



Civil society participation and partnerships in advancing the wider SDG/SDG4 agenda

The words ‘participation’ and ‘partnership’ are used perhaps over-frequently these days, with many shades of meaning, and by different users in varying contexts. However, hopefully this pervasiveness and vagueness has not dulled us to recognising the potential for empowerment that these words, when acted on effectively, can unleash for the achievement of sustainable development.

Indeed, it was this belief that led the world leaders at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in 2015 to include a seventeenth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), because the other 16 goals are so interconnected and complex, they can only be fully realised with the seventeenth: a strong commitment to global partnership and cooperation. Without the participation and partnership of stakeholders and the coherence of policies and programmes at national, regional, and global levels, the 169 targets would have little chance of being achieved.

One of the targets under Goal 17 includes multi-stakeholder partnerships, including civil society, that mobilise and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources, in particular for and with developing countries.

We know the world is now much more “connected” than



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ever before through increased, faster, and broader access to information via transport and communication technologies. Add to this an increasing population, climate change, greater inequity, greater complexity of economic and governance systems, and an increasing array of organisations, platforms, and processes - it has become essential to cooperate and engage in partnerships to achieve common objectives. This is no less so for civil society organisations (CSOs) as they strive to bring about their change agenda.

Not only are CSOs challenged to achieve greater participation and partnerships within civil society, they are challenged to engage with other stakeholders, and not only within the same sector but also in other sectors, recognising the strong inter-connectedness between the SDGs and the means of achieving them. A further challenge is that participation and partnerships are required at multiple levels, from the local, the national,

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ASPBAE has been able to facilitate increased participation of national-level CSO education coalitions, especially in SDG-SDG4 sub-regional and regional policy platforms and processes.

the regional, to the global, and that these levels need to be coherent and integrated. These dimensions are reflected in the emerging experience of education CSOs aiming to advance the SDG4/education 2030 agenda.

This issue of *Ed-lines* features stories of CSO participation and partnerships at the national, regional, and global levels, all with the aim of ensuring the implementation of SDG4. The stories of ASPBAE and its partners also reveal some of the challenges, strategies used, resilience, hard work, and impact.

As a regional CSO, ASPBAE has had the privilege of being positioned between national and global level organisations and processes, while also participating in regional level SDG/SDG4 platforms and mechanisms. ASPBAE's broad membership, including 20 national-level CSO education advocacy coalitions, provides a rich, diverse, and well-grounded voice across the region, especially for the concerns of the most disadvantaged and excluded. In turn, ASPBAE has been able to provide capacity support to national education coalitions, including encouraging their own horizontal reaching out, and increased participation and partnership creation within their own countries, including to CSOs in other sectors. An example from the national coalition in Sri Lanka is provided, whereby, when there were limits to the level of engagement with the Ministry of Education to contribute to the education component for its national SDG Voluntary National Review (VNR), the coalition co-founded a multi-sector SDG Stakeholder Platform and prepared a People's Review Report on the SDGs.

Regional-level platforms and processes are also growing as a link between the national and the global. ASPBAE has been able to increase national coalition participation in sub-regional and regional platforms and processes, for example the annual inter-governmental and multi-stakeholder Asia Pacific Meeting on Education (APMED) organised by UNESCO, for the benefit not only of shaping the broader regional agenda, but also in turn the benefit of coalition in-country advocacy. An example is provided from the national coalition in Vietnam, where its increased capacity and participation in the APMED process has aided the coalition's ability to influence the Vietnam National Plan of Action on the SDGs.

Not all stakeholders are open or supportive of civil society participation and partnership, so a key challenge is to take the initiative and assert the right of civil society to be at the table and the value addition that CSOs bring. An article in this *Ed-Lines* gives an example of this, and a fuller background to ASPBAE's involvement at the regional level in relation to APMED and the regional Thematic Working Group on Education 2030 (TWG). It also describes how ASPBAE is reaching out beyond the education sector to partner with CSOs from other sectors, all keen to promote their respective SDGs. Two such mechanisms are the Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (APRCM), and the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), which in turn link into global SDG processes.

