A whole-of-society approach: Partnerships to realize the 2030 Agenda

While implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is primarily the responsibility of governments, the scale and ambition of the agenda call for contributions from stakeholders across society including parliamentarians, citizens, civil society organizations, the private sector, academia, and the media. Based on a review of good practices emerging from around the world, this policy brief offers recommendations on how governments can support the establishment of multi-stakeholder partnerships and promote a whole-of-society approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Key messages

- The inclusion of non-state actors in formal governance mechanisms is an emerging standard practice that supports multi-stakeholder partnerships for 2030 Agenda implementation. Further leadership by governments is needed to ensure a partnership enabling environment through policies and programs.

- Governments should establish plans to promote a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation that identify, support and coordinate contributions from a diverse stakeholders, establish mechanisms for multi-stakeholder engagement, and support multi-stakeholder partnerships including in terms of funding and capacity development.

- Governments should incentivize inclusive and effective multi-stakeholder partnerships that incorporate the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda such as leaving no one behind, integrated and indivisible approaches to sustainable development, intergenerational equity and progress within planetary boundaries.

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Introduction

In 2015, world leaders adopted the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda, which introduced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sets out a transformative plan for people and planet. It aims to promote shared prosperity, environmental sustainability and progress on sustainable development that leaves no one behind. Realizing the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda requires a whole-of-society approach. Governments, citizens, civil society organizations, academia and the private sector all have roles to play in contributing to sustainable development outcomes.

Nearly four years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, many countries have put in place building blocks for its implementation as shown by reviews of government reporting to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Many countries have integrated the SDGs into policy frameworks. Institutional and governance mechanisms have been established to oversee and evaluate progress on implementation. Partnerships across sectors are forming, while systems for monitoring and evaluation are being put in place. However, progress has been mixed across countries, particularly in terms of the extent to which countries have localized implementation of the 2030 Agenda, integrated its transformative elements into policies and practices, and developed enabling environments that promote whole-of-society contributions to sustainable development.

A whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation requires an enabling environment that promotes partnership and contributions by a wide range of stakeholders to collective impact. The integrated nature of the SDGs demands collaboration and cooperation across sectors and in partnership with local communities that understand best how to address local sustainable development challenges. Effective coordination is also key to avoid duplication of efforts and promote synergies. Partnerships can be harnessed to foster innovation, integrated approaches, solidarity and inclusivity, and actions to leave no one behind. Governments facilitate enabling environments for partnership, including through supportive policy frameworks, mapping of efforts by stakeholders from across society and sharing of information, ongoing multi-stakeholder engagement, and initiatives that promote collective contributions towards sustainable development.

This policy brief outlines emerging standard and good practices with respect to the establishment of multi-stakeholder partnerships to implement the 2030 Agenda. It is based on a review of countries reporting to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development over the 2016–18 period through Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports, which collectively serve as a key element of international follow-up and review of 2030 Agenda implementation. Also, interviews were conducted with 22 civil society organizations from 16 countries to complement and validate information presented in VNR reports. The brief provides an overview of emerging practices along with recommendations on how governments can improve their efforts. An annex with detailed information on the specific good practices highlighted in this brief serves as a useful resource for governments and other stakeholders that are keen to adopt and promote good practices for 2030 Agenda implementation.

What is a good practice?

TRANSFORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF THE 2030 AGENDA

A good practice is an activity or approach that demonstrates incorporation of one or more of the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda. The agenda is human rights-based and focuses on the inclusion of, and change for, the poorest and most vulnerable by promoting their inherent dignity and human rights through efforts to leave no one behind. Efforts are informed by inclusivity, solidarity and participation. The 2030 Agenda is universal in that it applies to all countries and people. The economic, social and environmental pillars of the 2030 Agenda are of equal importance, with the SDGs being integrated and indivisible—achievements under any one goal are linked to progress on others. Implementation of the agenda should occur with respect for planetary boundaries and inter-generational responsibility, recognizing the need to protect the planet's resources now and for future generations. Importantly, good practices respect the aspirational nature of the 2030 Agenda, demonstrably moving beyond standard practices or business-as-usual approaches. Finally, the 2030 Agenda is grounded in commitments to transparency and accountability.

HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

INTEGRATED AND INDIVISIBLE

INCLUSIVITY AND PARTICIPATION

PROGRESS WITHIN PLANETARY BOUNDARIES

INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

ASPIRATIONAL

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

PARTNERSHIP ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Good practices include the establishment of legal and policy frameworks that enable stakeholders to organize and partner within and across sectors. Closing space for civil society around the world makes the question of legal and policy frameworks particularly important for a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation. A partnership enabling environment is characterized by government leadership and coordination of efforts to maximize synergies while respecting the autonomy and initiative of individual actors.

SPACE FOR COLLABORATION

As outlined in the policy brief on multi-stakeholder engagement in this series, good practices in multi-stakeholder engagement promote partnership, particularly through the use of principled approaches that ensure openness and inclusivity and provide a basis for ongoing exchanges. Governments have a role to play in facilitating exchanges within and between sectors, including through institutionalized and ad hoc offline and online engagement opportunities. Good practice is convening diverse stakeholders to develop relationships, build trust and identify opportunities for collaboration.

PARTNERSHIP SUPPORT

Good practice is investing in partnerships that promote collective impact within and across sectors according to the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda. It is knowing when to partner directly and when to play more of a facilitation role to broker partnerships between others. Good practice is also partnering according to well-established approaches to effective partnership, such as ensuring alignment of interests, co-defining problems and co-creating solutions, establishing roles and responsibilities, and developing systems for communication, transparency and mutual accountability. Finally, good practice is understanding the capacity challenges that diverse stakeholders face to building effective partnership on the 2030 Agenda and working with them to ensure that they have the necessary skills to collaborate effectively.

PARTNERSHIP ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
- Partnership promotion legislation and policies
- Government leadership and coordination

SPACE FOR COLLABORATION
- Institutionalized and ad hoc multi-stakeholder engagement mechanisms
- Regular exchanges and knowledge sharing offline and online
- Brokership

PARTNERSHIP SUPPORT
- Financial and human resources
- Capacity development

Standard practices

According to civil society reviews of VNR reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2017 and 2018, it is standard practice for governments to refer to contributions by non-state actors to 2030 Agenda implementation in VNR reports. Non-state actor participation in governance mechanisms for 2030 Agenda implementation appears to be an emerging standard practice based on VNR reports submitted in 2018. Information on overall approaches—policies and programs—to support partnerships was limited, however.

With respect to partnerships with non-state actors, reporting by governments on this area improved in 2018 over 2017. For civil society, the private sector and academia, VNR reports tend to refer to specific initiatives or partnerships. With few exceptions, VNR reports do not refer to the enabling environment for civil society. In addition to contributions to awareness raising, the emergence of national
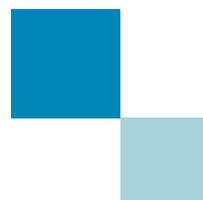
civil society coalitions was cited by 15 of 88[1] VNR reports over 2017 and 2018. The emergence of national civil society coalitions on the 2030 Agenda is more widespread than that suggests. A 2018 report by Together 2030 and the Norwegian Forum for Development and the Environment looked at inputs from civil society organizations in 33 countries that are engaging in national coalitions focused on the 2030 Agenda. For the private sector and academia, no standard practices were identified in terms of overall approaches by governments. Among private sector actors, the adoption of award programs by business associations to promote action and partnerships on the 2030 Agenda appears to be an emerging standard practice. In 2019, United Nations Global Compact local networks in 17 countries will award young professionals as SDG Pioneers. Reporting on partnerships with other stakeholders, such as youth, volunteers, trade unions and the media, tends to be limited and focused on ad hoc initiatives.

A limited number of countries reported on specific approaches to partnerships with development partners. Standard practices are unclear, though 2017 and 2018 VNR reports suggest that developing countries are looking for development partners to partner through financial and technical assistance to achieve their development priorities and/or support overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

As noted in the policy brief on capacity development in this series, there is a need for improved reporting on overall approaches to partnership for 2030 Agenda implementation. Although more information is available on partnerships than capacity development efforts, more examples are needed to understand standard and good practices that can inform knowledge sharing and peer learning.

