPF's function. In 2016, 22 countries⁵ presented volunteer national reviews on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the HLPF. For 2017, 44 countries have volunteered.⁶

2. The survey:

For the second year, Together2030 conducted a survey to collect evidence on stakeholder awareness of, and participation in, national planning and review of the 2030 Agenda. In 2017, the survey was conducted in partnership with the Newcastle University. The survey received 461 responses from a range of stakeholders (predominantly civil society organizations (CSOs) and academia – see accompanying methodology and background note). This perceptions survey asked 20 questions in total (though not all questions were directed to all respondents). It was issued in three languages: English, Spanish and French, and was shared broadly with civil society and stakeholder mailing lists and via social media from March 3 to March 24 2017.

The questions were adapted from the questionnaire utilized by Together2030 in 2016. The data gathered allowed for disaggregation along combinations of three axes (i) characteristics of respondents - age, gender, position, civil society sector of respondents (ii) location – country and region (iii) VNR status. Methodology, non-individualized demographics and survey text are all included in the annexed methodology and background note. The Together 2030 International Secretariat, in partnership with the Politics Department of Newcastle University, compiled and analysed the information and prepared this report.

The body of the report comprises two parts. In Sections 3 and 4, we present the analysis of survey data on two key themes: stakeholder experiences in this year's VNR countries (Section 3) and worldwide stakeholder awareness of SDG implementation and review in national contexts (Section 4). In Section 5, we summarise the key findings and offer recommendations on each theme.

For the purposes of the report, countries were divided into four regional groupings – the allocation of countries to these groupings can be found in the attached background note. In the analysis below, we sometimes contrast these regional groupings, but it is important to stress these contrasts reflect the *particular countries* from which respondents contributed (in the case of VNRs, the VNR countries from each region), rather than *all* countries in each region.

⁵ *Volunteer Countries for 2016*: China; Colombia, Egypt; Estonia; Finland; France; Georgia; Germany; Madagascar; Mexico; Montenegro; Morocco; Norway; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Samoa; Sierra Leone; Switzerland; Togo; Turkey; Uganda; Venezuela.

⁶ *Volunteer countries for 2017*: Afghanistan; Argentina; Azerbaijan; Bangladesh; Belarus; Belgium; Belize; Benin; Botswana; Brazil; Chile; Costa Rica; Cyprus; Czech Republic; Denmark; El Salvador; Ethiopia; Guatemala; Honduras; India; Indonesia; Iran; Italy; Japan; Jordan; Kenya; Luxembourg; Malaysia; Maldives; Monaco; Nepal; Netherlands; Nigeria; Panama; Peru; Portugal; Qatar; Slovenia; Sweden; Tajikistan; Thailand; Togo; Uruguay; Zimbabwe.

3. Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) – Awareness and Inclusion?

3.1 Awareness of VNRs:

Most respondents from VNR countries (68%, 146) were aware that their country had volunteered to engage on a national review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda to be presented during the 2017 Session of the High Level Political Forum (HLPF). However, **32% (68) of the respondents were still unaware that their countries had volunteered to present national reviews.** (Figure 1)



Figure 1

76% of Civil society respondents were aware that countries were volunteering to present national reviews at the HLPF in 2017 (Figure 2). Academic respondents were evenly divided (50-50%) (Figure 3).

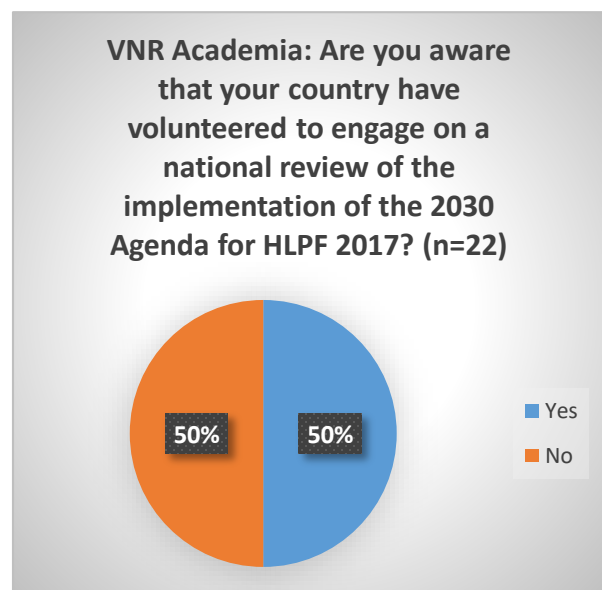
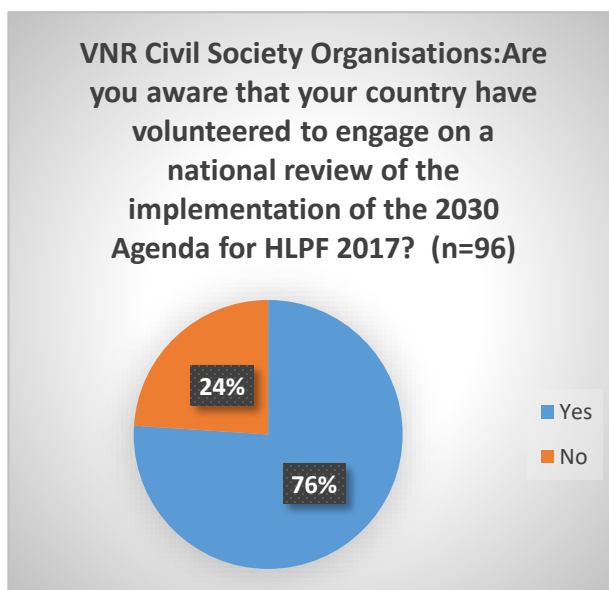


Figure 2

Figure 3

Regional disparities:

Respondents based in VNR countries in **Asia-Pacific** showed the highest level of awareness (76%) of voluntary reviews, followed by **Africa** (74%), **Europe, Canada and the USA** (63%) and **Latin America and the Caribbean** (59%) (Figure 4).