CSO participation and partnerships at the global level are of course also crucial, but, just as with other levels, CSOs face the constant challenge of asserting its right to be heard,



The chances of CSO engagement at the global level are dramatically increased when they enter into strategic partnerships, whether it be within the education sector or beyond.

and to effectively participate. This issue of *Ed-Lines* also highlights one particular SDG process, that of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that are presented by Member States during the annual High-level Political Forum (HLPF) meetings as part of the global SDG process of follow-up and review. The article urges the need to reform the VNR process to ensure meaningful inclusion and participation of stakeholders.

The chances of CSO participation and engagement at the global level are dramatically increased when they enter into strategic partnerships, whether it be within the education sector or beyond for the promotion of the broader CSO agenda for the SDGs. One key partner is the Global Campaign for Education (GCE), where ASPBAE participates as a member, serves on the Board, and collaborates with GCE to engage SDG4 and SDG processes, for example, in relation to the UN Education and Academia Stakeholder Group, which is a mechanism to contribute into the HLPF. Vernor Muñoz,

Head of Policy and Advocacy at GCE, offers a reflection on the transformative power of education, and gives examples of the linkages between education and the other SDGs.

There are many other important partnerships and mechanisms that ASPBAE engages with at the global level. This includes through UNESCO mechanisms such as the Education 2030 Steering Committee, the Global Education Meeting (GEM), and the Consultation of NGOs on Education 2030 (CoNGO). In relation to adult learning and education, ASPBAE collaborates as a member with the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), and with the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (DVV International).

CSO partnerships with funders are also vital, and often multi-dimensional, not just restricted to funding. ASPBAE engages with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), exchanging perspectives and information on common agendas for the promotion of SDG4. ASPBAE participates in the Civil Society Education Fund (CSEF) funded by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), and in partnership with GCE and regional education CSOs, ASPBAE contributes to ensuring a strong CSO presence at GPE Board meetings and through GPE Committee processes.

CSO participation and partnership comes at a price. Additional effort and resources are needed since every new frontier of engagement with allies and partners requires meetings, negotiations, documents, additional personnel time, and funding. However, for CSOs to be effective, participation and engaging in partnerships at all levels is becoming indispensable for the advancement of the SDGs, and of course for SDG4.

EDITORIAL

Reinforcing the value and integrated approach of national, regional, and global civil society actions to influence the SDGs and SDG4

By Nguyen Thi Kim Anh, National Coordinator, Vietnam Association for Education For All (VAEFA), and ASPBAE Executive Council Member representing Southeast Asia

Almost two years after the historical moment when Heads of States came together at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York on 15 September 2015 to commit to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Vietnam government issued the

National Plan of Action on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 (Plan of Action on SDGs). Not long after that, the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam (Ministry of Education) issued the Plan of Action (PoA) on the Sustainable Development Goal on



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Education (SDG4 Plan of Action). To date, this event has always been cited by the Ministry of Investment and Planning, which has been assigned by the Government to be the focal point on the implementation of the Plan of Action (PoA) on the SDGs,



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as a great example of being pro-active and effective in realising the SDG commitments in the country.

The SDG4 PoA is the first finalised sector plan on the SDGs in Vietnam. Health, environment, social welfare, economic, as well as other sectors are still working on the development of their respective sector plans of action. The issuance of the SDG4 PoA was a result of the successful engagement by the Vietnam Association for Education for All (VAEFA - Vietnam coalition) with various education partners and stakeholders not only at the national level, but also at the regional and global levels.

The lobbying efforts of the VAEFA Vietnam coalition since the first Asia Pacific Meeting on Education (APMED) in July 2016 enabled it to engage in several rounds of consultations on the development of the SDG4 PoA during the first half of 2017. This resulted in four drafts of the PoA which incorporated comments and inputs from UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

After the issuance of the 4th draft of the SDG4 PoA, the Ministry of Education requested VAEFA and UNESCO-Vietnam to coordinate another round of reviews and provide written comments from the UN and from NGOs before the finalisation of the document. This is proof of the recognition by the Ministry of Education for constructive and quality contributions from the

coalition and UNESCO-Vietnam in the previous round of consultations. The final SDG4 PoA was then approved by the Minister of Education and officially issued on 26 June 2017. Being able to engage in this process, VAEFA was able to include voices from its membership representing the most marginalised groups in Vietnam and incorporate the coalition's advocacy agenda in the SDG4 PoA.

