



# Inclusion of civil society in the virtual HLPF 2020 – feedback from a survey of stakeholder participation September 2020

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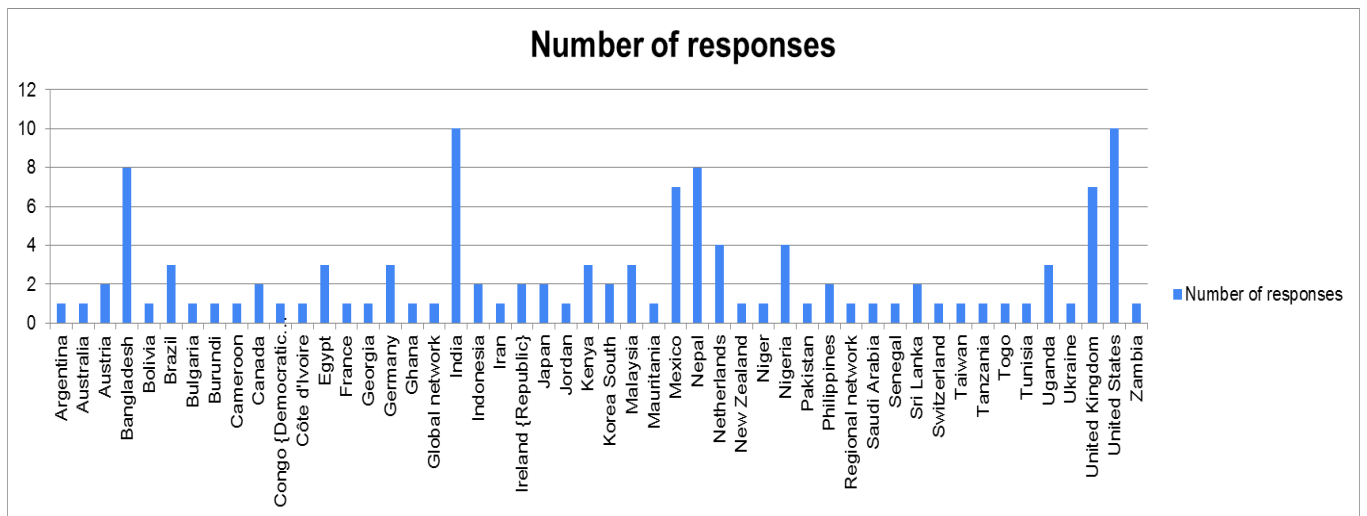
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## Introduction & Overview of respondents

As part of the review process from the point of view of civil society, A4SD shared a survey on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2020 with all Major Groups and other Stakeholders through the Coordination Mechanism.

This report provides an overview of the key findings from that report and draws from a strong relationship that already exists between the members of the Major Group and other Stakeholders and the wider national memberships as part of established and inclusive networks.

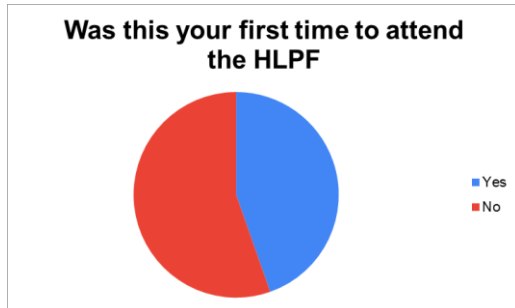
We received 130 responses from 48 countries, the highest number of responses came from respondents based in the USA, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, UK and Mexico, in addition, one group responded as a global network and one as a regional network,



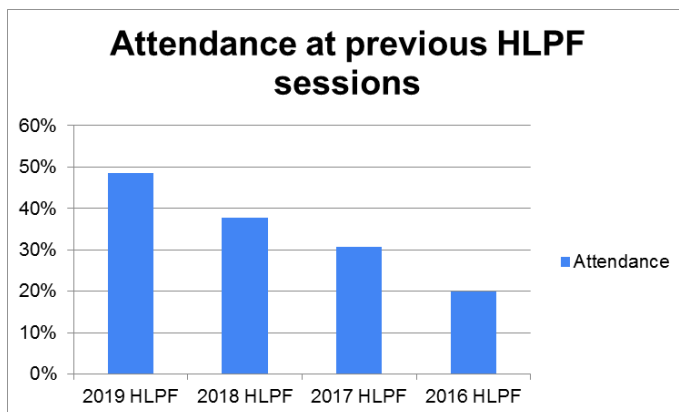
Responses came in from all of the recognised stakeholder groups, with 69 respondents who self-identified with more than one group. The highest proportion of responses came from groups self-identifying as NGOs; Women; or Children & Youth; there were also a relatively high number of responses from groups self-identifying as being from the constituencies of Education, Volunteers and Indigenous Peoples. There were relatively few respondents who self-identified as part of the Aging or Local Authorities groups.

