Engaging Citizens for Sustainable Development in the Ibero-American Region

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OECD Development Communication Network (DevCom) & Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB)

“Mucha gente pequeña, en lugares pequeños, haciendo cosas pequeñas, puede cambiar el mundo”
Eduardo Galeano, Uruguayan journalist and writer

When global leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda in 2015, they called it an agenda “of the people, by the people, and for the people”. They knew that, like all policy goals today, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot be achieved without public support.

Four years later, citizens around the world are mobilising: protesting against inequality, calling for gender equality and demanding action against climate change. For public institutions seeking to achieve the SDGs, this is a tremendous opportunity to turn public attitudes into positive action for sustainable development.

This Policy Note focuses on the challenge of engaging citizens for sustainable development in the Ibero-American region. It addresses four key questions:

I. Rationale: Why do public institutions need to engage citizens for sustainable development?
II. Taking stock: What do citizens in the region think about and do for sustainable development?
III. Action: What are public institutions doing to engage citizens?
IV. Principles: How can public engagement achieve greater impact?

I. RATIONALE: WHY WE NEED TO ENGAGE CITIZENS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Engaging with citizens can help public institutions achieve policy goals. It can generate:

1. More public support and legitimacy for SDG policies.

Governments need support from citizens (and taxpayers) in order to justify their spending decisions. Yet, only 22% of Latin Americans had “a lot” or “some” trust in governments in 2018 (Latinobarómetro, 2018[1]). The OECD finds that engaging citizens can help increase their satisfaction with public services, strengthen accountability and raise awareness about results that governments have achieved (OECD, 2016[1]).

2. Feedback and ideas for better policies and programmes.

Citizens have feedback and ideas to share for the SDGs. By consulting them on policies and budgets (e.g. through citizens’ councils or innovation labs), governments can not only build trust, but also improve the delivery of public services for the SDGs (OECD, 2016[1]). The 2018 Latin American Economic Outlook (LEO) calls for more open, participatory and innovative states to help connect with citizens (OECD/CAF/ECLAC, 2018[2]).

3. More public action for the SDGs.

Glocalities finds that young people are particularly willing to donate money for a cause (28% of Millennials compared to 24% of older generations), to participate in groups supporting a cause (22% vs 17%) and to volunteer (38% vs 26%) (Glocalities, 2018[3]). Beyond these “extra-curricular” activities, communicators need to show citizens how to integrate sustainable development into their daily lives, at work and at home.
Besides shaping public attitudes and behaviours for better policy outcomes, engaging with citizens can also be a legal or political obligation. Most public institutions are required by law to report to parliament and consult with citizens in the design of new policies. Many countries have also made international commitments:

- 17 Ibero-American governments have signed on to the Open Government Partnership, thereby agreeing to empower citizens and become more inclusive and transparent.
- Of the 169 SDG targets, five depend directly on awareness-raising and transparency [see Box].
- As part of the Action Plan for Ibero-American Co-operation 2019-2022, countries call on SEGIB to accompany national-level efforts to “promote awareness-raising actions on the SDGs and their underlying values”.

There are no agreed measures of how citizens engage with sustainable development, but the framework below can help “SDG advocates” set goals. On the one hand, they can improve public awareness and attitudes. On the other, they can catalyse public action and ask for advice.

II. TAKING STOCK: HOW ARE CITIZENS ENGAGING WITH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

Where do Ibero-American SDG advocates stand in pursuing the above goals? This section brings together survey findings on how citizens engage with sustainable development in Ibero-America and around the world.

A. Awareness & Attitudes: what do citizens think and know about sustainable development?

Too many citizens feel that their countries – and public institutions – are off track

Mobilising support for the SDGs requires confidence and hope. Yet, despite rising living standards, only few citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) feel that their country is on track for sustainable development. Large shares of the population think their country is on the wrong track in Peru (65%), Chile (55%), Brazil (55%) and Mexico (45%) (Ipsos, 2019[5]). Meanwhile, a majority of citizens in Spain (83%) and Portugal (55%) judge the situation of their national economies as “bad” (European Commission, 2018[6]), while 94% in Portugal and 93% in Spain agree that national governments need to address differences in income levels (European Commission, 2018[8]).

This lack of confidence mirrors how citizens feel about public services. For example, between 2006 and 2016, the proportion of LAC citizens who were satisfied with healthcare fell from 57% to 41%, well below the OECD average of 70% (OECD/CAF/ECLAC, 2018[2]). In Portugal and Spain, respectively 38% and 42% of citizens state that the current provision of public services in their country is “good” (European Commission, 2018[9]).