The good relationship and trust built with the SDG4 focal points in the Ministry of Education is crucial in allowing the coalition to play an active role in the development process of the SDG4 PoA. This relationship was initiated in previous regional events such as the Asia Pacific Regional Meeting on Education (APMED) I and II in 2015 and 2016 and other similar spaces where the coalition participated. It was in these spaces that country delegations, including the government, NGOs, and the UN understood one another's positions better and grew closer.

However, it is not always easy for civil society organisations (CSOs) to be able to participate in these regional spaces. ASPBAE, especially with funding support from the Civil Society Education Fund (CSEF)¹, has been playing a very effective role here. On the one hand, ASPBAE's Capacity Support and Advocacy Advisers have been working closely with country coalitions and CSOs to enhance their skills, capacities, and confidence in delivering education advocacy work. On the other hand, ASPBAE strongly lobbied at regional levels to secure spaces for CSOs, especially education coalitions, in these important advocacy spaces. Where many regional advocacy forums are part of global policy mechanisms, ASPBAE, which is a part of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) movement and other relevant global networks, has made its interventions and lobbying work effective.

One can find many examples of successful campaigns and advocacy work in other countries at regional



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and global levels funded by CSEF. The national, regional, and global connections and cooperation are vital to these successes. Governments' commitments and consensus are informed through the global, regional, and national architecture that was set in place that helped guide national and local advocacy work. Issues, voices, and recommendations from the work on the ground were elevated in relevant regional and global spaces, which ensure the genuineness and quality of inputs to policy discussions. Through gathering in regional, and sometimes in global policy spaces, the relationships between CSOs, the UN, and governments are strengthened, which leads to better cooperation at the national level.

As a representative of the Vietnam coalition as well a member of ASPBAE's Executive Council, I hope these global, regional, and country bonds will be sustained and become even stronger through time. If we aim for quality advocacy work that results not only in the issuance of appropriate laws and policies, but also in ensuring a positive impact on the right to education on education programmes that affect the lives of people in the communities, I believe this integrated approach needs to be sustained and supported by all of us.

¹ CSEF was set up by the Global Campaign for Education in 2009 to support the core work of national education coalitions so that civil society can fully engage with and track the progress of national governments and donor groups working towards the Education For All (EFA) goals. The CSEF programme was developed and is managed by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE), in close collaboration with regional implementing partners.

Building transformative education

By Vernor Muñoz, Head of Policy and Advocacy, Global Campaign for Education (GCE)

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has insightfully interpreted the aims of education by stating that education transcends access to formal schooling and embraces the right to a specific quality of education and a broad range of life experiences and learning processes that enable children, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents, and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society¹.

Then, the right to education does not have as its object only the pedagogical experience, because education is an exercise of freedom and democracy, which involves the learner in his/her political, economic, family, and cultural contexts. Education is always a collective and dynamic process, in which people share, debate, and support each other.

This understanding of education, as an enabling social right, requires also dynamic and participatory mechanisms for the establishment of public policies and this is where civil society organisations have a preponderant role. The participation of civil society organisations in the design of education policies has a democratising effect on school governance and administration and it is also a way to strengthening social inclusion in all school and community dimensions.

The need for more inclusive societies requires greater and better impacts in advocacy actions against power structures in communities, families and public authorities. Inclusion is a necessary demand in all areas, one of which is the education system. We cannot aspire to an inclusive education within an exclusive community. For this reason, the fight for inclusion should lead to mobilisations that cover the entire spectrum of public policies, for which it is necessary to strengthen alliances and partnerships. The change of beliefs and practices that the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) promotes shows that inclusion works from the educational and social point of view, and evidence that the advance towards inclusion is not simply based on politics, although it requires it to prop up the changes that the world needs.

The notion of inclusion in education has political implications that not only question the segregating environments, but also the belief that education is reserved for school-age children only, without considering that all people have the right to educational opportunities throughout the life cycle, regardless of the context or circumstance in which they find themselves.

A school which is open to diversity and democratic participation of civil society organisations should also be inclusive and can also be considered as the best vehicle to fight for the realisation of all human rights. Indeed, within the development agenda, education is included as both a stand-alone goal (SDG4: quality education) and as a means to facilitate the achievement of other five goals: SDG3 (health and well-being); SDG 5 (gender equality); SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth); SDG12 (responsible consumption



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and production); and SDG 13 (climate change mitigation). To name but two examples, education is considered a vital instrument in the achievement of gender equality; and the early warning, impact reduction, and adaptation to climate change.

