Lessons from Geneva: Applying Insights from the UPR Process to Improve Reporting on SDG16

Webinar Report

About this event

As part of the 2021 Geneva Peace Week, DCAF together with UPR Info and WFUNA held a roundtable discussion aimed at drawing lessons from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process and how they could help improve reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). In particular, the event focused on the crucial role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in these two processes. A recording of the webinar can be found on DCAF's Youtube channel.

About DCAF's project on SDG 16

This webinar took place as part of DCAF's SDG 16 project, which aims to position SSG/R as a policy tool at the national and international levels for the realization of SDG 16. It focuses on three oversight actors, namely parliaments, civil society actors and independent oversight institutions. It develops SDG16-specific guidance that supports the work of SSG/R in the context of the 2030 Agenda. This project is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. More information can be found at www.dcaf.ch/SDG16.

Roundtable Experts

- **Patrick Bwire**, Regional Liaison Officer at Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC)
- **Karen Dumpit Gomez**, Commissioner at the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines
- **Louise Edwards**, Director of Programmes and Research at the African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum (APCOF)
- **Damian Etone**, Lecturer and Co-Director of Programme in Human Rights and Diplomacy at University of Stirling
- **Emma Hunt**, SDG16+ Coordinator at World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA)
- **Miloon Kothari**, Former UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing
- **Marina Kumskova**, Senior UN Policy and Advocacy Advisor at Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC)
- **Gianni Magazzeni**, Chief of UPR Branch at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

- **Mona M'Bikay**, Executive Director, UPR Info
- **Mary A. Nartey**, Director of the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, Ghana
- **Francesca Restifo**, Senior Human Rights Lawyer, UN Representative at the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)
- **John Romano**, Coordinator for Transparency, Accountability & Participation (TAP) Network
- **Alice Storey**, Lecturer and Associate Director of the Centre for Human Rights at Birmingham City University
- **Liv Tørres**, Director of Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies
- **John Robert Turyakira**, CSO National Stakeholders' Forum on the UPR in Uganda
- **Peter van Sluijs**, Senior Strategist at Cordaid and Coordinator of the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and State-building (CSPPS)
- **Nicoletta Zappile**, Programme Manager at UPR Info

Moderator

- **William McDermott**, Programme Manager, DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance

Main takeaways

The UPR and VNR processes

The UPR and VNR processes represent two key reporting mechanisms at the international level, with the former aiming to review the human rights situation of a country, while the latter focuses on the state of SDGs implementation and sharing lessons learned and challenges thereof. Despite being state-led processes, both reporting mechanisms foresee space for the participation of civil society organizations. However, where the UPR process has greater guarantees for civil society involvement, the VNRs largely depend on the goodwill of states to engage with CSOs. In addition, the UPR process is more mature, as its first cycle started in 2008, while the VNR process only began in 2016. Therefore, much could be learned from other global human-centred initiatives such as the UPR. With human rights being an integral component of the 2030 Agenda and SDG 16, in particular, the Human Rights Council (HRC) and its UPR Process can support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, and vice versa.

During the webinar, speakers reiterated the crucial role of CSOs in enhancing the two reporting processes. Civil society is key in making citizens' voices, including those of marginalized and vulnerable groups, heard. Their contributions can relate to many different aspects of the review, including the reporting itself, but also raising awareness and advocating on specific issues, as well as in monitoring the follow-up process. Thus, CSOs' contributions are important throughout the review process, including before and during the review, but also in the implementation and follow-up. As both reporting processes rely on a multistakeholder participation, the webinar also highlighted the role of academia as a key actor within civil society, and National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) – which often have civil society representation built-in and can help bridge concerns between civil society and governments. Both stakeholders also perform a critical function in providing data to inform the review processes.

Space for the participation of CSOs

Nevertheless, speakers highlighted that involvement of civil society in these processes may be challenging vis-à-vis governments. In the context of SDG reporting, some CSOs have developed parallel reports to the VNRs (often called "spotlight reports" or "shadow reports"), to provide their account on SDG implementation. However, governments often construe these reports as negative or critical, thus prompting the question on how to re-shape the narrative so that they are perceived in a more constructive way. In this context, inclusivity and CSO engagement is especially difficult to realize in countries where governments are restrictive and where civic space is limited. In turn, this renders the implementation of a whole-of-society review difficult to achieve.