The significantly lower level of awareness in **Latin America and the Caribbean** is especially concerning considering that 25% (11) of the 2017 VNR countries are coming from this region. This can only have a negative impact on the inclusivity of consultation in preparation for the reviews.

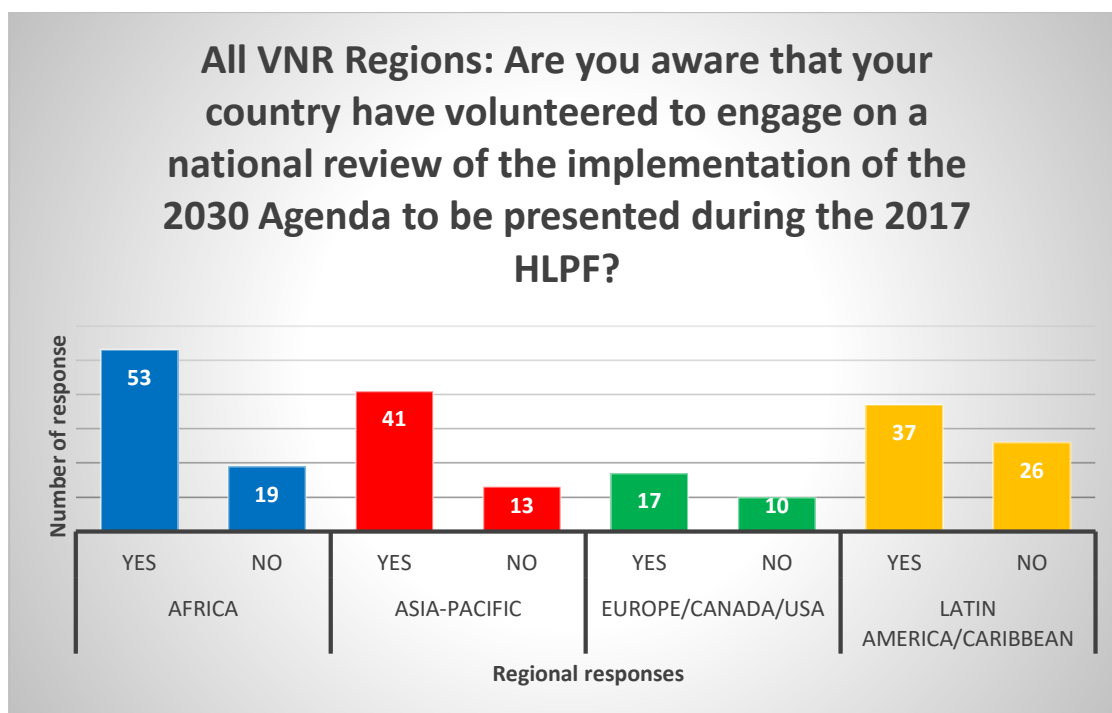


Figure 4

3.2 Awareness of how VNR processes are being conducted:

Only 25% of civil society respondents are aware (“totally aware, “very much aware” or “aware”) of the process their governments are following to prepare the VNR (Figure 5).

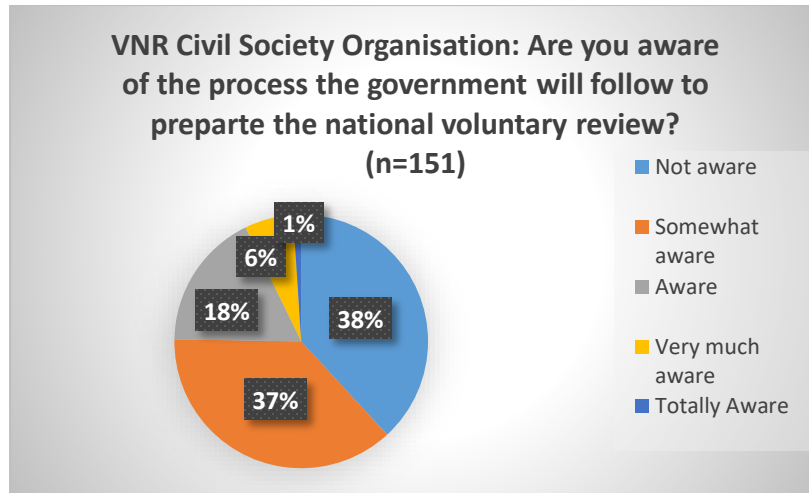


Figure 5

Regional variations:

All regions show low levels of awareness about the process to be followed by their governments in preparation for the voluntary national reviews. But there are regional disparities. In Africa, only **20%** of the respondents are aware; followed by **27%** in Europe, Canada and the USA, **30%** in Asia/Pacific and **31%** of the respondents in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC): the rest being either not aware or only somewhat aware. (Figures 6-9):

VNR Countries (all stakeholders): 'Are you aware of the process the government will follow to prepare the voluntary national review?' (Figures 6 - 9)