Good practices

VNR reports and interviews with civil society organizations highlight established good practices around promoting partnerships for 2030 Agenda implementation. These good practices include establishing policies to support partnership, such as including support for partnerships in overarching national sustainable development plans or 2030 Agenda implementation plans. Some countries have also established institutional arrangements that support partnership, particularly in the form of inclusive, multi-stakeholder governance structures[2] that oversee 2030 Agenda implementation. Other examples of good practice point to multi-stakeholder engagement

mechanisms that bring together diverse stakeholders through offline and online opportunities to share knowledge, coordinate efforts and promote further collaboration. In addition, a number of countries have made use of national priority setting and VNRs processes to promote multi-stakeholder partnerships, including in terms of creating inclusive committees to guide these processes and by submitting a VNR report that systematically outlines contributions made by a wide range of stakeholders in addition to the national government.[3]

The brief identified limited examples of government funding initiatives for 2030 Agenda-related partnerships in VNR reports. There was also limited information on initiatives aimed at supporting stakeholders to develop necessary skills to work effectively within and across sectors.[4] Finally, good practices are emerging from non-state actors to support partnerships for 2030 Agenda implementation, including the development of inclusive civil society coalitions, networks within academia, and platforms to promote action by the private sector. The review did not lead to the identification of a set of emerging good practices with respect to partnerships that specifically incorporate the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda since examples were limited. Nevertheless, a common theme across the examples below is their inclusive and participatory nature.

PARTNERSHIP ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Some countries have established policy frameworks and demonstrated leadership to support partnerships for 2030 Agenda implementation. **Bhutan** used its national development plan as an effective tool for establishing an enabling environment for partnership focusing on the "triple C"—coordination, consolidation and cooperation. The plan includes efforts related to the business enabling environment and capacity development for local stakeholders. The strategic framework of the **Czech Republic** for the 2030 Agenda calls for establishing a framework of voluntary commitments to meaningfully manage the range of contributions from non-state actors and encourage cross-sector partnerships. **Jamaica's** Vision 2030 Jamaica calls for mobilizing the strengths of all stakeholders to achieve sustainable development. The government has published a roadmap to inform partnerships on awareness raising and citizen feedback. **Laos's** draft SDG roadmap underscores effective issue-based partnerships, rather than a centrally planned approach. **Uganda** has developed a coordination framework and national SDG roadmap. Although there have been

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1   The 2017 civil society review of VNR reports included 42 of the 43 reports. Eighty-nine countries reported to the United Nations High-level Political Forum in 2017 and 2018.

2   The policy brief on institutional coordination mechanisms in this series provides additional examples of good practices. Specific examples have not been showcased below.

3   A forthcoming report by Action for Sustainable Development based on a survey of civil society organizations and others shows that non-state actor engagement in VNR processes has been largely ineffective. Examples of good practice in this area are therefore particularly useful for informing approaches going forward.

4   See the policy brief on capacity development in this series.

implementation challenges, the coordination framework is good practice. It sets out technical working groups that cover all aspects of SDG implementation and include government institutions, development partners, civil society and the private sector. Launched in 2018, the national SDG roadmap also seeks to create an enabling environment for a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation and includes references to partnerships.

In the context of international development, **Canada** and **Laos** have established policies that aim to support an enabling environment for partnership. **Canada's** Policy for Civil Society Partnerships for International Assistance sets out guiding principles for enhancing partnerships with national, local and international civil society actors with actionable steps to realize effective partnerships. **Laos's** Vientiane Declaration of Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, a partnership agreement between the government and development partners for the 2016—25 period, addresses issues around providing an enabling environment for partnerships and includes commitments to an enabling environment for civil society and the private sector.

SPACE FOR COLLABORATION

As mentioned, the inclusion of non-state actors in governance mechanisms is an emerging standard practice that supports multi-stakeholder engagement and partnerships. The 2019 Progressing National SDGs Implementation report showed an increase in the number of countries that have included non-state actors in formal governance mechanisms. This trend supports whole-of-society ownership over the 2030 Agenda and presents opportunities to build relationships and trust across sectors for inclusive multi-stakeholder approaches to implementation.

The review revealed specific initiatives to promote partnership outside of governance mechanisms. The government of **Armenia**, in partnership with the United Nations country office, launched the Armenia SDG Innovation Lab to unlock the potential of big data and develop a SDG barometer to monitor the financial support committed to public-private and civil society partnerships. This initiative is an example of public support towards navigating complexity around partnerships via monitoring.

