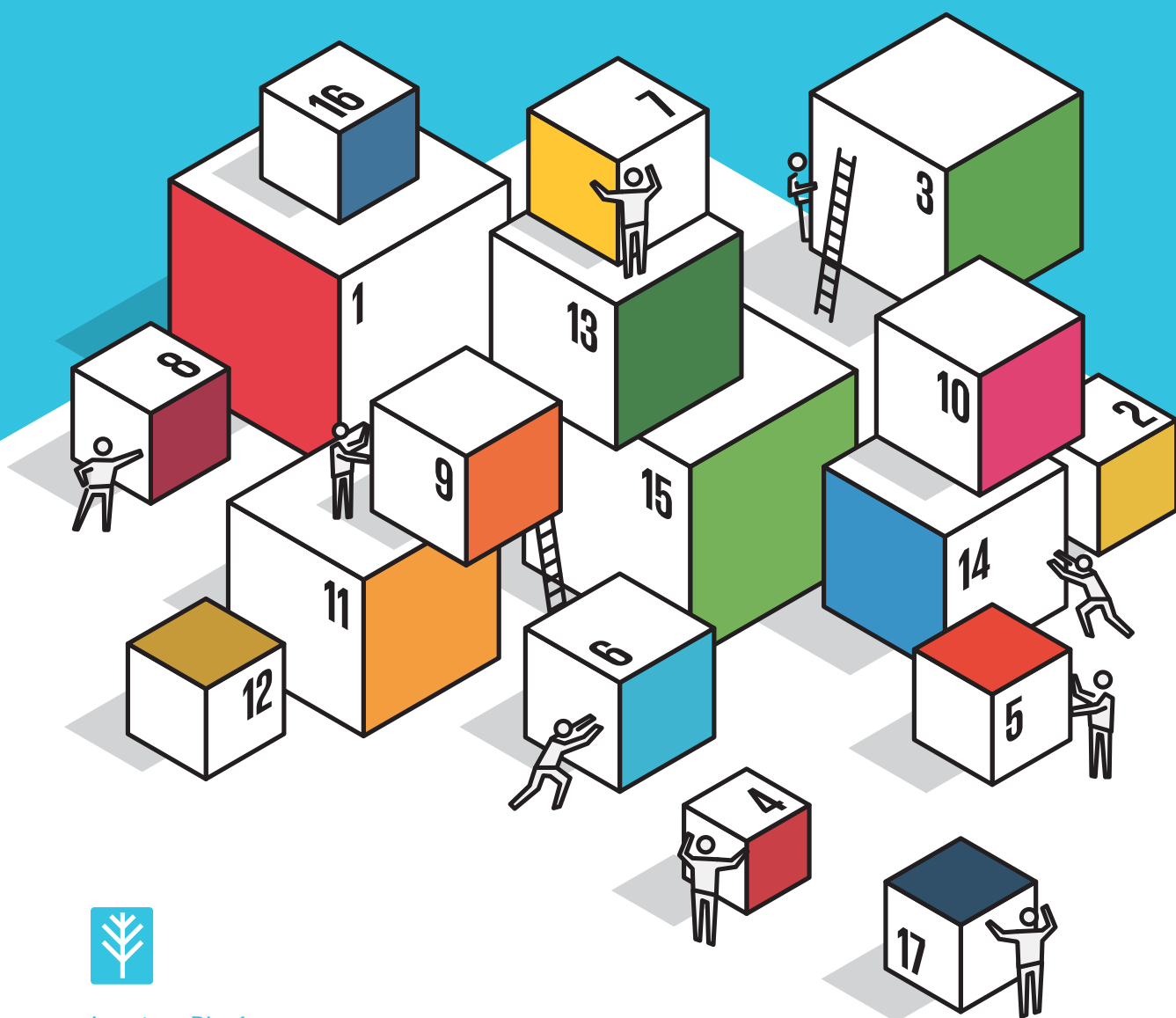


Voluntary National Review: Connector. Case of Latvian CSOs



Index

Brief background	4
Pre-VNR process - how to get on the board	5
How to jump in a running train - nationally and globally?	5
How to get partners and supporters?	6
How to promote the motivation of national partners?	8
VNR process - reap what you seeded	9
Post-VNR process	10
How to hold all stakeholders accountable?	10
How not to stop?	10
How to grow big?	11
Why do we think that we were successful?	14

The Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation LAPAS was founded in 2004 and unites 34 non-governmental organisations working in the field of global education and development cooperation and includes national unions, associations, and cooperation networks.