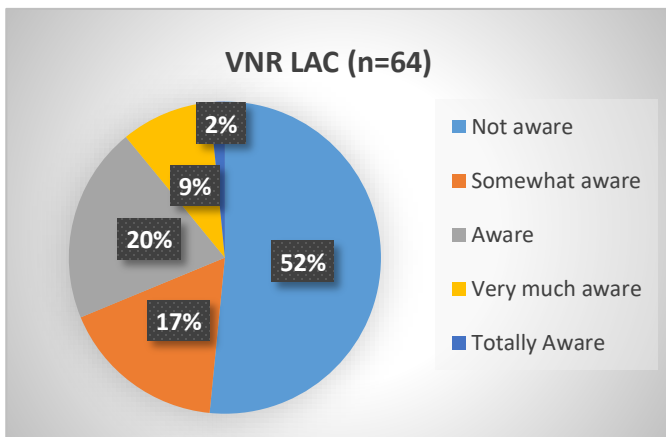


Figure 6

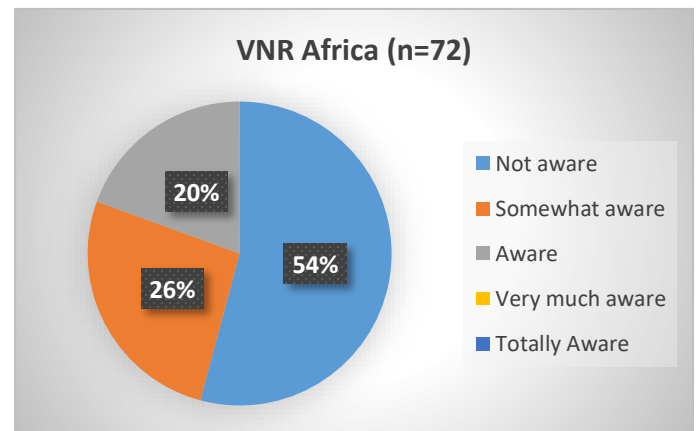


Figure 7

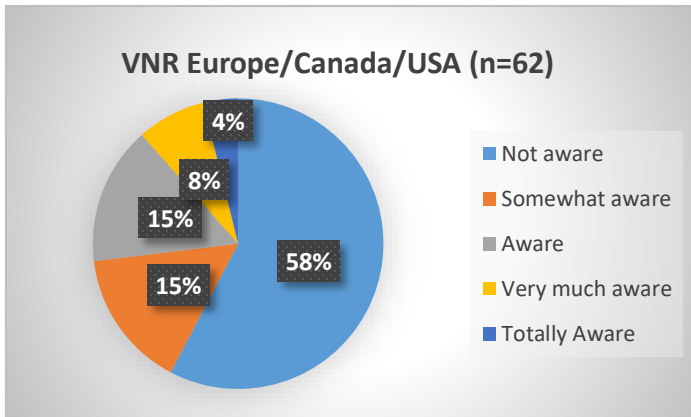


Figure 8

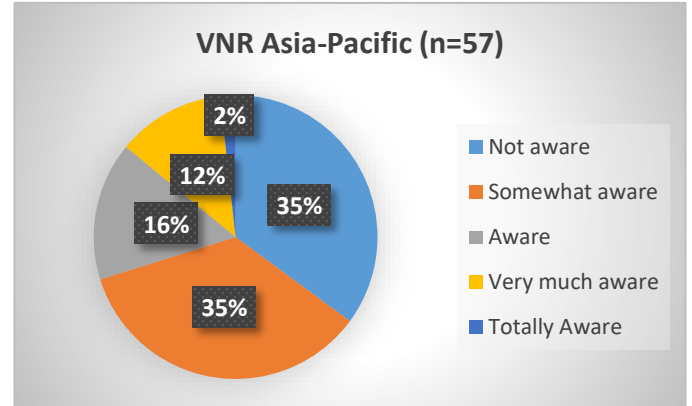


Figure 9

Clearly, being aware of the commitment of a country to present a VNR at the HLPF does not translate into knowledge of the **process** governments will be following to prepare their national reports. We would expect those unaware of their country's VNR *commitment* to be unaware of the *process* their country would follow: but the levels of process awareness reported here are so low that they cannot be explained by this factor alone.

3.3 Civil Society and Stakeholder Engagement on VNRs

65% of all respondents agreed (“agreed” and “totally agreed”) that ‘civil society and other stakeholders would be able to engage in the preparation of the VNR in their country’. However, **15%** of respondents “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with the previous affirmation and **20%** did not know or neither agreed nor disagreed with it. Assuming that when answering “being able” to engage in the process, and the corresponding Spanish and French translations, respondents were referring to the presence or absence of obstacles to participation, this clearly highlights a **shortfall in how participatory and inclusive some national review processes are**.

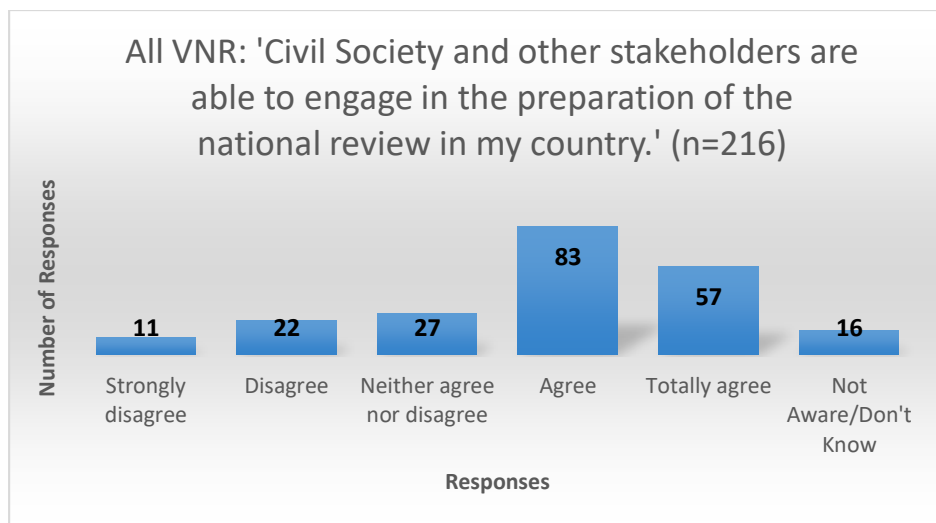


Figure 10

The civil society sector reflected this trend, with 62% answering “being able” to engage in the preparation of the national review (totally agree or agree) in their countries, 20% disagreed, and 18% that were not aware or did not know (n=100).

Regional variations

50% of respondents in Europe, Canada and the USA affirmed (“agreed” plus “totally agreed”) that civil society and stakeholders were able to participate in preparation of their country’s VNR, whilst **66%** of respondents from Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia/Pacific (**67%**) and Africa (**70%**) agreed. (Figures 11-14)

VNR countries: 'Civil Society and other stakeholders are able to engage in the preparation of the national review in my country.'