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1 Signatory countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Spain, Uruguay.
A lack of trust can directly affect the ability of public institutions to deliver on the SDGs when it translates into lower resources. In LAC, “tax morale” has fallen. Since 2011, the percentage of Latin Americans who would never justify evading paying taxes decreased from 54% to 48% in 2015. In contrast, the proportion of those who find evading taxes “justifiable” increased to 27% in 2015 from 17% in 2011 (OECD, 2019[9]).

**Awareness of the SDGs remains very low**

Citizens may perceive a lack of progress at the national level, but do they know about international efforts to promote the SDGs? In a 2018 SEGIB survey of communications focal points in Ibero-America, 8% estimated that their citizens know “a lot” about the SDGs.

In 2017, **Globescan asked citizens** in 21 countries about their awareness of the SDGs. The results for the Ibero-American countries surveyed are displayed in table 1 (Globescan, 2017[8]).

![Table 1: Source: Globescan (2017), Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.](image)

**Young people need more information on how to make a difference**

Many young people are confident that they can **play a role** in advancing sustainable development. For example, 20% of millennials worldwide² think their actions can make a “great difference” in helping to end global poverty (against 12% for older generations) (Globalities, 2018[8]). In 2017, the **Varkey Foundation** found that young people in Brazil (86%) and Argentina (73%) were more likely than others to say that making a wider contribution to society is important: the global figure was 67%. In these two countries, about 1 in 3 respondents said they needed more knowledge on how to get involved (Varkey Foundation, 2017[5]).

**B. Action & Advice: How are citizens contributing to sustainable development?**

**Citizens are willing to adopt sustainable lifestyles, and companies are listening**

According to **Nielsen**, 66% of consumers worldwide say they are willing to pay more for products from companies that are committed to positive social and environmental impact (Nielsen, 2015[10]). In a **2019 SEGIB poll**, 91% of respondents said that companies can and should play a decisive role in creating a fairer and more sustainable economic model (SEGIB, 2019[11]). According to the **UN Global Compact**, 81% of LAC companies claim to be taking specific actions on the SDGs (United Nations Global Compact, 2018[12]).

**Citizens in Ibero-America are taking action for the SDGs**

In the **2016 YouthSpeak survey**, 68% of respondents from LAC said they volunteered, giving their time, resources and energy to a particular cause, compared to a global average of 58% (AIESEC, 2016[9]). Indeed, a large number of activists from Ibero-American countries are gaining global recognition for their leadership in promoting the SDGs. At the 2019 **UN SDG Action Awards**, the finalists included a **Sustainability Festival** in Brazil, a Peruvian **investigative series**, and a **Spanish documentary** on migrants travelling from Africa to Europe.

**More work is needed to include citizens in the policy process**

Several LAC governments hold citizen councils and debates on development plans or specific issues like social policy or environmental preservation (OECD, 2016[2]). 22 cities across Ibero-America are using **text analytics and other innovative methods** to understand public opinion on the SDGs. The OECD **Observatory on Public Sector Innovation (OPS)** shows how citizens participate in budgeting in countries like **Portugal**. However, a 2016 OECD survey found that, in LAC and OECD countries, open government reforms suffer from: lack of awareness among public officials; general resistance to changes in the public sector; and a lack of sufficient resources (OECD, n.d.[18]).

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² The Globalities study surveyed 61,213 respondents in 26 countries, including in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Spain.
III. ACTION: WHAT ARE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS DOING TO ENGAGE CITIZENS?

Across Ibero-America, public institutions have many experiences to share in engaging citizens for the SDGs. This section first describes two regional campaigns coordinated by SEGIB. It then provides an overview of the efforts of individual countries, drawing on two sources: the Voluntary National Reviews on the SDGs that countries have submitted to the UN; and a 2018 survey of SEGIB communications focal points.

a. Region-wide campaigns for the SDGs

In 2018, SEGIB launched a campaign called “Somos Iberoamérica: Los colores del cambio” (“We Are Ibero-America: The colours of change”) with the aim of raising SDG awareness and engaging citizens for the 2030 Agenda. Collaborating with institutions in each of its member countries, SEGIB used diverse channels to engage audiences across the region.

- **Mural paintings.** The *Boa Mistura* collective created murals featuring a powerful quote from Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano: “We are what we do to change who we are”.

- **Videos.** SEGIB produced videos about the SDGs and the role of Ibero-American cooperation in achieving them.

- **Social Media.** SEGIB encourages citizens to share inspiring stories of their role in achieving the agenda.

The campaign was launched by heads of state, as part of the 26th Ibero-American Summit in Guatemala, which helped generate buy-in and media coverage. Through SEGIB and official governments’ channels, the campaign generated 5,200 messages and reached 10 million citizens across 22 countries.