*Author of the report:
Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation*

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Voluntary National Review: Connector. Case of Latvian CSOs

The Voluntary National Review (VNR) is the process that connects stakeholders, levels and topics. Each country approaches it differently, nationalizing the Global Goals and their implementation. This case study of Latvia highlights the VNR process in 2018 from the perspective of the national development NGO platform - LAPAS.

CHALLENGING GAPS	OPPORTUNITY WINDOWS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – national elections - change of politicians and maybe also political priorities – formality and closed process of SDGs national implementation before the VNR – continuity of the VNR - integration in the national development planning – low awareness of NGOs on SDGs – getting involved in the international level processes – non-existing formal multistakeholder coordination body for SDGs on the national level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – small and active group of motivated key stakeholders – supportive politicians in the Parliament – support by international NGOs – ability of being vocal in international events – open consultation channels within the VNR process – mainstreaming SDGs in all projects for raising awareness of different stakeholders – financial support from international donors

Brief background

Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation LAPAS has been working on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since 2014 when the stakeholder involvement in the post-2015 process took place. In cooperation with environmental NGOs and other partners, in particular, economists, researchers, media experts and others, LAPAS developed the advocacy plan and opinion papers, started continuous work on awareness raising. As a result, LAPAS established the working group on the SDGs within the platform uniting active NGOs, UNESCO NC, academia. This group aimed to coordinate current projects and to mainstream the SDGs in the relevant activities.

Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre (PKC) is the main responsible body for the national implementation of the SDGs. It organised several meetings with policy planners from the ministries and mapped the policy planning documents towards the SDGs.

Governmental and non-governmental work was quite autonomous as Latvia already had its **National Development Plan 2014-2020**, and **Sustainable Development Strategy “Latvia 2030”**.

In the autumn of 2017 it was announced that Latvia will prepare its **Voluntary National Review** on the national implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and it will be delivered at the HLPF in New York in July 2018.



Pre-VNR process – how to get on the board

Even though LAPAS had implemented some activities on the SDGs before, the VNR process required expert knowledge of the process and consistent approach in the involvement.

How to jump in a running train – nationally and globally?

SDGs process is a huge global process with many stakeholders on all levels and in all sectors. Bigger organisations have specific staff or at least advocacy persons, but if you are a small platform from a small country you should be prepared that you will need to find your way through a huge volume of documents, processes and traditions.

 *Learning and systematization is the answer.*

Very important role was devoted for learning and systematization of existing experiences.

LAPAS interns worked to gather all information available on the international level. A high number of various materials have been developed about the SDGs and VNRs, but it is important to analyze them and critically indicate what is specifically useful for your national case. Be brave to shape your national process according to your national needs.

Possibility to learn in GALAA 5 South Asia was very crucial. It provided a possibility to grasp the knowledge of the whole region and specifics of VNR issues from qualified trainers. This training served as a basis for the targeted and competent

national and international interventions.

Learning and support was also provided by the Forus who organised regular working group calls, developed specific materials and supported financially.

Strong support was received from the Embassy of Sweden who is a fore-runner in the implementation of the SDGs on the national level. Embassy supported LAPAS by providing com-



prehensive information and showcased their best practice case at the multistakeholder workshop in Riga that gathered also representative number of politicians, all other key stakeholders. This workshop in November 2017 was a turning point to open the VNR process for NGOs. LAPAS were invited to present their perspective in the Parliamentary Committee, NGOs were invited to appoint their representatives in the working group of PKC drafting the VNR.



