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Participatory approaches to reach the Sustainable Development Goals: LATVIA

Involving the general public in the SDG review process



Key messages

Latvia's participatory approach to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (1) highlights the following.

- **Involving the general public is strongly supported by and embedded in Latvia's decision-making process.**
The focus on the participation of the general public, along with relevant policies and legislation, has created opportunities for making a difference.
- **Involving different parts of society increases ownership and reflects needs.**
An inclusive SDG review process ensured transparency and policy coherence, making it possible to achieve consensus in developing and planning action to achieve the Goals (1).
- **Building on existing social awareness has contributed to making great progress towards achievement of the SDGs.**
Latvia attributes a good political foundation and social consciousness about sustainable development as being the key to generating momentum for the implementation of the United Nations 2030 agenda and achievement of the SDGs (1).



Summary

In the 1990s, soon after the country became independent, Latvia decided to launch an initial environmental policy with the aim of balancing economic and social processes related to environmental needs. In 2002, Latvia enacted its strategy for sustainable development based on the Latvian National Report "Rio + 10" to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2). In 2006, following a review of the European Union's Sustainable Development Strategy (3), Latvia began a participatory sustainable-development planning process in which citizens were encouraged to express their vision of Latvia in 2030 as regards all dimensions of sustainability. This resulted in Parliament's approval of the *Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia until 2030 (Latvia 2030)* (4) in 2010. Because of the extensive involvement of the public in discussions about the country's future, Latvia 2030 (4) is sometimes referred to as a "social contract". The Government's planning system places achieving Latvia 2030 (4) as the overarching goal of the 7-year mid-term national development plans. The current *National Development Plan of Latvia for 2014–2020* (5) ensures a hierarchy of performance indicators that are operationalized in sectoral or multisectoral policy documents down to the activity level.

While Latvia mainstreams targets for implementing the 17 SDGs in its policy, this briefing focuses specifically on SDG 16 (promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels) with a focus on participation (1). It showcases the participatory process put in place in government planning, and the contribution of public participation to the SDG review process.

Motivation

Since defining its policy processes in 1995, Latvia has had a tradition of embedding public participation in all aspects of policy-making. The Government approved a policy for strengthening civil society in 2004 and Parliament adopted laws encouraging the development of the NGO sector, including one to encourage donations to public benefit organizations. That same year brought about the establishment of Civic Alliance – Latvia, the largest NGO umbrella organization in the country, which brings together many organizations that are implementing action towards achieving the SDGs (1). The focus on public participation motivated civil society to participate in the SDG review process.

Description of action

Latvia has promoted coherence and public participation throughout its planning process, including the SDG-review process. In 2012, the Cross Sectoral Coordination Centre (CSSC) was set up (under the direct authority of the Prime Minister) to ensure policy coherence in the Latvian development planning system. As of 2015, the CSCC is the focal point for the SDGs (1).

The CSCC coordinated a process, involving all ministries, of mapping progress towards achieving the SDGs (1) and Latvia's development goals (4) to understand how the former were being mainstreamed into Latvian policy. This process revealed the position of the goals and targets (1) in the hierarchy of Latvian policy and provided an insight into policy coherence and coverage. It was also discussed with stakeholders during a conference in 2017. Participants in an informal advisory working group established to discuss the SDG review also provided useful information, including examples of best practice. Stakeholders involved in the final review of the draft policy document before it was sent to the Cabinet of Ministers were: Parliament's Sustainable Development Commission; local government (at which level sustainable-development strategies are adopted); civil society; the private sector; academia; the WHO Country Office Latvia, and the Latvian National Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

The general public and organized civil society participated in the SDG-review process. This is commonplace for any policy process in Latvia.

Regarding the policies that include SDG targets (1), stakeholders have been able to:

- take part at any stage of policy-making (problem identification, development of planning documents, policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation);
- become involved in public consultations, formal and informal working groups, advisory councils and other forums, and submit their opinions (in writing); and
- comment on the draft document, which is published on ministry websites under "Public participation").

This inclusive process ensures transparency and policy coherence, which allows for achieving

consensus in planning development. All stakeholders are also free to submit proposals.

The steps taken in Latvia to achieve policy coherence are the following:

1. the responsible ministry drafts the policy document, based on impact assessment and initial public participation;
2. the Cabinet of Ministers announces the consultation period on its website;
3. stakeholders submit comments (proposals/objections) they may wish to make on the draft policy;
4. the responsible ministry compiles a table showing the stakeholders' comments on the draft policy and the ministry's reactions to these, as well as information about any subsequent changes in wording, and shares it with the relevant stakeholders;
5. stakeholders decide whether to maintain their proposals/objections in the light of the ministry's reactions;
6. the responsible ministry convenes a meeting with stakeholders to reach an agreement on the content of the policy;
7. in cases where agreement about a particular proposal is not reached, the Cabinet of Ministers' Committee convenes a meeting to hear both sides and come to a political decision, the result of which is submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers;
8. the Cabinet of Ministers convenes a meeting (televised live on the Cabinet's website) to take the final decision on the draft policy at which stakeholders have the right to be heard (6).

Citizens not wishing to be part of the formal consultation process can engage in the decision-making process by submitting their proposals via the citizens' engagement website (6). Parliament is obliged to consider any issue brought forward in this way if a certain number of signatures is collected.

Regarding health policy, a wide range of NGOs representing the interests of various health-care groups (patients, medical practitioners, health-care institutions, employers, as well as representatives of the pharmaceutical industry (pharmacists, pharmacies, manufacturers, etc.) are involved in both policy planning and evaluation and the drafting of legislation by the Ministry of Health or any other ministry.

Impact

Latvia attributes the existence of a good policy foundation and social consciousness about sustainable development as being key to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its goals (1). Today, NGOs in Latvia are working towards every SDG, both at the grass-roots level and at the individual, community, local-government, national, regional and global levels. The Latvian development planning system defines how goals and performance indicators are used in policy planning. This is another factor that is conducive to more effective public participation in the planning process and it facilitates budget-related decision-making. Latvia has a decentralized planning system based on the principle of subsidiarity; the Government only addresses issues at the national level if they cannot be better addressed at the local-government, community and individual levels. In this context, local governments have an important role to play in raising awareness about sustainable development and, to this end, have adopted local sustainable-development strategies.

Policy implications and remaining challenges

The Advisory Working Group for the SDG review is continuing its work and meets on an ad hoc basis. In March 2019, it met to discuss the results of public consultations in Latvia on the European Commission's *Reflection paper: toward a sustainable Europe by 2030* (7).

Lessons learnt

Latvia 2030. Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia until 2030 (4) is the highest-level long-term national planning document, setting priorities for sustainable development in the country. Involving the public and other sectors throughout the development of the Strategy (4) has resulted in ensuring that targets identified by citizens are at the heart of Latvia's sustainability agenda. It is important that SDGs (1) are embedded across the spectrum of policies and that people can rely on having a voice.

Latvia will continue to find ways of achieving even more efficient ways of involving the public in governmental decision-making. In 2018, the State Chancellery of Latvia – in cooperation

with the Council for Implementation of the Memorandum of Co-operation between Non-governmental Organizations and the Cabinet – carried out an assessment of the current situation regarding regulations for and the practice of such public participation. Latvia will use the results of this assessment to continue building on its successes in involving the public in SDG-related and other decision-making processes. At the same time, the State Chancellery is testing innovative approaches to interfacing with citizens, which may one day become mainstream.

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¹ All URLs accessed 12 March 2019.

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