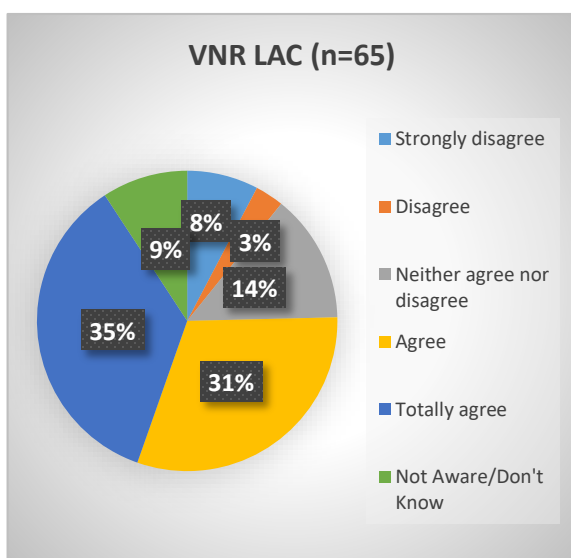


Figure 11

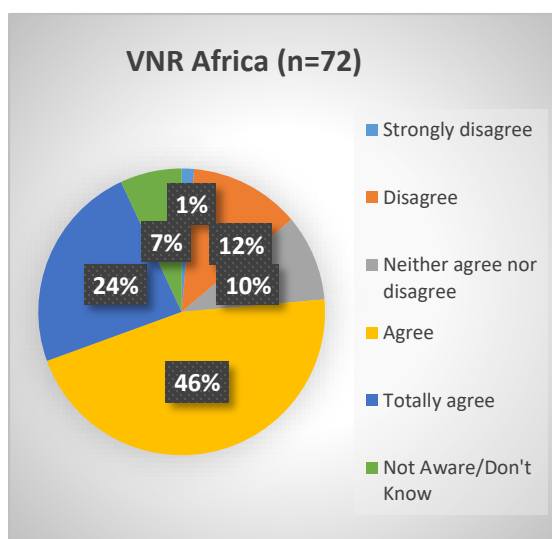


Figure 12

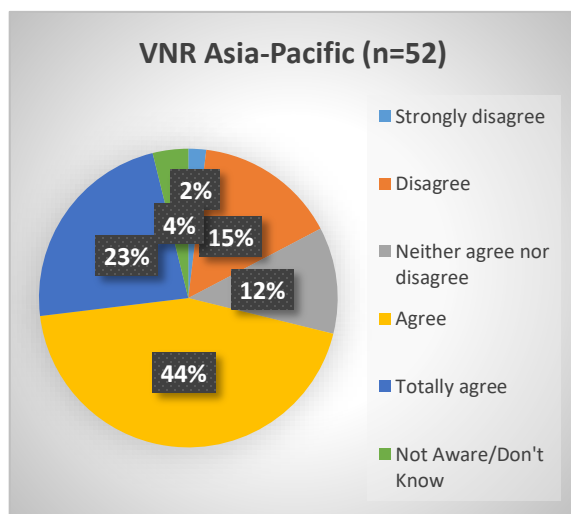


Figure 13

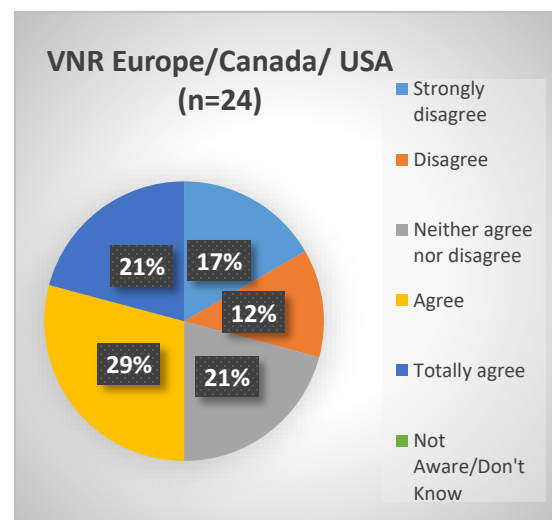


Figure 14

3.4 Means of engagement for stakeholders

The survey also allowed respondents to express **how civil society was engaging** in the national review processes, and how they would like to engage.

Where civil society and stakeholders are engaging on the VNR process, 'coordinated approaches by coalitions/groups', 'national consultations' and 'multi-stakeholder committees' are the main means of engagement (Figure 15).