## Levels of Participation

In terms of overall numbers of participants compared to previous years, there appears to be quite a significant increase in participation, with 45% of respondents stating that this was their first time to attend the HLPF.

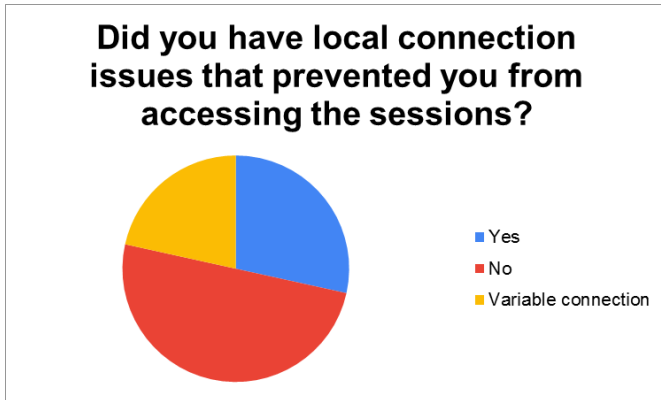


Of those who had attended before, the largest number had previously attended in 2019, while only 20% of those who attended in 2020 had attended in 2016. This suggests that the overall number of participants has increased steadily but there was a significant increase of new attendees this year within the virtual format, a point which was backed up by the high number of participants who attended the virtual side events during the HLPF.



## Challenges of Connectivity

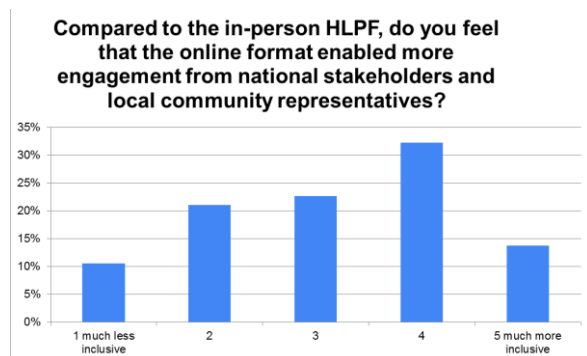
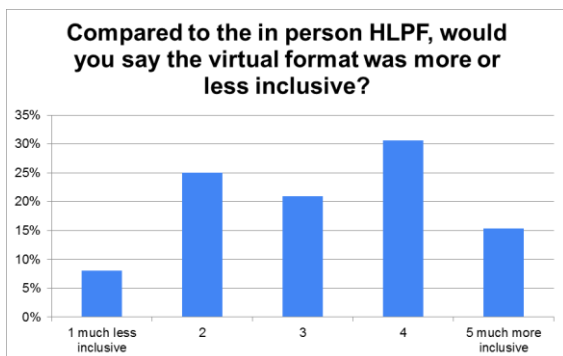
Overall the vast majority (73%) felt it was easy to follow the main programme and to connect online to watch the proceedings, however 50% either had a variable internet connection or had local connection challenges which prevented them from joining the session. This suggests that while the online programme is quite straightforward the lack of a stable internet connection is a major barrier to participation in many countries, a clear demonstration of the 'digital divide' which limits voices from disadvantaged communities from having a clear voice.



### Inclusivity in the digital format

One of the key questions was to identify how inclusive participants found the virtual format of the meeting. In this case, the number of participants who thought it was either more inclusive or much more inclusive was 46%, however 33% thought it was either less inclusive or much less inclusive, meanwhile 21% thought it was a similar level of inclusion. So while the overall trend is not completely clear, there do seem to be some benefits in terms of widening inclusion through an online format.

