



HLPF 2016 Brief Series

ISSUE #4: Voluntary Country Reviews – ensuring meaningful participation and ensuring gender equality targets and goals are at the forefront

Key Messages:

Taking into account the 2030 Agenda's theme, "Leaving no one behind", the national review process should ensure meaningful engagement of all civil society, in their diversity, ensuring specific focus on groups that are marginalized and are inadequately represented in the country's decision making bodies.

Governments need to recognize the significant contributions that civil society can make to the preparation of the national reports. In particular, feminist and women's organizations can provide inputs, experiences and data from the ground on the progress toward gender equality through activities related to Goal 5 (Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls) and other relevant goals, as well as the impacts of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for gender equality.

All national policies and development funding need to be SDG-proofed, ensuring that all laws, programs and budgets are in line with principles of gender equality, human rights and environmental sustainability.

Background:

At the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2016, 22 UN member states volunteered to present reports on how they are preparing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/inputs>). The Women's Major Group appreciates that these 22 countries – the first to present their national reviews at the HLPF – are inviting constructive inputs from other member states and civil society in order to promote learning and improve their consultation processes and implementation efforts.

The WMG reviewed the information provided by these 22 countries based on the documents publicly available (primarily on the SD Knowledge Platform website). The Women's Major Group also issued a survey to 29 women's organisations and networks, representing approximately 100 CSOs. This survey aimed to analyse the first round of the national reports to the HLPF and specifically assess how governments implemented SDG 5 and how they engaged women's organisations.

This survey of the Women's Major Group covered 21 out of 22 countries (as one country did not upload information on the UN website). The conclusions and recommendations of the survey were published in a short report and presented at a side event at the HLPF on July 12th (see www.womenmajorgroup.org)

Some general observations:

Comparing the voluntary reviews, the Women's Major Group notes:

- While planning should have started 6 months ago, few countries were able to have a truly inclusive consultation with civil society within that timeframe.
- Two of the 21 countries (9,5%) reviewed had invited civil society to engage in the national HLPF review from the beginning.
- More than half (52%) of the countries did not / were not able to involve civil society at an early stage in planning the national SDG review report for HLPF.

Examples of Civil Society and SDG 5 Considerations in the Preparation of National Reports:

A. Civil Society:

- Very few countries incorporated civil society, especially women's organizations and other main actors, from the beginning of the process.
- Some countries invited a small (non-representative) number of civil society members to a consultation meeting, as a result of using restrictive selection criteria.
- Some few countries invited groups that already closely work with government instead of a wider group of independent major groups, constituencies and stakeholders.
- Most of the governmental reports could not be validated by civil society organizations, particularly women's organizations, given that NGOs and women's organizations did not have access to the draft report or the drafting process.

B. Sustainable Development Goal 5 "Gender Equality and the empowerment of all women and girls" and gender equality considerations:

- There are countries, such as Finland, Norway, Egypt, Morocco, Switzerland, and Germany, which specifically address SDG 5. They show the improvements made regarding gender equality but also acknowledge that there are specific aspects that need improvement.
- b) Other countries such as Sierra Leone make reference to the MDGs and shows the progress made regarding maternal mortality and girls' education. Sierra Leone then mentions plans for SDGs that includes engaging marginalized groups and rural women in consultations on the SDGs.
- Other countries, such as Uganda, France, Madagascar, and Turkey, specifically prioritize issues related to improving women's working conditions and their access to economic resources.
- Another group of countries, based on the information available to date, did not include or prioritize the consideration of SDG 5 and its targets. This was the case for Colombia, Mexico, Montenegro, Venezuela, and Estonia, so we believe there is room for improvement.
- Many reports present a strong focus on recent events. This is the case of Colombia, with the recently signed peace agreement, or Togo, with the Ebola outbreak in 2015 as well as the serious flooding that affected some areas. These could be opportunities to address the way in which structural inequalities are related to current events.

Recommendations to the HLPF process:

A. Process of national reviews

Women's organizations can support governments given their experience in monitoring and elaborating shadow reports for national, regional and global reviews of conferences, CSW and treaty bodies. Women's organizations can also play an important role in reaching out to large constituencies and disseminating information.

The Women's Major Group therefore makes the following recommendations to governments:

- Institutionalize the participation of the **diversity of feminists and women's organizations**, especially indigenous, migrants, youth, LGBTI, and others that have been traditionally marginalized. This inclusion should take place in an open and transparent manner at all stages of the process: design of the implementation strategy, the putting into place of the review mechanism, as well as during the implementation itself.
- Ensure **access to information for all** while strengthening qualitative and quantitative data.
- Governments and donors **should commit to financing and supporting civil society organizations**, especially feminists and women's organizations, so they can truly and meaningfully participate. Enabling such an inclusive process is of the utmost importance to ensure no one is being left behind.
- Planning for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda should start without any delay in all countries, making sure that civil society, including feminists and women's organizations, **are involved from the start**.

B. Content of national reviews

- SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls must be included in national review reports, ratifying the commitment of fulfilling women and girls' human rights, bearing in mind their diversity and the structural inequalities and multiple forms of discrimination they face.
- Adopt a model for the national review process and reports that allows **comparisons over time and among countries** on achievement of SDG 5 targets and importantly across the full agenda and all targets, and **build on existing mechanisms** such as the Agreed Conclusions from the CSW, the observation of the treaty bodies' committees such as the UPR, CEDAW, CESCR, CCPR and others.
- Countries should **link the national reporting with other human rights processes** such as the **CESCR**, see for example the concluding comments for France on their extra-territorial obligation of trade on human rights.
- The mechanisms for the advancement of gender equality and women's human rights should take a leading role to mainstream women's human rights in the state coordination mechanisms to effectively implement the SDG's, both in qualitative and quantitative terms.
- Ensure **direct access to all MOIs for feminist and women's organisations**, including grants for capacity building, political empowerment and their full engagement in the SDG implementation. A macro-economic shift must be promoted to ensure the eradication of all structural barriers that women face, including those of social, environmental and economic nature.
- Promote the introduction of gender **quotas** or other mechanisms in close cooperation with non-governmental and international organizations. Quotas should be seen as a temporary special measure for increasing women's political participation, heading towards parity in all spaces of decision making, both in domestic and public spheres;

- Strengthened political commitment to promote and fulfil women’s rights and ensure women’s access to justice.

Levels of civil society engagement:

Worthy of note is the levels of engagement of civil society that the Women’s Major Group found in the reports. We decided that two categories are useful to analyse this:

A. Meaningful participation means the right to express opinions and to discuss and exchange information and to attend policy meetings. This is ideally done through an institutionalized civil society engagement mechanism in which diversity of participation is ensured by reserving specific spaces for groups who are often not present in policy negotiations. UN Member States have committed to this in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in which they agree to engage “Major Groups and Stakeholders”, which includes the Women’s Major Group

Para 89. The HLPF will support participation in follow-up and review processes by the major groups and other relevant stakeholders in line with Resolution 67/290. We call on these actors to report on their contribution to the implementation of the Agenda.

B. Symbolic Participation is when a small number of civil society and women’s organizations are invited as a result of restrictive selection criteria. It is also when participants are only invited to listen to reports that are nearly or already finalized, and/or are requested to send comments with only 1 or 2 days to respond.

We hope the outcome of our analysis may be of use to the ongoing process of the HLPF and the reports of future volunteer countries.