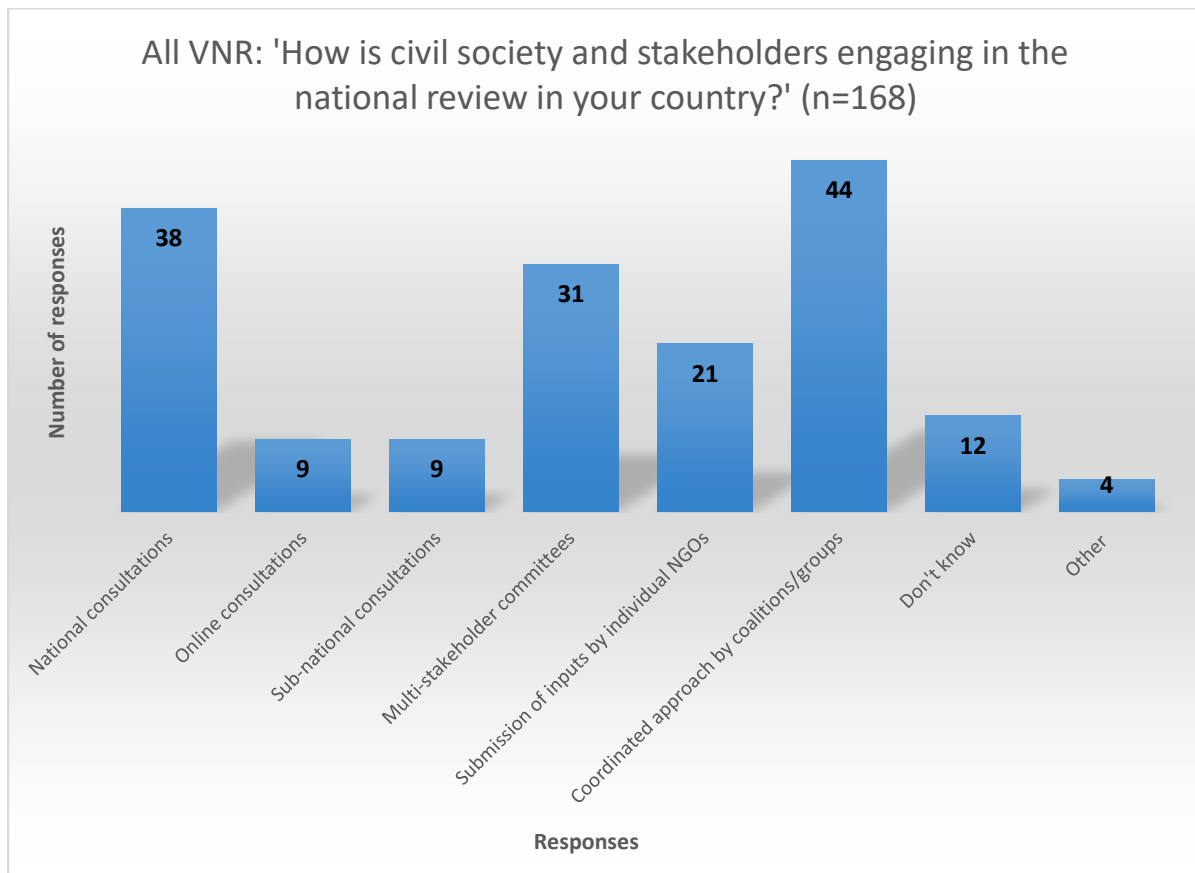


Figure 15

Regarding how they would like to see civil society and stakeholders engaging on VNR preparation, responses are widely distributed. Respondents tended to favour 'coordinated approaches by coalitions/groups', followed by 'national consultations' and participation in 'multi-stakeholder committees', but all categories gathered significant numbers of responses. Only two respondents said that they did not want to engage (Figure 16). The common responses indicate a strategic role to be played by self-organized structures of civil society and stakeholders at the national level that exchange information, coordinate efforts and facilitate participation and dialogue with governments.

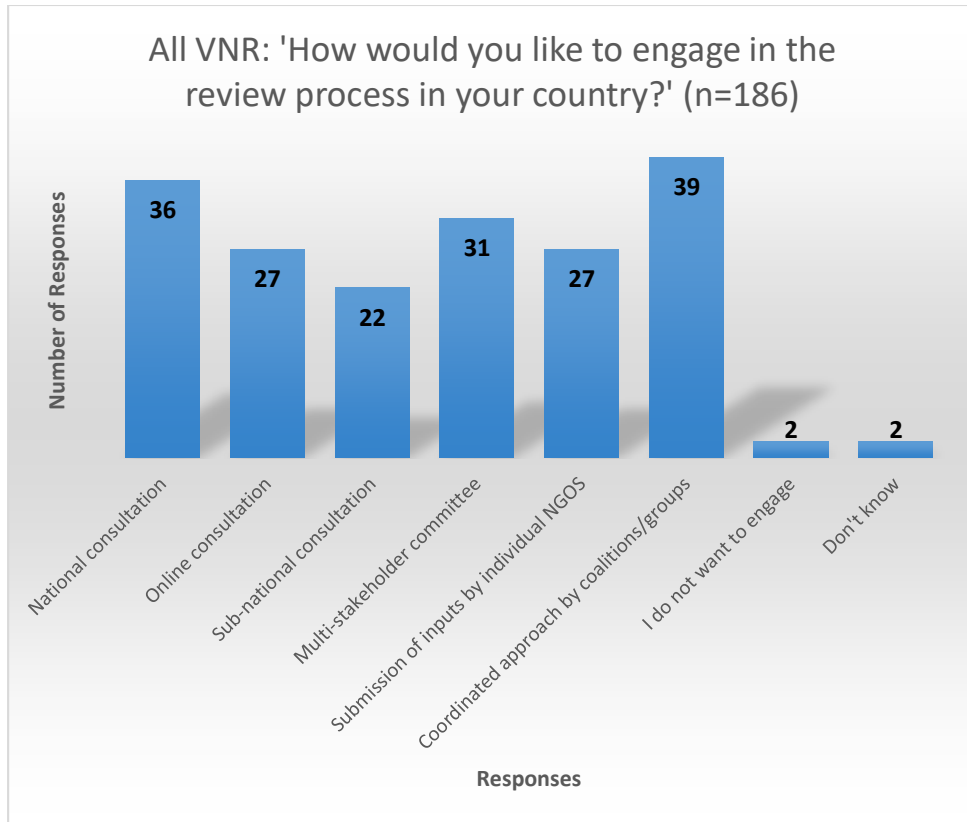


Figure 16

4. Global awareness of, and participation in, national plans and processes

4.1 Global Awareness of National Implementation Plans

Overall, 41% of respondents (both VNR and non-VNR countries) were not aware or only somewhat aware of their countries plans to implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. 58% of respondents were aware (34%) or very much/totally aware (24%) (Figure 17).