Experiences from NGOs in Uganda and South Africa in SDG reporting processes revealed that they largely had to claim the space required to engage. Counterparts involved in the UPR process in Uganda also highlighted that despite participation, civil society met a certain pushback by the state. In the context of SDG reporting, institutional coordination mechanisms may also have an impact on whose voices from civil society are heard. In South Africa, the choice of having Statistics South Africa as a custodian body for the country's 2019 VNR entailed that space for participation was primarily linked to data, which had the effect of mainly engaging technical CSOs, while community-based representativity remained marginal.

The specificity of institutionalized activities with the frequency and predictability of reviews within the UPR was found to make it a more robust process to facilitate CSOs' involvement, in comparison to VNRs. In this light, the VNRs process was described as "fluffy" when compared to the UPR. A number of entry points from the UPR process were explored as possible avenues to address some of the challenges encountered by CSOs in the SDG reporting as described above. For example, the creation of national coalitions has been found to have a positive impact. This applies both before the start of the review cycle, and in the follow-up stages. Similarly, in contexts characterized by a

restrictive civic space, fostering relations with international NGOs to get the word out and impact the UPR is also found to be beneficial. Another entry point relates to awareness-raising and advocacy to the delegates of the recommending states (RS). This helps ensure that recommendations are grounded in and respond to the realities of a country's human rights situation. To this respect, UPR Info's "pre-sessions" can serve as entry points for discussion between CSOs and representatives of the RSs. Overall, these various areas for CSO engagement reiterate that participation can take place throughout the reviewing process.

UPR and VNR as mutually reinforcing processes

The two reporting mechanisms should not be conceived in isolation or in competition with one another, but rather as mutually reinforcing processes. As a clear example of this, given the intrinsic linkages in the content both mechanisms report on, an increasing number of recommending states have been linking their recommendations to specific SDGs and their targets. Leveraging synergies and improving cooperation on these two mechanisms can also increase available data and reduce the reporting burden. Speakers also called to keep in mind the end objective of these reporting mechanisms – that of achieving meaningful change in peoples' lives. These processes represent a moment to take stock of progress made, and identify the gaps where action is required to have an impact on the ground. To this aim, the more the recommendations emerging from these mechanisms are implemented, the more the root causes linking peace, security, development and human rights can be improved, conflict prevented, and peace enhanced.

About Geneva Peace Week

Highlighting that peacebuilding takes place in different contexts and across disciplines, Geneva Peace Week brings together various levels of actors working on peace from all sectors to connect and expand space for building peace. Geneva Peace Week is a locus for meaningful exchange and co-created learning, linking practitioners, policymakers, researchers, students and individuals from all sectors. The theme of the 2021 iteration of the Geneva Peace Week was "From seeds to systems of peace: Weathering today's challenges."

Further resources

- Cardinal, C. et al. (2021). *SDG 16+ Civil Society Toolkit*. Transparency, Accountability & Participation for 2030 Agenda. Available at: www.sdg16toolkit.org.
- DCAF (2021). *Sustainable Development Goal 16: The importance of good security sector governance for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda*. SSR Backgrounder Series. Geneva: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance.
- Feiring, B. and König-Reis, S. (2020). *Leveraging Human Rights Mechanisms to Improve SDG Follow-up and Review*. Making the HLPF More Inclusive Paper Series. Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation. Available at: https://www.humanrights.dk/publications/leveraging-human-rights-mechanisms-improve-sdg-follow-review.
- OHCHR (n.d.). *Maximizing the use of the Universal Periodic Review at country level: Practical guidance*. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/UPR/UPR_Practical_Guidance.pdf.
- UPR Info (2017). *The Civil Society Compendium: A comprehensive guide for Civil Society Organisations engaging in the Universal Periodic Review*. Available at: https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/general-document/pdf/upr_info_cso_compendium_en.pdf.
- WFUNA (2020). *Outcome Document, 2019 Annual Showcase*. Available at: wfuna_16_outcomedocument_2020_6.pdf.