 *Get the global support.*

Even though SDGs process is not a highly recognised political priority on the national level, the international processes played an important role to boost its implementation nationally.

For example, the annual regional UNECE meeting in Geneva on the SDGs and VNRs with the civic society event before it, helped to get involved in the international level process more easily. It also gave an opportunity to meet national stakeholders in a different setting and discuss the progress of the VNR.

At the same time, it should be pointed out that national stakeholders play a rather minor role on the international level as many international organisations are very active in this area on daily basis. Still within the VNR process it was observed that not all of them have national constituencies, relevant and appropriate national level consultations. Therefore it is important to bring more capacity to the national level platforms who can work as channels between the local and global levels.

How to get partners and supporters?

The mandate of LAPAS is to work with the civic society, but within the SDGs and VNR process we recognised that many actors are left out or are interested to cooperate. Also new partners might emerge, for example, we learned that libraries are actively working in the SDGs area and invited them to join the group.



Or - important stakeholders can become more open seeing that cooperation is positive and productive. Among others, international organisations like WHO, UNESCO NC who are working on these topics on daily basis are helpful and ready to get involved. Involvement of academia provided a specific added value as it helped to have a broader context, a link with different theories.

Political support is the key.

Regular work with politicians secures access to political debates and an opportunity to express the opinion on the issue. In order to get involved in the SDGs process, we established cooperation with the Parliamentary Committee on Sustainable Development who monitors the implementation of the National Development Plan and sustainable development perspectives. LAPAS participated in all the committee meetings that were devoted to the SDGs and also delivered a specific presentation on the Civic Society Spotlight Report that was developed by NGOs within the VNR process. Also a relatively high number of politicians participated in the events organised by LAPAS on SDGs.

Political support was also crucial to open the ministerial process on the VNR. In autumn of 2018 Latvia had the national election and the political setting changed bringing forward new challenges in the postVNR process. In order to promote these important relationships LAPAS has sent out the documents and a good will letter to all politicians urging cooperation on the SDGs.

Local governments - direct link to daily politics.

Local governments play a very important role as they are directly linked with the local policy planning and daily application of the SDGs. LAPAS has established very good cooperation with the Union of the Local Governments, organising different joint activities on the SDGs, presenting specific lectures on how the Global Goals can be implemented in local policies.

In 2016 the series of the regional discussions were organised involving local partners - municipalities, NGOs, universities, entrepreneurs. These discussions aimed at the glocalisation of the SDGs - showcasing local examples, discussing priority SDGs and their implementation, local partnerships.



How to promote the motivation of national partners?

Most of the NGOs in Latvia work on the national or local issues, have rather small scale projects. Also the awareness of the SDGs issues is very low - very few national level projects on this topic have been implemented. Therefore most of the organisations hardly recognize their connection to the SDGs.

Within the pre-VNR process LAPAS strived to gather the NGO opinions and the best practice cases on the SDGs, but the activity was very low. Only few national level NGOs who work also on the international level were prepared to provide their input. So, we needed to take one step back and start with awareness raising.

 *Glocalisation - explaining global at local*

For people to understand SDGs we need to glocalise them - put the global goals in the local context. In 2015 LAPAS developed the **glocalisation methodology** – an approach how global issues can be explained at the local level and vice versa. Regional workshops proved that the approach works and we continued it by gathering local stories on each SDG.

Specific methodology was developed how to gather them in order to grasp more emotional perspectives - as the goal was to motivate for implementation. 34 stories were specifically devoted to the NGOs and also used to promote the NGO role in the sustainable development showing the diversity of the NGO work. Other 17 stories were collected from multistakeholder sources covering also the private sector, government and academia. All stories are available in Latvian and English. Part of them were attached to the Spotlight Report on VNR. Stories are available [here](#).