When educational authorities open up to civil society organisations, the work in favor of human rights is not only easier, but its impact is magnificent in all areas of development. The alliance between these organisations and the public sector is a fundamental requirement for the success in education planning. It is a practice that enhances the exercise of rights and signifies a new form of social organisation, in which shared responsibility is a source of happiness and in which citizenship is built in the search for solutions that reinvigorate political participation.

These strategic alliances are not possible, however, if the education policies are focused on merely instrumental priorities. The importance of basic skills (numeracy, literacy) is not under discussion, but we affirm that these competences cannot be achieved or enjoyed outside of an environment of democratic values, which can only be offered through a transformative education. Contributing to the construction of this environment is a fundamental task from civil society organisations.

From a transformative perspective, education is perceived as a catalyst for change. This means an education aiming to challenge unfair social structures and which sees knowledge as the way to expand individual freedoms, opportunities to enjoy their rights, and contribute to a democratic and fairer society. The transforming potential of education is the factor that makes it possible to break the cycle of violence, exclusion, and deprivation. It is not schooling that allows change, but transformative education!

The idea of transformation is at the heart of the SDGs and must be the reason that fuels the struggle for human dignity.

¹ General Comment N° 1 (2001): *The aims of education* (CRC/GC/2001/1)

Finding an alternative approach for Voluntary National Reviews amidst limited civil society space in Sri Lanka

By **Shantha Kulathunge**,
National Coordinator, CED
Sri Lanka

The Government of Sri Lanka agreed to present its Voluntary National Review (VNR) at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on the progress the country has made in achieving the overall Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Ministry of Sustainable Development and Wildlife, the focal point in achieving the SDGs in Sri Lanka, coordinated the review process with other stakeholders.

The Ministry handed over the review process to the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) which is a government institution involved in research and formulating policies. In the meantime, the Ministry of Sustainable Development invited government departments to participate in consultation meetings on the implementation of the SDGs.

The spaces available for civil society to participate in policy formation and reforms are comparatively low in Sri Lanka. As the Coalition for Education and Development (CED), Sri Lanka, had fostered good relations with the Ministry of Sustainable Development, the Secretary of the Ministry invited CED to participate in the Voluntary



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Although Goal 4 on education was not selected for review this year, CED was able to emphasize the significance of education in achieving SDG4 through social transformation. CED pointed out that the quality and relevance of both university and technical vocational education and training (TVET) also needed to improve as Sri Lanka faces the challenge of low employability of graduates. In addition, the need for maintaining minimum standards in the early childhood education and the lack of proper facilities and adequate resources for teaching and learning, especially for children with special needs, was also highlighted.

However, most community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were not invited for the consultations. While civil society organisations (CSOs) were invited at the final stages of the SDG consultations, they felt their voices were not properly heard.

In response to this, a group of CSOs formed an SDG Stakeholder Platform to initiate a dialogue on developing alternative mechanisms for reviewing SDG implementation in Sri Lanka. CED was one of the

founding members of this civil society platform which held several meetings and discussions to strengthen CSO voices in identifying the gaps and shortcomings of the VNR process in the country.

This group comprised of 15-20 CSOs and NGOs involved in issues such as poverty alleviation, health, environmental protection, and education, amongst others. In addition to the group's experience at the grassroots level, it was able to gather information directly from communities rather than depending on government-published or secondary data.

Following a series of meetings, the SDG Stakeholder Platform prepared a People's Review Report (VPR) on the SDGs. CED was tasked with reviewing and compiling a report on SDG4 on education.

Some of the consultations took place at the provincial level with CED members facilitating the meetings held in their locations. CED members highlighted provincial issues with regard to ensuring quality education. This exercise also proved to be a good opportunity for CED to develop more contacts with like-minded organisations.

In the VPR, CED highlighted that although sustainable lifestyles,

human rights, gender equality, and the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence must be achieved through education, Sri Lanka has not been able to give it adequate priority due to an exam-oriented education system. There is also a huge knowledge gap within education officials and teachers on how to enable this. The VNR only referred to education on sustainable consumption and production through a resource pack and modules given in universities and higher education institutions. It also reported on orientation programmes for children and families undertaken in early childhood education programmes.

A strong recommendation of CED Sri Lanka during the VNR consultations and in the VPR is to improve the quality and relevance of higher education and TVET.