Initiatives to promote a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation and partnerships through an emphasis on individual commitments by non-state actors exist in **Belgium**, **Finland**, **Greece**, **Poland** and the **Netherlands**. Founded in **Belgium** in June 2015, The Shift is a platform that gathers around 410 businesses, non-governmental organizations and others to promote partnerships and sustainable business models, including through

the Belgian SDG Charter that commits signatories to advancing and internalizing the SDGs. **Finland's** Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development promotes and showcases concrete actions by government institutions, civil society, the private sector and others to implement the SDGs and has been used to foster partnerships within and across sectors. Sustainable Greece 2020, launched in partnership with social partners from all sectors in **Greece**, has participation by 10,000 citizens and encourages organizations to integrate sustainability into their operations, including through an award program and partnerships. Formed in 2017, **Poland's** Partnership for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals unites representatives from diverse backgrounds to promote partnerships across sectors and undertake initiatives through joint and participatory planning. The SDG Charter in the **Netherlands** initially began as a private sector initiative to promote commitments and partnerships on the SDGs. Over 100 organizations have signed up, including government institutions.

VNR processes present an opportunity for governments to further strengthen and showcase partnerships on the 2030 Agenda. VNR reports for **Belgium**, **Canada**, **Cyprus**, **Denmark**, **Egypt**, **Greece**, **Jamaica**, **Malta**, **Nigeria**, **Slovenia** and **Uruguay** either include written inputs from non-state actors or consistently showcase their efforts throughout. Beyond integrating contributions from non-state actors in VNR reports, some countries took a participatory approach to drafting their VNR reports. **Lithuania** established a group of experts that included government institutions, non-governmental organizations and municipalities to draft its VNR report. **Paraguay's** VNR report was produced in collaboration between government institutions, civil society organizations, the private sector and others. **Romania** established an open working group comprised of government officials, civil society representatives and academics to prepare its VNR report.

PARTNERSHIP SUPPORT

VNR reports showcase a wide range of partnerships with non-state actors that support sustainable development. However, the extent to which partnerships have been established as a result of the 2030 Agenda is less clear. VNR reports tend to showcase existing and ongoing partnerships, with limited examples of countries developing specific SDG-related partnership mechanisms that provide dedicated financing and support to SDG-related partnerships. **Canada's** SDG Unit manages a funding program, which provided a series of grants to Canadian organizations to promote awareness of the 2030 Agenda and assist in consultations on Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy in 2019. The **Netherlands** has developed a SDG Partnership Facility to support

advancements in developing countries on SDG 2 on zero hunger, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth and SDG 17 on partnerships for the goals. According to **Slovakia's** VNR report, the government launched a micro-grant program to support small projects by local communities, schools and civil society actors that address sustainable development challenges.

At the global level, a number of initiatives showcase partnerships and funding mechanisms to advance the 2030 Agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals Fund brings together United Nations agencies and the public and private sectors to deliver multi-stakeholder partnerships. SDG Funders, an initiative of the Foundation Center, collates information on how foundations are supporting the SDGs, suggesting that over US$112 billion has been allocated to support the SDGs since 2016. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network's Local Data Action Solutions Initiative established a micro-grant initiative to promote sub-national monitoring of the SDGs.

With respect to capacity development to support multi-stakeholder partnerships, the review of VNR reports and interviews with civil society organizations did not lead to the identification of specific examples. Nevertheless, multi-stakeholder partnerships require new individual and institutional capacities. While a number of organizations have developed specific toolkits and resources to promote good practice in multi-stakeholder partnerships to advance the SDGs, including The Partnering Initiative and the Partnerships Resource Centre, governments also have a role to play in supporting non-state actors to develop their capacity to partner within and across sectors in light of the need for a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation.

SECTOR-SPECIFIC GOOD PRACTICES
Civil society

Interviews with civil society organizations highlight good practices emerging from national civil society coalitions on the 2030 Agenda. The Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh—a civil society platform in **Bangladesh** that generates knowledge to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda—has been useful for engaging the government and private sector on sustainable development issues, which has led to collaborative efforts. In **Hungary**, the Roundtable of Hungarian Civil Society Organisations for the Sustainable Development Goals took steps to engage nearly 100 civil society organizations with limited capacities to link their efforts to the SDGs, which are showcased on a dedicated website. This work has provided a basis for discussions with the government and helped

develop more coherent approaches to 2030 Agenda implementation. International development civil society organizations in **Portugal** worked with the United Nations Regional Information Centre to link with platforms that represent diverse stakeholders such as women, youth and trade unions under the 2030 Agenda, forming a civil society SDG Forum. The forum serves as a coalition of coalitions and has provided a basis for trust and relationship building between civil society groups. Finally, civil society organizations in **Uganda** created an inclusive Agenda 2030 Reference Group that brings together diverse civil society organizations to organize and build partnerships around the SDGs. Through regular meetings, the group has organized efforts by civil society and engaged governments, development partners and the private sector in a structured manner.