*Somos Iberoamérica* builds on the highly successful 2017 campaign, “Diferentemente iguales” (“Differently the same”), which was based on a song by Spanish singer Bebe and accumulated more than 8.6 million views on YouTube. The interactive campaign website allows people to “play” with the song, adding sounds from their countries and discovering Ibero-American co-operation projects.

b. National efforts to engage citizens

The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) demonstrate that most Ibero-American countries are stepping up efforts to communicate with and engage citizens for the SDGs.

For many, the first step has been to develop online platforms where citizens can track progress towards the SDGs. Such platforms are available in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Spain and Uruguay.

Many countries have involved citizens and stakeholders very actively in the process of drafting and presenting their VNRs. These include Andorra, the Dominican Republic and Portugal. In Mexico, the *My World Mexico* survey gathered opinions from almost 2 million citizens, the second highest number of respondents for a country. The results helped shape the country’s SDG priorities.

These SDG-specific consultations are part of a more general trend to consult citizens on policies. Here are three countries that have developed online tools for public consultation and participation:

- Chile’s online platform “Consultas Ciudadanas” allows citizens to submit written contributions on environmental issues, including on the quality of air and classification of wild species.

- With “Dialoga Brasil”, Brazilians proposed improvements to 80 federal government programs, with the government making commitments on the most popular proposals;

- Guatemala uses U-report platform to ask young people for their views on diverse topics, and displays results anonymously and transparently.
Beyond consultations, which tend to attract citizens that are already engaged with policy processes, some governments are making efforts to reach much broader public constituencies, both online and offline. Most governments are active on social media. In their VNRs, some confirm that they have organised press conferences and launched specific social media feeds to communicate about sustainable development. On New Year’s Eve 2019, the Spanish government launched the #Soy2030 campaign, broadcasting on national television a **countdown to 2030** just hours before midnight.

Some institutions have actively sought out citizens by organising events and presentations, often in collaboration with civil society organisations and universities. In **Argentina**, for example, the National Council on Social Policies participated to the Campus Party at Technopolis 2016, and the city of Buenos Aires partnered with UN Argentina to host a booth at the Lollapalooza music festival.

To help young women and men learn about the SDGs, Bolivia has organised **workshops** and the Dominican Republic organised a 2030 Youth Academy. Costa Rica and the UN partnered on a “**Leaving No One Behind**” campaign, with celebrities from sports, journalism and music explaining the SDGs in videos and pictures. In Andorra, “**Ecoles Vertes**” brought sustainable development into school curricula.

Most of the activities above concern the 2030 Agenda as a whole. However, public engagement is often most effective when it focuses on specific themes, and on the actions that people can take to help achieve specific SDGs. As just one powerful example, Uruguay’s campaign “**Relationships free of violence**” helped raise awareness about gender violence, involving more than 12,000 young people in 115 activities in 2018.

**IV. PRINCIPLES: ENGAGING IBERO-AMERICAN CITIZENS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

There is still much to learn about what makes public engagement effective for sustainable development. Moreover, what works in one context may not work in another. However, the global knowledge base on good practice is growing, with many countries sharing lessons and inspiring stories.

Based on recent discussions within the OECD Development Communication Network (DevCom) and SEGIB’s network of communications focal points, the following five principles can help countries strengthen the impact of their engagement efforts.

1) **DON’T JUST BROADCAST: ENGAGE & ENABLE.**
   Communications today is a multi-way process. Today’s communicators need to act as platforms where citizens can participate in the conversation and carry messages about sustainable development forward themselves.

2) **ENGAGE ON FACTS AND EMOTIONS.**
   Building trust and public support is not just about communicating the numbers. It is also about engaging citizens emotionally. Accordingly, we need to frame messages that build hope and relate to people’s daily lives, and we need to choose messengers to whom our audiences relate.

3) **GO TO WHERE THE PEOPLE ARE.**
   It is no longer enough to expect audiences to visit our websites or attend our events. We need to go to where they are: cultural events, community organisations, businesses, online discussion groups.

4) **BECOME A PARTNER.**
   By partnering with others – such as civil society or businesses – public institutions can reach entirely new audiences. They can also acquire new campaigning and marketing skills.

5) **COLLABORATE ACROSS BORDERS.**
   Sustainable development is a global challenge, and the international community of SDG advocates is growing. Communicators can achieve greater impact at home when they learn from different countries and collaborate on global campaigns.

OECD DevCom promotes **Peer Learning for SDG Communicators**.

Contact us at dev.com@oecd.org or visit www.oecd.org/dev/devcom.
References