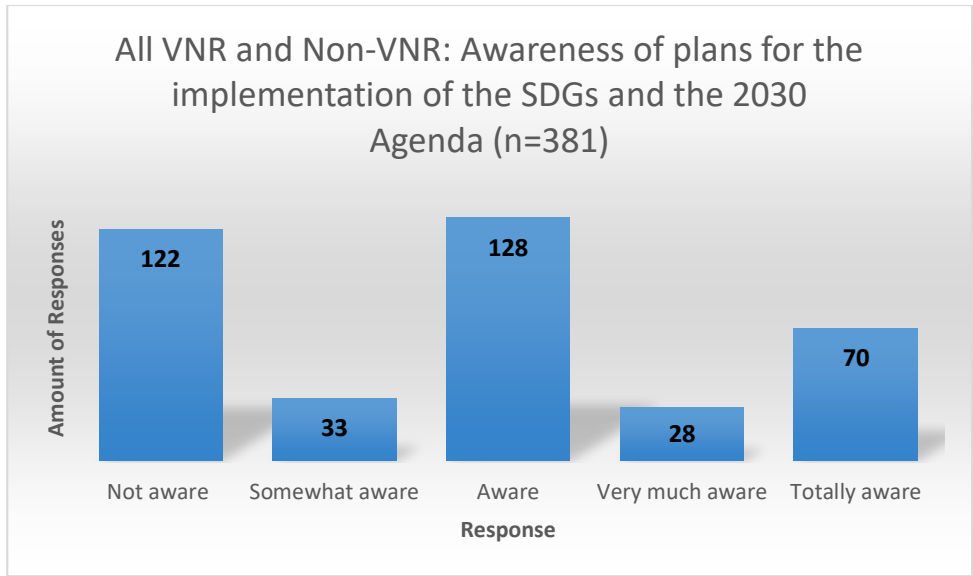


Figure 17

Regional disparities:

The regional review shows similar levels of awareness for Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin American and the Caribbean. Respondents in Europe, Canada and the USA demonstrated lower levels of awareness about their countries’ implementation plans, with 54% responding that they were “not aware” or only “somewhat aware” of their countries implementation plans for the 2030 Agenda (Figure 18).

Figure 18

Region	Not Aware/Somewhat Aware	Aware	Very much aware/totally aware
Africa (n= 127)	29%	46%	25%
Asia/Pacific (n=59)	32%	41%	27%
Europe/Canada/USA (n=65)	54%	18%	28%
Latin America and the Caribbean (n=108)	40%	30%	30%

Civil society respondents showed a slightly higher-than-average level of knowledge about their countries’ implementation plans, with around 40% “aware” of the plans and 26% replying to be “very much or totally aware”. 34% of respondents were “not aware” or only “somewhat aware” of their countries’ implementation plans (Figure 19).

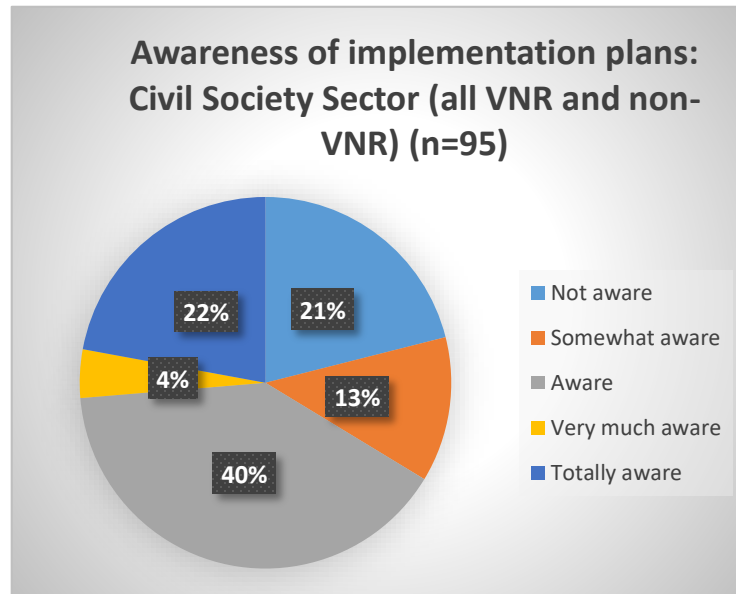


Figure 19

4.2 Access to information

44% of respondents in VNR countries agreed they had the necessary information to engage and contribute to national review, whilst 37% strongly disagreed or disagreed and 18% of respondents either did not know, or neither agreed or disagreed (*Figure 20*).

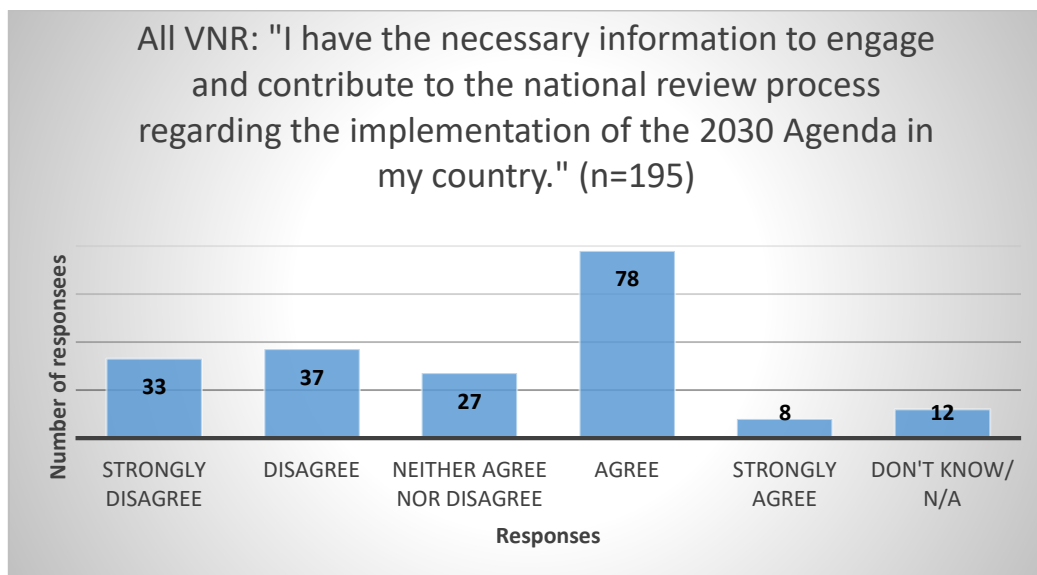


Figure 20

When responses from non-VNR countries are included, the proportion of responses indicating lack of information increases, to 49% ("strongly disagree" or "disagree"). **Only 33% ("agree" or "strongly agree") of respondents consider that they do have the necessary information to**

engage and contribute to the national review process regarding the 2030 Agenda. 18% of all respondents “did not know” or “neither agreed nor disagreed” with the affirmation (Figure 22).