VNR process – reap what you seeded

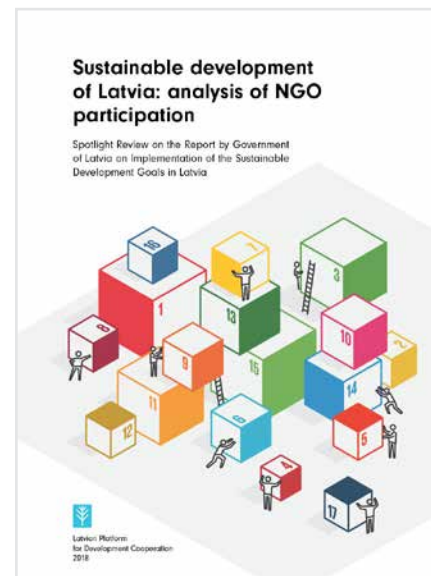
Within our national case the VNR process was quite open, but also very fast - stakeholders needed to present their opinions in few weeks time. But, as explained above, if the SDGs are not so familiar to many organisations, it is very hard to get their expert opinions within in the global context, especially on specific issues like statistical measurements.

Also the government has the final say as to what information will be included and how. Even though governments do not tend to be critical, in our case quite a few challenges were identified honestly in **the Voluntary National Review**. At the same time, the report, of course, reflects the governing perspective of the importance of the economic breakthrough and existing priorities.

 *Be brave to express your CSO opinion.*

In order to balance the government's perspective with an alternative view, LAPAS decided to develop the **Spotlight Report by the CSOs**. Within the process of elaboration thereof many organisations and experts were consulted, also CSO examples were presented. The report covers a glance on the role of the social capital and human security, evaluation of the policy process of the national development planning and specific perspectives such as poverty, inequality, gender and youth.

LAPAS active involvement and ownership was highly recognised by the government and the Spotlight Report was accepted as one of the supplementary nature showcasing the role of the CSOs in the development rather than just a critical or alternative version.



By the kind invitation of the Latvian government LAPAS director was included in the national delegation to the HLPF and an opportunity was provided to deliver a short speech on the panel together with the Minister of Economics. Also another representative of CSO Green Liberty was involved as a reporter in the side-event organised by the Latvian government and partners.

Overall the VNR process was formally open, cooperative and provided mutual learning for everybody involved.

Post-VNR process

Even though on the global level a VNR presentation is a two hour event, nothing stops after it on the national level. Nicely written and presented VNRs need to be implemented in the real life, and this is where the real work of the national and local CSOs starts. If the process has been detached from the CSO reality in the pre-VNR process, it cannot be expected that they will have high motivation to bring the work further.

How to hold all stakeholders accountable?

When the VNR was finished, the biggest issue emerged of how to continue implementation of the conclusions of the VNR and recommendations defined? In our case the biggest window of opportunity is the new National Development Plan that is to be drafted in 2019. Until now there is not much information available on how the civic society involvement process will be shaped, but all the parties have expressed willingness to continue working together. We have also discussed the need to establish the multistakeholder coalition that would promote the perspective of the sustainable development in the new National Development Plan and in other processes. It is notable that the informal working group by LAPAS that started four years ago has now become a more mature and formal process.

How not to stop?

In order to ensure the continuity of the VNR process we implemented two follow-up activities – a multistakeholder event and an evaluation questionnaire.

The event was organised in October 2018 to showcase different opinions on what is ongoing, what the further development perspectives are. Surprisingly more than 10 different stakeholders from the private sector, academia, government, politicians, NGOs and students applied to deliver their interventions and over 40 persons registered for participation. In such a small



country where the SDG issues are not considered a political priority this is the good sign and proof that the VNR process has raised the importance of the topic and LAPAS has been recognised as a reliable coordinator of the SDG issues. This event also helped to bridge the gap on the policy opinions as all of them were gathered and summarized in a single document for further use.

Also the evaluation questionnaire of the VNR process was distributed and again - it was very positive that all the main stakeholders replied providing in-depth answers. All of them stated that they are prepared to continue cooperating and to establish the multistakeholder coalition, emphasised the importance of daily awareness raising activities, involvement of all sectors, including academia and the private sector.