While Sri Lanka boasts of free tertiary education, many graduates face underemployment and unemployment. At the same time, it argued for universal access to quality, child-centred early childhood care and education. Both these challenges and recommendations to address them were prominently highlighted in the government's VNR. Additionally, the VNR echoed CED's recommendations on strengthening equity in education and improving education governance and accountability.

Maintaining momentum and dedication amongst the SDG Stakeholder Platform was a major hurdle in compiling the report. Most group members were intensely involved in the work of their own organisations and they had to function amidst tight schedules. Although



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few members were not able to fulfill assigned roles and responsibilities adequately, the core group members took the responsibility of gathering information and compiling the Voluntary People's Review Report. This report was presented at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) 2018 in New York.

Vietnam coalition (VAEFA) influences government to recognise gaps and challenges in education in country's Voluntary National Review

By Nguyen Thi Kim Anh, National Coordinator, Vietnam Association for Education For All (VAEFA), and ASPBAE Executive Council Member representing Southeast Asia

As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to, "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven" (paragraph 79). These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for regular reviews by the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), meeting under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). As stipulated in paragraph 84 of the 2030 Agenda, regular reviews by the HLPF are to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and involve multiple stakeholders.

The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges, and lessons learnt with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The VNRs also seek to strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilise multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. (Source: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>)

The theme of the VNRs in 2018 is 'Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies' and its focus is on six out of the 17 SDGs - water and sanitation for all (SDG 6); sustainable and modern energy for all (SDG 7); cities and human settlements (SDG 11); sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12); sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss (SDG 15); and global partnership for



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sustainable development (SDG 17). Vietnam was among 13 countries in the Asia Pacific and was amongst 46 countries in the world that produced its VNR and presented the report at the High-level Political Forum in July 2018.

On 10 May 2017, the Prime Minister of Vietnam approved the National Action Plan on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the NAP). The Ministry of Planning and Investment has been assigned by the government as the lead agency to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the NAP, thus the Ministry of Planning and Investment is in charge of the VNR 2018 for Vietnam.

The development of the VNR started in late 2017 between Ministries, however information about this was not made widely available. The Ministry of Planning and Investment worked mostly with finance departments of other Ministries to collect data for the report. At that time, the Vietnam Association for Education for All (VAEFA - Vietnam coalition) was not aware of the process. In early April 2018, during the 1st coordination meeting to celebrate the Global Action Week on Education among some of the Education Sector Group members (LEG equivalent), questions about the VNR process were raised by VAEFA. The UNESCO and UNICEF representatives at the meeting then contacted the UN SDGs Technical Working group to get updates about the report and to try to find entrance to the VNR consultation for VAEFA. After that, VAEFA was registered with the Ministry of Planning and Investment to attend a VNR training and consultation workshop on 17 April 2018.

Attending the 17 April consultation, VAEFA learnt about the progress of the VNR, that the government will report on all the SDGs instead of just the focused goals, and that there would be only one more open consultation before the VNR was finalised. The draft report was not shared in the meeting. According to the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the draft report had not been completed. Though the Ministry of Planning and Investment had sent an invitation to the Ministry of Education, there was no representative present. During the meeting, VAEFA met and spoke to the person in charge of organising the VNR consultations to secure a seat for VAEFA in the final round of consultations. After the meeting and through its contacts in the Ministry of Education and training and UNESCO, VAEFA tried to push for the



VAEFA expressed its reservations on the use of only general data to assess education in the country, whereas a more accurate picture would be available through the use of segregated data.

participation of the Ministry of Education and Training in the final round of consultation on 26 April 2018.

Due to the direct invitation from the Ministry of Planning and Investment, VAEFA attended the final round of consultations on the draft VNR for Vietnam. The draft report was shared just one day prior to the meeting. VAEFA observed that the report was too positive. It only mentioned achievements. During the consultation workshop, VAEFA was able to voice its hesitation and reservation in seeing the use of only general data, for example on enrollment, to assess the situation because the situation would look different if segregated data were available. VAEFA used an example from its work on people with disabilities to argue for this. VAEFA mentioned the importance of recognising gaps and weaknesses aside from only achievements in the report to help guide implementation, investment, and cooperation to ensure Vietnam achieves the set targets.