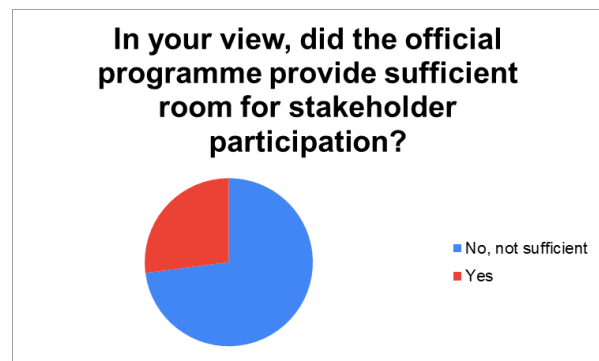
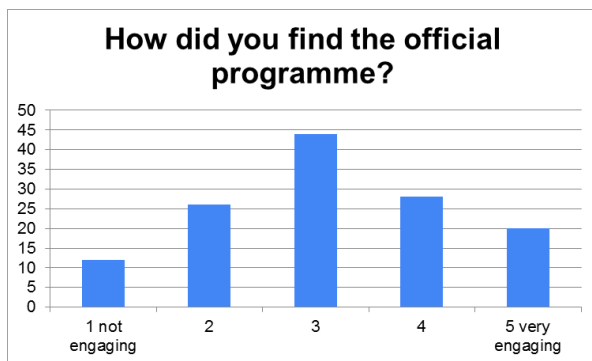
Furthermore, when asked if the virtual format enabled more engagement from national stakeholders and local community representatives, the answer was slightly more favourable; here again 46% thought it was more inclusive or much more inclusive but only 31% thought it was either less inclusive or much less inclusive, while 23% thought it was a similar level of inclusion. This suggests that while the virtual format may not be seen to be more inclusive by all participants, there does seem to be a sense that it allows for greater participation of voices from the national level who would otherwise be less able to travel to New York.



### Official programme

When asked about the official programme the responses were much more mixed. In the case of the general question of how 'engaging' respondents found the official programme, the majority of responses were that the official programme was relatively engaging but not very engaging, ie. the largest number of responses (44%) scored a middle 3 in a scale of 1-5 for level of engagement.

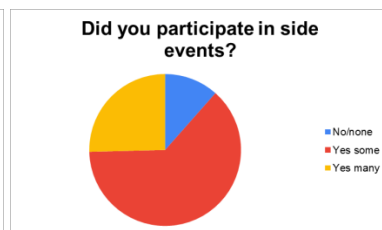
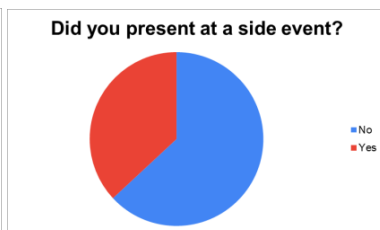
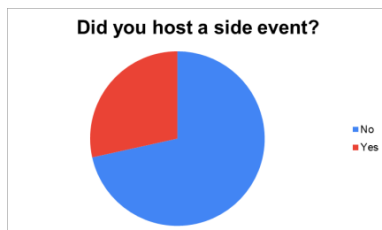
However perhaps most significant is the response to the question: “In your view, did the official programme provide sufficient room for stakeholder participation?” - here the answer was overwhelmingly that the official programme does not provide sufficient space for participation.



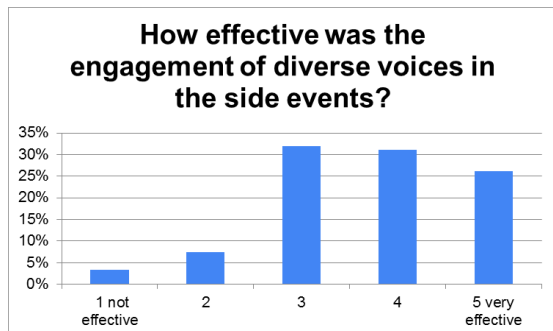
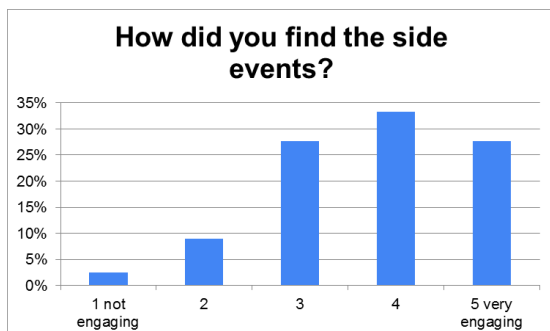
It seems clear that while a large number of new participants appear to have joined in the virtual HLPF, many of the participants did not feel that there were sufficient opportunities for real dialogue. Clearly it is difficult to accommodate such a large number of participants but other methods, such as online polling and more written Q&As could provide opportunities for a more engaging approach.