As LAPAS works with the community building issues in many areas we also proposed and established a closed Facebook group of “SDG fans” where the topical information, documents and useful resources will be shared for daily use by insitiutions and people involved.

How to grow big?

Active work at the policy level is relevant to very few organisations and institutions, but everybody is connected with everyday implementation of the SDGs. Awareness raising and education still is a key to continue growing the number of supporters for the sustainable development.

Awareness raising - never ending story

Awareness raising is the first and most important priority as it serves as a basis for the motivation for the different stakeholders to get involved in the SDGs process.

LAPAS and its members apply the approach of mainstreaming of the SDGs in most of the activities, for example, in the Global Education Week (GEW) - an annual event organised to promote the global development issues, organised in



Latvia already for five years. Each year GEW looks at the sustainable development from a specific angle - food security, sustainable lifestyles, global financing and other.

In 2018 GEW the look was from the lens of the fast fashion, linking it to the policy coherence for sustainable development. GEW activities covered aspects such as the development of the newspaper “World Becomes Better Place” devoted to the fast fashion, link to the SDGs, screening of the movie “True Cost” and workshops “T-shirt story”.



Many partners contributed in the development and support of the activities, more than 70 local partners - schools, libraries, youth centres, culture centres got involved in the implementation. In 2017 GEW focused specifically on the SDGs and the methodology of how to explain each goal was developed - with global and local facts, related videos and cases how it can be implemented.

 *Use summer festivals as a tool.*

In Latvia the annual debates' festival LAMPA is a popular event that in 2018 gathered 16 thousand participants in many activities that took place for two days. LAPAS devoted its participation for the SDGs in 2018 by organising two events, in particular, the presentation of local practices and the discussion of politicians in the light of the upcoming election. Both events had a great number of participants and were also live streamed.

A specific section on LAPAS web page "Global Goals" was developed. It provides different resources by sectors and by goals that can be used to get more in-depth information.





Find supportive partners to multiply

In order to multiply the knowledge on the SDGs and spread the word to different target groups, some specific activities have taken place. LAPAS member homo ecos: in 2017 implemented a project preparing youth multipliers on the SDGs. Around 100 young people from all regions were trained and later prepared their individual projects on the sustainable development perspectives.

In GEW2018 specific focus was devoted to involvement of younger children - we organised the training for kindergarten teachers on the Toy-swap method – a special event where children swap their toys and learn about sustainable choices. This event raised high interest from teachers from all the regions.



LAPAS member CSR Latvia organises training courses for the private sector and LAPAS provided a part of the training on the SDGs. This brings an opportunity to develop new working methods for a new target group whose interest on the issue is increasing.

As a continuity of the activities started with the support of the Forus, we developed a new regional project jointly with other two Baltic country platforms, in particular, Estonian and Lithuanian, gathering more best practice cases from other sectors - on each SDG from each country and free use public data base of photos. These materials can be used in the learning and awareness raising process by LAPAS or any other organisation interested.

Why do we think that we were successful?

We think that we were successful because VNR process helped us to connect all stakeholders and all levels, still staying relevant and integrated within the national process. The VNR process itself is quite a short and formal process where you can use the momentum to establish links and partnerships, but the real work is done before and after it.

The outputs of the actions can be measured quite easy - thousands of participants in the awareness raising campaigns, trainings and flag ship events, Spotlight Review on the VNR reflecting the view of CSOs, presentations in HLPF by the CSOs. But the outcomes are more important , in particular, established long- term positive relationships, footing for the multistakeholder coalition, motivation to work together further, recognition of LAPAS as an important stakeholder and reliable partner.

Near future will bring an important test for us of how we will be able to maintain these relationships within the development of the new National Development Plan. Also we need to look actively for new international resources to continue awareness raising as national funds for CSOs are very scarce. Still we feel that we have wheels on - and all roads that we will discover on this journey for more sustainable world depend just on us. Each one of us.





Latvian Platform
for Development Cooperation
2019