The final report was not shared with the participants of the consultation workshop prior to its presentation at the High-level Political Forum. However, when the report was made available, the gaps, difficulties, and constraints in education, as well as in other sectors, were recognised, which VAEFA believes is a result of the intervention of the coalition.

Participating in the process, VAEFA observed that multi-sector cooperation is challenging. The invitation by the Ministry of Planning and Investment came when the Ministry of Education and Training was very busy and the representative familiar with SDGs was not available. While the Ministry of Planning and Investment wants to involve NGOs, they are not connected with NGOs working in education sector. Even within the UN, representatives who work in the Education Sector Group are not in the UN SDGs working group. VAEFA would have been totally missed out from the VNR consultation process if in the coordination meeting of the Global Action Week in early April it had not mentioned and shared updates on the VNR timeline that it received from the regional network.

Moving forward, VAEFA will maintain the connection that has been established at the VNR 2018 consultation with the SDG task force of the Ministry of Planning and Investment. VAEFA will raise awareness of the Ministry of Education and Training on the importance of joining the SDG process to advocate for education.

Reforming the Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes for stronger civil society voice and participation

ASPBAE, along with its members across the Asia Pacific region, have actively participated in the crafting and monitoring of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at national, regional, and global levels. Apart from the engagements with UNESCO at the regional and global levels, education coalitions engage their respective governments in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) national rollout and the preparation of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that are presented by Member States during the High-level Political Forum (HLPF). ASPBAE coordinates the SDG-related initiatives of its members, and directly engages UN regional and global bodies responsible for the SDG implementation review.

The High-level Political Forum is the main United Nations platform for the follow-up and review of the progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the commitments made by Member States on the SDGs. The HLPF meets every year under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC); and every four years at the level of Heads of State and Government under the auspices of the General Assembly.

The Ministerial segment of the Forum is highlighted by the presentations of the VNR by Member States which report on the SDG implementation.



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The VNRs are prepared officially by the governments on a voluntary basis to facilitate the sharing of experiences within and among countries, including the successes, challenges, and lessons learnt in SDG implementation. In July 2018, 46 countries shared their respective VNRs during the 2018 HLPF held at the UN Headquarters in New York. For the 2019 HLPF, 42 countries have so far volunteered to present their VNR reports.

In presenting their VNRs, countries are expected to report on the actions and measures taken to advance the implementation of the SDG 2030, the progress made, and the status of all the SDGs. Some goals could be addressed in more depth, particularly those goals that are up for review for the particular year. Countries are also encouraged to share the good practices and the potential for partnerships. In the experience of the three years of reporting, countries usually focus only on the goals that were reviewed for the particular year, cherry picking on favoured goals where there are certain headways. Only a handful reported on all 17 goals. Civil society organisations (CSOs) also cited the lack of updated, reliable, and accessible data as a

major barrier for implementing and tracking the SDGs.

While VNRs are state-led, governments are encouraged to prepare the reports in a consultative, inclusive, participatory, and transparent process involving all stakeholders, including different sectors and levels of government, civil society, the private sector, members of Parliament, and other institutions. This is in line with the UN resolution to involve stakeholders in the national voluntary reviews.

The government of Bangladesh, for example, has adopted the “Whole of Society” approach to ensure wider participation of NGOs, development partners, private sector, media, and CSOs in the process of formulation of the Action Plan and implementation of the SDGs. There were several consultations held with civil society and other stakeholders in the preparation of their VNR that was presented in the 2017 HLPF.

The Bangladeshi case, however, is an exception as most countries did very little in consulting civil society stakeholders in the preparation of their VNRs. In Thailand, there were no public consultations in the



While VNRs are state-led, governments are encouraged to prepare the reports in a consultative, inclusive, participatory, and transparent process involving all stakeholders, including civil society.

preparation of the VNR and the draft report had not been communicated and shared publicly. In Nepal, CSOs criticised the government for lack of consultation in preparation of the VNR. Their views and recommendations were not included in the final report presented by the Nepali government. In most other cases, civil society stakeholders were not given enough time, space, and opportunities for meaningful engagement in the VNR preparation and reporting during the HLPF. There is also no meaningful follow-up by the reporting Member States concerning the issues raised during the HLPF interactive dialogue.