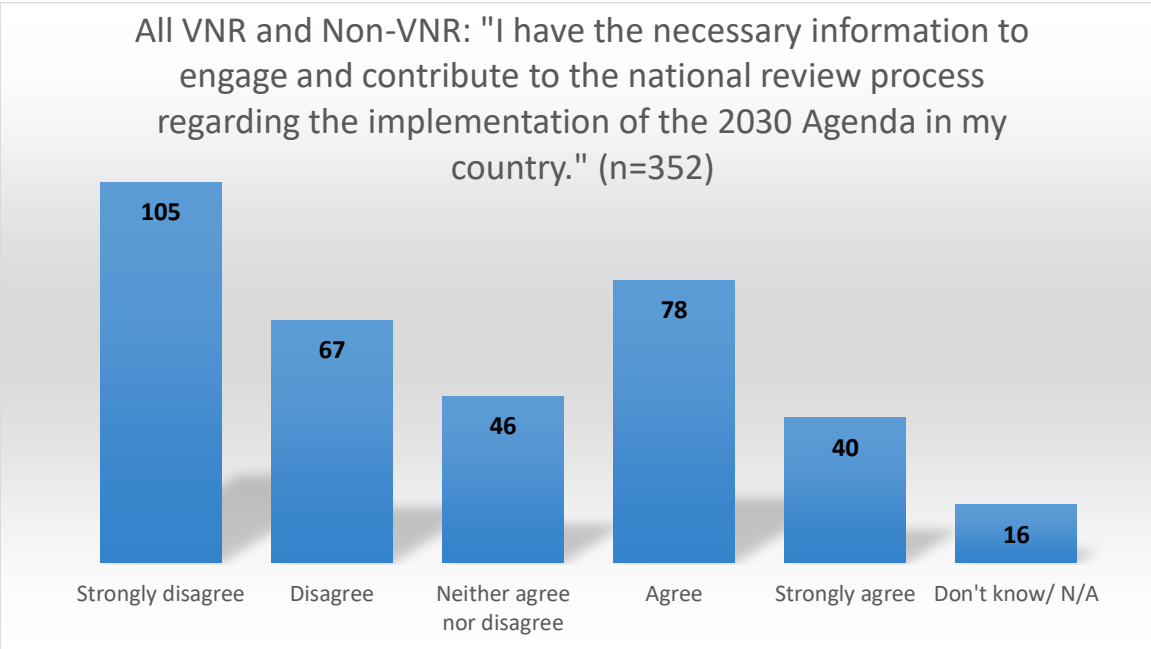


Figure 21

Respondents in non-VNR countries were asked about their awareness on the fact that countries were volunteering to present national reviews at the UN HLPF: 41.5% were “totally aware” or “very much aware”, 24.5% were “aware” and 34% were “not aware” or only “somewhat aware” (Figure 23).

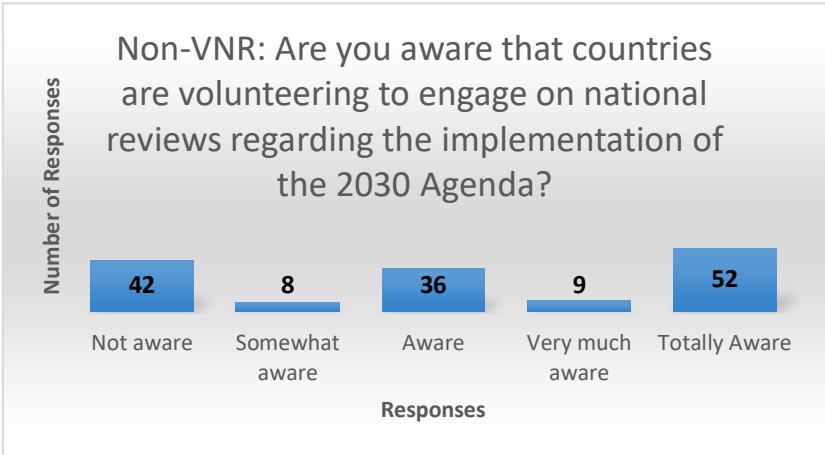


Figure 22

This data shows that at least 1/3 of respondents in non-VNR countries lacked awareness (“not aware” or “somewhat aware” of the global process of voluntary reviews (n=147).

4.3 Qualitative Data on awareness and participation

The survey also left an open space for respondents to bring additional perspectives and comments about the implementation and follow up of the 2030 Agenda in their countries. The main commonalities between responses in English, Spanish and French are:

- **A call for more publicity and awareness around countries' plans to implement the 2030 Agenda and processes of national reviews.** Respondents used the open question to flag their lack of information about implementation plans and about processes to be followed by volunteer countries to prepare their national volunteer reviews. Some mentioned the need to make information more accessible and translated to different languages used in their countries.
- **An enthusiasm to participate and a belief that stakeholders can add distinctive value to SDG implementation.** Individual responses called for the participation of 'all stakeholders', to 'leave no one behind' and for governments to make broader consultations at the national level, beyond those few who are typically engaged. Respondents emphasized the key role of civil society and stakeholders in the implementation and follow up of the 2030 Agenda.
- **Frustration expressed with the slow pace of government action and lack of opportunities to engage, as well as a need for building capacity for meaningful engagement.** Some respondents highlighted the lack of time for proper consultations. Others mentioned the challenges to include the most marginalized groups, and how difficult it can be to set up consultations at regional and local levels. Some respondents added the need for strengthened capacity, especially funding for civil society and stakeholders to be able to meaningfully engage.

