Side Event:
CSOs Participation in the VNR Process and SDG Follow-up Mechanisms
13 July 2018, UNDP Office, New York
Draft report by Ms. Jyotsna Mohan, Asia Development Alliance (ADA)

The Asia Development Alliance (ADA), the UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub, the International Platform for National NGOs (IFP), the UNECE Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism and the UNECLAC civil society engagement mechanism jointly organized a side event on 13 July 2018 at the UNDP headquarters, during the 2018 HLPF.

The side event contributed to share experiences of government-CSO engagement across regions and understand the role of the United Nations to encourage multi-stakeholder partnerships and ensure that the transformative promise of the SDGs to "Leave No One Behind' is delivered. It also focused on challenges and opportunities related to CSO-government engagement based on previous CSO lessons learned during VNR reporting and other follow-up mechanisms in 2016 , 2017 and 2018.

The side event aimed to answer the following key questions:

- What are the challenges and opportunities for an inclusive and meaningful CSO engagement in the VNR process and other SDG follow-up mechanisms across the three regions? How to promote regional exchange of learning and good practice linked to VNRs?
- What can we learn from CSO alternative reports, and submissions on VNR reporting, for instance VNR guidelines prepared by CSOs such as IFP, ADA and others?
- Are the governments of 2018 VNR reporting countries prepared to fulfil the principles of the UNDESA Handbook for Preparation of VNRs regarding the role of civil society in this process?
- How can UN agencies support CSO engagement in SDG implementation at the country level? What tools and platforms can the UN create and promote to advance CSO engagement in this context?"

The session was moderated by **Ms. Hannie Meesters**, Programme Specialist, 2030 Agenda and SDGs from the UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub. From the outset, she acknowledged the crucial role and contribution of civil society in SDG implementation and review mechanisms at the national level. She stressed the need for Voluntary National Reviews (VNR), which are extremely important processes and a strategic entry point for CSO engagement at the national level. She also reflected on the 2030 Agenda and the role of UNDP in the inclusive and meaningful implementation of the SDGs, both in the Asia-Pacific region and at the global level, as well as on potential opportunities for the UN and CSOs to work together to strengthen the VNR process in the region.

Opening and framing remarks

Mr. Anselmo Lee, Senior Advisor, ADA stressed that, beyond the obsession with the VNRs, there is a need to go deeper and focus on the real challenges, limitations and strategies. CSOs need to come up more innovative strategies: for example, SDG 16 is about governance, peace and justice, where peace is the missing link. There is therefore a need to bring in the institutions that work on peace and work together rather that work in silos.

Ms. Magda Elena Toma, Director, IFP, identified CSOs as one of the key actors in SDG implementation. However, in reality, the issue of means of implementation (MoI) of the SDGs is more theoretical than practical and there is a need to push for the MoI in SDG 17 through partnerships. She acknowledged the role of the six regional coalitions of IFP and how they work together alongside IFP to influence and support regional processes. She highlighted important reports published by IFP, i.e. a) "*Everything you need to know about the VNR process*" which provides useful introduction to, and links for VNR-related resource materials and best practices on CSO-government engagement in VNR processes; b) "*Guidelines for CSO shadow reports monitoring the implementation of Agenda 2030 at national level*", which discusses the various ways through which the CSOs can engage in the VNR process.

Regional perspectives

Ms. Inese Vaivare, Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation (LAPAS), reflected on the existing regional mechanism on the VNR in the ECIS region. She mentioned that most CSOs are working on the certain goals of SDGs but not VNR, and hence stressed the importance to be engaged in the national level. In the absence of national-level branches in certain

countries, people don't know how the local CSO work is connected with the SDGs. Some European CSO colleagues were consulted by their respective government on the VNR only at the last minute. She mentioned that CSOs lack the capacity to draft VNR or do not have the financial resources to access and/or participate in the regional or global advocacy processes. She also stressed the fact to narrate the success story with the government on the SDGs engagement process since not many CSOs come up with such kind of experience sharing.