### Side Events

When asked about their experience of side events, the responses were quite different. It is interesting to note that the vast majority of respondents did not organise their own side event, or even present at a side event, however 88% did participate in at least one side event, while a quarter of respondents stated that they had participated in many side events.



It is therefore crucial to understand what feedback was received on the engagement in side events to understand if participants felt that they were able to engage proactively.



It's useful to note that a combined total of 61% rated side events as 4 or 5 in terms of level of engagement, while only a combined 11% rated them at level 1 or 2. Furthermore, even on the more challenging question of engaging diverse voices, here again the combined total of ratings of level 4 or 5 was 57%, while only a combined 10% rated these at level 1 or 2 for level of engagement.

In summary this means that nearly 2/3 of all respondents found the side events to provide good opportunities for the engagement of diverse voices. It may be helpful to reflect on ways of engagement that were employed in the side events to help to inform future official events in order to ensure broader inclusion in the official events.

### **Other observations from respondents**

The final question allowed for open-ended text on other comments or suggestions. There were a wide range of additional comments but a few key themes emerge.

- a) Risk of disconnect between the official events and the side events- one of the challenges that was highlighted in several comments was the risk that due to the digital format, the overall programme became somewhat disjointed and there were limited opportunities for interaction between official delegates and wider stakeholders. It would be useful to consider how to expand on the opportunities for greater inclusion in the official programme and also more spaces for informal dialogue online between different participants.
- b) Accessibility- there were a number of comments regarding accessibility, this is particularly noticeable in terms of the challenges to digital connectivity but also includes the need for better interpretation of a wider range of languages and also disability access, such as closed captions and sign language.
- c) Importance of shared agenda setting- a number of comments highlighted that the virtual format included less interaction in the preparation phase and therefore there was less opportunity to shape the agenda. While it was welcome that a number of countries included written questions for the first time as a way to offer feedback on the VNR, there was also a perception that the speakers chosen for official sessions did not sufficiently reflect the diversity of voices and the importance to leave no one behind, such as enabling the participation of indigenous, disability and youth voices.
- d) Blended formats- various comments highlighted that the virtual format could work alongside a physical meeting in the future, this could provide a way to reach out to a wider range of participants possibly in advance of; or alongside a physical meeting in New York.

## Summary of key recommendations

This survey has highlighted a number of patterns and leads to a number of recommendations in order to learn the lessons of this highly unusual year.

### a) Bridging the digital divide

One of the clearest lessons is around the need to overcome the challenges in enabling diverse communities to be heard online. There are significant challenges in terms of digital reach in many communities, which require significant investment in local infrastructure. Furthermore, in terms of specific infrastructure for the meetings, it is important to ensure accessibility including diverse languages, closed captioning and sign language access.

### b) Ensure real interactive dialogue in official sessions

The official sessions could be more creative in ways of engaging with participants, there were missed opportunities in terms of ensuring inputs could be heard via online polls, and Q&As, however there is emerging good practice in terms of written responses to questions posed to VNR countries.

### c) Maximise the potential reach of online engagement to crowdsource ideas and ensure independent voices are heard

The wider sessions, including the many side events enabled a broader range of voices to be heard but they could go even further in terms of using the online format to share independent voices from many communities that are not normally heard in the UN; they could also consider ways to harness crowdsourcing of ideas to capture broader views and inputs from stakeholders.

### d) Blended formats for future meetings

There is now an opportunity to plan ahead, depending on the future situation with the Covid-19 pandemic, it is hoped that there may be opportunities in the future for blended formats, which would include an element of online outreach to diverse communities as well as an element of physical meetings in New York.

### e) Embed the process pre and post HLPF at national level

Finally, one of the longer-term proposals is to ensure that the HLPF process is more fully embedded into the national planning process so that there is a coherent process for dialogue with stakeholders before the VNR is prepared, as well as follow up in terms of engagement with stakeholders in national delivery. This should also include appropriate feedback on progress since the last VNR when reporting for the second or third times.