Private sector

Award programs to promote sustainability in the private sector appear to be emerging standard practice. Some countries have also established specific platforms to promote private sector partnerships. Established in 2015, Open 2030 Project is a business platform in **Japan** that offers learning opportunities to member businesses to identify and implement sustainable business models, including in partnership with social entrepreneurs, civil society, government institutions and other businesses. In **Lebanon**, the United Nations Global Compact Network Lebanon launched a SDG Council in 2017 that is composed of representatives from the private sector committed to championing the SDGs, forging partnerships and mobilizing resources for 2030 Agenda implementation.

Academia

Australia and the **Dominican Republic** have seen the establishment of academic networks committed to supporting the 2030 Agenda through tertiary education. As a result of a nationwide commitment by universities in **Australia** to implement the SDGs, a number of universities have started incorporating the SDGs in their strategic documents and curricula and various universities have founded institutes and faculties with clear links to the 2030 Agenda. In the **Dominican Republic,** the United Nations System, Ministry of Economy, Planning and Development, Dominican Association of University Rectors and Dominican Association of Universities signed an agreement to promote academia's role in 2030 Agenda implementation. All higher education institutions in the country have committed to contribute through research, monitoring and evaluation, curricula and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Recommendations

This brief showcases a range of approaches to supporting partnerships for 2030 Agenda implementation through an analysis of efforts to promote a partnership enabling environment, spaces for collaboration and specific partnerships. Several recommendations emerge from this analysis.

Support a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation by creating an enabling environment, including through policies that promote multi-stakeholder partnerships as well as government leadership and coordination.

Legal and policy frameworks can undermine the ability of non-state actors to organize, partner and contribute to sustainable development. In addition to ensuring that existing legislation and policies contribute to a partnership enabling environment, national 2030 Agenda implementation plans should make reference to multi-stakeholder partnerships and set out provisions to support a whole-of-society approach, including by identifying how government institutions will lead in the establishment of multi-stakeholder partnerships, coordinate contributions from non-state actors, engage stakeholders and resource collaborative efforts.

Create space for collaboration within and across sectors through inclusion of non-state actors in formal governance arrangements as well as institutionalized and ad hoc multi-stakeholder engagement.

Inclusion of non-state actors in formal governance arrangements shows commitment to a whole-of-society approach to 2030 Agenda implementation and provides a basis for collaboration across sectors. Ad hoc and institutionalized multi-stakeholder engagement mechanisms can allow for participation by a wider range of stakeholders beyond governance mechanisms as well as opportunities for discussion and collaboration on specific elements of the 2030 Agenda, such as activities related to specific goals or milestones in implementation like setting national priorities. Inclusion of non-state

actors in efforts to report at national, regional and global levels also offers an opportunity to promote collaboration and showcase a whole-of-society approach to advancing the 2030 Agenda.

Develop mechanisms to broker and strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships, including through the provision of accessible finance and capacity development.

Many non-state actors are contributing to sustainable development by establishing their own commitments to the 2030 Agenda in line with existing resources and capacities. Non-state actors should be encouraged to continue to develop their own contributions, including in partnership with others. At the same time, governments have an important role to play in facilitating and promoting partnerships, including through the provision of finance and capacity development to enable non-state actors to scale up successful initiatives, innovate and collaborate effectively.

Promote partnerships that contribute to the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda, including leaving no one behind, integrated approaches, intergenerational equity and progress within planetary boundaries.

Governments can play a critical role in incentivizing partnerships that contribute to the transformative elements of the 2030 Agenda. This role includes efforts to convene diverse stakeholders for cross-sector exchanges and knowledge sharing as well as the provision of finance and other resources to build capacity for collaborative efforts that specifically support the transformative elements.

Take an inclusive approach to multi-stakeholder partnership by supporting partnerships with a variety of actors, including government institutions, civil society, local communities, academia, the media and the private sector.

A whole-of-society approach to the 2030 Agenda recognizes the valuable contributions made by a range of stakeholders to sustainable development. Efforts to promote multi-stakeholder partnerships should be inclusive, mindful of the roles and potential contributions that diverse non-state actors can make, including in collaboration with others.

Partner according to high standards.

Good practices with respect to effective partnering are well established. They point to ensuring that partnerships are grounded in the needs, interests and comparative advantages of different stakeholders, based on clearly defined goals, roles and responsibilities, and structured to allow for monitoring of success, communication, flexibility and course correction.

Photo: BCCIC, 2018