Mr. Miguel Santibañez, Chilean NGO Association (ACCION), highlighted that in the case of Latin America, VNRs are connected with the political situation. There is a need to associate and link the causes/issues of CSOs with the 2030 Agenda, an internationally-agreed agenda. SDG implementation at the national level is quite diverse in Latin America but there is a possibility to achieve the SDGs when the government and CSOs start working together. CSO participation in uneven, including in countries such as Brazil, Peru and Central America where there are strong CSOs movements (e.g. gender and defense of democracy movements). In case of the 2030 Agenda, the participation of CSOs has been problematic. At the international and regional levels, there are several regional forums hosted by the UN: VNR and the HLPF is one important level but not the only one. At the national level – for instance in Brazil, Nicaragua, Honduras and in other authoritarian contexts – there are issues to achieve the SDGs related to the repression and shrinking space especially for CSOs working on the issues of human rights and the environment. Some crucial questions to be addressed include: people do not know about the SDGs, there is a need to make them relevant and popular. From the CSO side, many CSOs do not know how to submit shadow/CSO reports; such reports need to be integrated. From the government side, many ministries and departments do not talk to each other; sectoral policies are not represented; SDGs need to be better prioritized.

National perspectives

Ms. Hoang Phuong Thao (Action Aid Vietnam) and **Ms. Linh Nguyen Phuong** (Research Center for Management and Sustainable Development) provided insights on Viet Nam, where the term CSO is still a taboo. Politically it's a sensitive thing to participate in the national process. The International NGOs got engaged in the process in November 2017 at the last minute, thanks to the pressure from international

organizations like UNDP. Vietnamese CSOs only started to participate in early 2018 through some different workshops but had not been aware of the VNR process until April 2018. Key issues remain: concerns about the voluntary nature of the SDGs; no official political space for NGOs to participate, the idea of CSO reporting and inclusion of CSO role as partner in the report is not welcomed by the government; limited knowledge and awareness about SDGs; issues of policy coherence and the fact that the government tends to select what they want to include in their national report; nearly two-thirds of national indicators have no data or baseline, and CSOs are trying to collect evidence to get grassroot-level voices; imbalance of power and limited CSO resources which prevent the meaningful participation of CSOs especially at the local levels. Finally, SDG 17 does not mention the participation of CSOs, and only focuses on public-private partnerships.

Mr. Uchita De Zoysa, Global Sustainability Solutions, provided insights about the situation in Sri Lanka. The principles set forth at Rio+20 are now twisted and most countries do not have sufficient monitoring indicators to report on progress. According to him, the Sri Lanka VNR was subcontracted with no logical process and the multi-stakeholder platform was discontinued after some time. The HLPF and VNRs must provide an honest space for reporting and accountability. All countries should have a parallel process which brings the people's review and shows the gaps and points of convergence. The state only reflected on the positive and did not address the challenges. It would be good if official VNR data included strong validation process through multi-stakeholder dialogue, and more space was provided for national CSOs in the parallel reporting process. Common guidelines for CSO shadow reporting exist but are rarely used by CSOs – those should reflect the Development Effectiveness principles. There is an overall lack of data democracy. He added that SDG 17 includes a commitment to capacity building and multi-stakeholder partnerships with an emphasis on the role of private sector, which can play a dual role of accelerator to and resourcing of CSOs. There is a need to include the CSO enabling environment agenda, and to debate the national level of development and democracy, during the VNR discussions.

Consolidation and way forward

Mr. John Romano, TAP Network, highlighted there are enormous challenges in the implementation of SDGs. Awareness is a pre-requisite for engagement in the 2030 Agenda, which needs to be made relevant to citizens, grassroots and CSOs. In the context of shrinking civic space, very few countries have space to participate. The challenges related to data are multiple: no sufficient government statistics; no resource to collect the data; data literacy; the need to include non-official data resources from citizens, CSOs and academia. There is an important opportunity for using the perception indicator data and SDG 16.6. The HLPF and VNRs should be a platform for partnership. Instead of helping to address gaps and challenges in SDG implementation, there is a danger that VNRs become an administrative process. There is a huge opportunity to build momentum for the 2019 HLPF, and create different approaches to hold governments accountable. Some avenues include:

developing a platform to showcase CSO reports and match them up with official country reporting; mapping of CSOs on who is doing what, with their commitments.

Mr. Rukshana Nanayakkara, Transparency International (TI), underlined the need to build the knowledge and capacity of CSOs to engage in the VNR process; and increase the "level of sexiness" of SDGs to take them to the ground level. Creating spaces and interlinkages between what's happening at the ground level and the international level, but also by looking at cross-sectional issues, will be key components in the framework. CSO data needs to be produced and people's perceptions need to be collected to corroborate and complement national data systems, including for instance perception data on corruption and bribery. SDG implementation requires multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches: achieving the SDGs is not only the government's job but a collective responsibility. Positive engagement, such as the example of the cooperation with the Latvian government, needs to be showcased; such leadership and platforms need to be championed. UNDP [and the UN] can help bridge those gaps.