Does Language Matter?

The 2016 Together 2030 report on stakeholder perceptions highlighted the disparity between respondents in French, English and Spanish. This year, once again, differences are present between the different language responses. Additional data work this year allows us to see how far these differences correlate with different regions. For example, the distribution of responses on questions 2 and 10 look very similar for respondents in Spanish and respondents from Latin America and the Caribbean: this is not surprising given that approximately 90% of Spanish Language responses came from countries in the LAC region. Whilst responses in French do show variations from the aggregate picture, it is impossible to tell from this data alone whether language constituted a specific barrier. By far the lowest number of responses to the questionnaire were received in French: we cannot tell whether this indicates especial challenges for francophone stakeholders in accessing and engaging in national consultations.

5. Key Findings and Recommendations

5.1 Awareness of voluntary national reviews (VNRs), and especially how to engage in VNR processes, is low. This constitutes a major barrier to meaningful participation by stakeholders, and to establishing “open, inclusive, participatory and transparent follow up processes at all levels” (2030 Agenda, paragraph 74.d).

The data shows different levels of awareness in VNR countries and many variations across regions and sectors around reporting and the process for reporting. Nevertheless, the picture is not positive: one-third of respondents were unaware that their countries were undertaking VNR this year; only one in four civil society (CSO) respondents were aware of the process their governments were using to prepare their reports.

Recommendation: *Governments need to strengthen efforts to publicize their plans and processes for national review, and opportunities for participation, sharing common challenges and identifying best practices in stakeholder engagement.*

5.2 High expectations for civil society and stakeholder participation in national reviews processes has not universally translated into genuine spaces and opportunities for engagement.

At least 1/3 of the respondents did not consider that civil society and stakeholders would be able to participate, or did not know whether they could. This demonstrates, as a minimum, a lack of an optimal enabling environment for participation.

Recommendation: *Governments will need to match the willingness and enthusiasm of civil society and stakeholders for engagement by setting up and communicating a transparent, participatory and inclusive national review processes. Those should be broad and include all stakeholders and sectors. Processes must be publicized and organized in a timely manner.*

5.3 Respondents have shown interest in engaging on national review processes via several approaches, including coordinated spaces for civil society engagement on national review processes.

It is clear that stakeholders want to engage in and contribute to national processes, and do so via a range of approaches. There is a desire amongst respondents for coordination mechanisms amongst civil society and other stakeholders.

Recommendation: *The participatory processes of review established by governments, and facilitated by global and regional support requires several approaches for participation of civil society and stakeholders. Exploring self-organization and setting up of cooperation platforms at national and regional levels may facilitate coordination and inclusion at national and regional levels. It will be important to continue advancing on adapting new and existing collaboration models to the 2030 Agenda.*

5.4 Global awareness of national plans and the VNR process amongst civil society is limited. Whilst varying from region to region, awareness of the VNR system as a vehicle for follow up and review is far from universal. Awareness of country plans that address the sustainable development goals (SDGs) is mixed.

Recommendation: *Governments should publicize national SDG-oriented plans and governance structure, and should be supported in doing this by regional and global levels of review. More effort should be made at all levels to promote knowledge of the VNR system.*

5.5 The universality of the agenda is not clearly reflected in data for European VNR countries, nor on awareness of national plans in Europe, Canada and the United States. Low figures for awareness of national processes and ability to participate in European VNR countries are a concerning sign for the universality of the Agenda and for transparent, accountable governance around the SDGs in the region. All countries have committed to implement and follow up on an inclusive manner and European countries, as well as other developed countries such as Canada and the USA are not, based on this evidence, taking the lead on this.

Recommendation: *European, Canada and the USA governments should make especial efforts to publicize the SDGs as a universal agenda with meaningful domestic and external policy implications, and should plan and publicize participatory processes of national review. Governments in Europe, Canada and the USA should, in line with A/RES/70/1, prepare ambitious national responses to the SDGs, publicize these responses, and engage with civil society and stakeholders on them.*

6. Credits and Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Naiara Costa (naiara.costa@together2030.org), Together 2030 International Secretariat; Graham Long (graham.long@ncl.ac.uk) and Louise Luxton (Newcastle Politics Department). Members of the Together 2030 Core Group (Arellys Bellorini, Andrew Griffiths and Marggie Simo) reviewed and added contributions to the document.

The project team from Together2030 and Newcastle University is grateful to all those that supported the dissemination of the survey and, especially, to the 461 respondents who dedicated time and efforts to share their views with us. We hope that this work will contribute to raising awareness about the need to make civil society participation and engagement a reality in accordance with the commitment expressed in the 2030 Agenda.

We are grateful to Ian O’Flynn, Javier Sajuria and Emily Clough from the Department of Politics of the Newcastle University for technical input on this survey. All errors and omissions remain the authors’ own.

7. Appendices

- Annex 1: [Questionnaire in English](#)
- [Methodology and Background note](#)

8. Acronyms

CSO: Civil Society Organisation

HLPF: United Nations High Level Political Forum

LAC: Latin America and the Caribbean

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

VNRs - Voluntary National Reviews

About Together 2030

Together 2030 (www.together2030.org) is a civil society initiative that promotes national implementation and track progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Initiative, set up in December 2015, aims at generating knowledge and project voices from different civil society and stakeholders around the world on the challenges and opportunities for the 2030 Agenda.

Together 2030 brings together actors to discuss the way to formulate and implement roadmaps at national level and hold governments to account at all levels.

As of May 2017, 486 organizations have joined Together 2030 from around 89 countries. More than 70% of those are based in developing countries and around 30% in developed countries.

About Newcastle University

Newcastle University is a public research university located in Newcastle upon Tyne in the North-East of England. It is a member of the Russell Group, one of 24 leading research universities in the UK and has a global reputation for academic excellence. We emphasize that the primary feature of a civic university is its sense of purpose – an understanding of not just what it is good at, but what it is good for.



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