CSOs, including ASPBAE's coalitions and members, have initiated or participated in the preparation of parallel reports, sometimes referred to as spotlight reports, to present an alternative analysis on the SDG implementation and status. Extensive consultations were done in preparation of these reports to reach out to the most marginalised and excluded groups. It is unfortunate that such quality reports produced by CSOs in parallel to the VNRs had not been accorded any official recognition or status by the UN as part of the HLPF resources.

Expressing disappointment on the VNR and the HLPF processes, CSOs working under the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS), which includes ASPBAE, assert the need to reform the process to ensure meaningful inclusion and participation of stakeholders in the implementation, monitoring, and review of the SDGs.

The voluntary nature of the SDG reporting and follow-up processes immediately presents a limitation on how, when, and what Member States will report on. The experience of the past three years indicates a clear weakness with States taking advantage of the reporting system that has become too state-centered and exclusive. It is important, therefore, to make SDG reporting by Member States regular and mandatory, rather than voluntary. Civil society should be represented in UN committees responsible for designing the VNR reporting process, and in peer reviewing the draft reports submitted by Member States. The final reports must respond to critical issues raised by civil society and other stakeholders.

The role played by civil society must be strengthened and recognised as key actors in monitoring the SDG implementation process in line

with the commitment articulated in Agenda 2030 which stipulates a multi-stakeholder approach to reporting. Official recognition must be accorded by the UN to the parallel or spotlight reports produced by civil society as alternative to the official government reports. Such reports must be uploaded and prominently featured in the websites of the United Nations.

The UN should encourage greater participation of civil society in the HLPF and VNR reporting sessions by providing more speaking roles and better opportunities for engaging Member States and UN agencies. In line with this, the UN should increase support to allow more civil society representatives, particularly from marginalised groups, to attend and participate in HLPF events, including the VNR reporting sessions. Member States should be encouraged to include civil society representatives in the national delegations attending the HLPF.

The UN General Assembly in September 2019 will have a session that will review the HLPF and the VNR reporting system. ASPBAE welcomes this review and hopes that meaningful reforms will be adopted to allow for more effective participation by civil society in the monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.



CSOs, including ASPBAE's coalitions and members, have participated in the preparation of parallel reports, or 'spotlight reports', to present an alternative analysis on SDG implementation.

Navigating regional mechanisms to ensure the right to education

The organised participation of civil society was evident even in the Education for All (EFA) era (1990-2000) launched in Jomtien, Thailand. It was however only after the ‘second EFA’ in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, that civil society’s role was recognised. The convergence of international NGOs, teachers unions and child rights movements galvanized a strong CSO input in the Dakar process, influencing the agreements and opening a new chapter on partnerships with civil society as a recognised stakeholder in education policy. ASPBAE was active in these processes led by the global CSO front, the Global Campaign for Education.

It leveraged its engagement in global EFA policy spaces to widen CSO involvement at the regional level. In 2006, ASPBAE insisted on an invitation to the regional EFA Coordinators’ Meeting, the main regional mechanism for coordination on the EFA follow up, organised by the Thematic Working Group on EFA (TWG-EFA) co-chaired by UNESCO-Bangkok and UNICEF.

From there, it was full swing for ASPBAE’s regional advocacy.

REFLECTIONS ON THE REGIONAL EFA ENGAGEMENT

In preparation for the implementation of new Education 2030 (SDG4) agenda, UNESCO-Bangkok, together with ASPBAE, collaborated on a paper to review the work of the TWG EFA, particularly the effectiveness of the regional EFA meetings.

The review underscored the following:

- The EFA meetings promoted exchanges and dialogues between CSOs and country EFA Coordinators and Ministry of Education (MOE) officials. This facilitated joint planning and CSO input on country plans.
- The meetings facilitated horizontal interactions - among countries, and among governments, civil society, and other partners towards developing effective EFA

interventions.

- By giving meaningful and prominent roles for governments as well as CSOs and other EFA partners to speak and contribute in the workshops, UNESCO Bangkok nurtured a culture of openness which was crucial in strengthening partnerships at different levels.

These reflections were instructive to ASPBAE. They were the building blocks on how it continued to position the civil society agenda and presence in the regional policy platforms.

FROM EFA TO SDG4 AND THE SDGS

The follow-up mechanisms for the new global development and education agenda – the SDGs and SDG4 – built on the EFA mechanisms and architecture. This time, the regional platform is the annual Asia Pacific Regional Meeting on Education 2030 (APMED), organised by the Thematic Working Group on Education 2030+ (TWG Ed 2030+) co-convened by UNESCO and UNICEF. ASPBAE is a member of the TWG Education 2030+.

During the EFA era, there were only 2 to 4 national education coalitions who were engaging at the regional EFA meetings. By 2015, a total of 16 national education coalitions had been formed and were seeking invitations to APMED. The concern to balance the government and civil society

representation posed a challenge to UNESCO-Bangkok. ASPBAE, however, continued to negotiate the participation of the national education coalitions.

ASPBAE argued that civil society is a critical partner in the implementation of the SDGs and education in general – recognised in the Education 2030 Framework for Action and in the SDGs. Further, apart from regional and international CSOs, ASPBAE stated that the national-level CSOs should be present in the meetings as well, so they can work in dialogue with their governments on education policies and reforms to address equity, inclusion and other critical issues.

In 2017, ASPBAE argued for the institutionalisation of the participation of international NGOs (INGOs), regional and national-level CSOs in the regional platforms, notably around APMED. This was approved by the TWG in 2018. In the protocol, apart from slots to regional organisations and INGOs, a total of 12 slots are dedicated for national-level CSOs to attend APMED with the TWG working closely with ASPBAE to facilitate the process. The protocols also include reporting by the national CSOs on the follow up work they undertake at the country level.

Beyond just representation in these regional meetings and processes, ASPBAE was keen to ensure *meaningful* participation. The ambitious and much wider agenda that SDG4-Education 2030 advanced required of CSOs, a new rigour



To better equip CSOs for the APMED processes and synergise their advocacy efforts, ASPBAE organised CSO meetings prior to the policy event.

in understanding the contexts of education and the complexities of the implementation of the SDG4 targets. Arguing for an agenda that will bring in benefits for the marginalised sectors, also necessitated an understanding of the intersection of education with other SDGs on poverty eradication, decent work, gender equality and eliminating inequality.

To better equip CSO participants for the APMED processes, ASPBAE organised meetings of CSOs at the front end of the annual policy event. These preparatory meetings offered a platform for CSOs to synergize their advocacy efforts during the APMED meeting itself. Participants reviewed the APMED agenda and documents together, agreed on common and priority advocacy points, and defined strategies for lobbying and coordination. These platforms facilitated analysis of education issues beyond one's country. They also fostered solidarity as well as camaraderie amongst the CSO participants – ASPBAE members and non-members alike.

Another important dimension of meaningful CSO participation is the ability and possibility to link regional engagements with national-level policy processes - where information, lessons and agreements at the regional level are leveraged for advocacy at the country

level, and where CSO advocacies at the national level are shared regionally to constructively seek solutions from across countries. The APMED preparatory meetings enabled CSOs to strategise in this respect as well.

GOING BEYOND THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Integrating SDG4 into the other SDGs has provided opportunities and challenges for ASPBAE to go beyond engagements in the regional education policy platforms. The education targets embedded in the other SDGs calls for connecting with other CSOs working on the other SDGs such as health, decent work, sustainable production and climate change.

The Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (APRCM) is the civil society platform that monitors the progress of the wider SDG agenda in Asia Pacific. The UN Economic Social Council in the Asia Pacific (UN ESCAP) works closely with APRCEM to ensure civil society voices in the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), the annual intergovernmental meeting to discuss progress on the 17 SDGs in the region.

ASPBAE has been an active member of the APRCEM since 2016. Working with CSOs beyond education is a continuing process of learning and building solidarity. The APRCEM is

composed of different sectors with different demands, bound by the mission to ensure that marginalised peoples are not left behind in sustainable development. The plethora of discussions is overwhelming and exhilarating at the same time! To engage in the debates, it was/is important for ASPBAE to be grounded on its framework and policy asks, not only on SDG4, but importantly on education issues that relate to the other SDGs.

The SDG agenda has propelled many other connections amongst CSOs. For ASPBAE, this is a welcome development; having more allies to promote education is important! It has started working with the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with the UN (CoNGO) in 2017. ASPBAE has also strengthened its engagements with the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) that has a strong presence in the High-level Political Forum (HLPF).

As ASPBAE scales up its advocacy on SDG4 and the SDGs, many regional platforms open up. CSOs can maximise and leverage agreements in regional and global mechanisms to hold their governments accountable. This is especially critical as democratic spaces are shrinking further at the country level.



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