Representativeness of the UN post-2015 national consultations

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been criticised for being created by developed countries for developing ones. For its post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Development Group (UNDG) undertook 88 national consultations to "widen the net of engagement" and include the views of vulnerable groups.[1] We examined the national consultation reports on UNDG's online repository to assess how well they accessed and represented the views of marginalised populations. Our analysis focused on the consultation process, and we reviewed reports written in English only (n=70).

Adapting the methods of Peterson for our analysis,[2] we categorised inclusion either as external inclusion, indicating proactive efforts to invite and facilitate the participation of all stakeholders,[3] or internal inclusion, indicating culturally welcoming and procedurally unrestrictive consultation methods.[4] We added a third category, inclusion in policy development, to assess whether marginalised views were separately communicated and fed into national policy processes.[5,6] The categories were assessed by means of 13 indicators on a scale of 0 to 4 (where 0 indicates an absent indicator, 1 limited inclusion, 2 reasonable inclusion, 3 strong inclusion, and 4 best practice). The indicators were: efforts to invite marginalised groups, to facilitate the attendance of marginalised groups, participation from the early stages of the consultation, and systematic *a priori* methods to identify the marginalised (external inclusion); culturally comfortable space to contribute ideas, procedures or topics that do not restrict communication, sufficient and early access to information, highly participatory methods used, and

allowing consultation participants to review the meeting transcripts to confirm that they were not misrepresented (internal inclusion); and marginalised views reported separately, feeds into local processes, results shared back with community, and sustained participation in later phases such as implementation (inclusion in policy development). The first two indicators in each category were deemed essential and were weighted twice as much as the other indicators.

The median standardised inclusion score for the 70 countries reviewed was 1·53 (IQR 0·63–2·09), corresponding to a reasonable level of inclusion. Countries showing best practice (score of 4) were Moldova, Ghana, Serbia, and the Dominican Republic. 20 countries (29%) showed strong inclusion, 25 countries (36%) had a reasonable level of inclusion, and 15 countries (21%) showed limited inclusion. Ten countries

scored 0 for having no evidence of consultations (or of reports, in three cases), effectively excluding their marginalised people from the global process (figure, appendix). The best performers for external inclusion used a priori strategies such as literature reviews or indices to identify additional marginalised groups beyond those suggested by the UNDG, such as undocumented workers and children living on the street. High performers sensitised marginalised groups using mass media campaigns and consulted them in their communities with civil society organisations (CSO). Poor performers generally held large conferences in the capital city and invited CSO representatives rather than the marginalised people themselves, or used randomised national samples instead of targeted efforts with under-represented communities. These consultations had low attendance, especially by marginalised groups.

See **Online** for appendix

For the **online repository of national consultation reports** see www.worldwewant2015.org
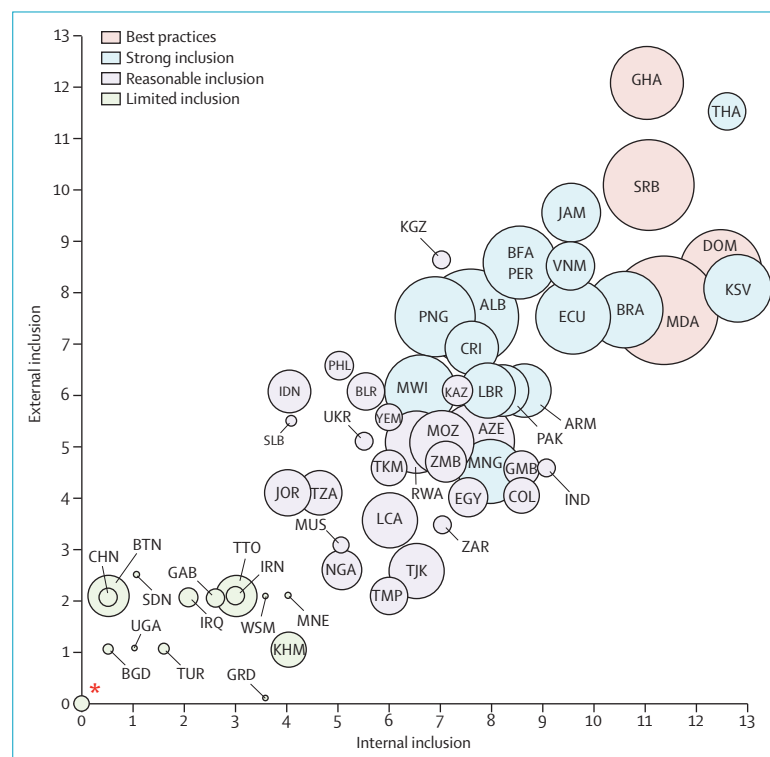

Figure: **Inclusion in UN post-2015 national consultations, highlighted by total scores**
Circle sizes correspond to degrees of policy inclusion. Using raw scores and World Bank country codes. Only reports available in English were analysed. *BDI, CIV, GEO, KEN, LBN, LSO, STP, SAU, ZAF, and SWZ.

Of the three categories, countries scored highest for internal inclusion. Culturally welcoming (eg, women-only groups) and procedurally unrestrictive methods were crucial to the success of a consultation. Weaker consultations adopted restrictive methods, such as (online) surveys or thematic consultations that did not capture the interconnected experiences of marginalisation. Unwelcoming conditions were created by the presence of government officials at community meetings, televising consultations, or publishing participant names. Researcher bias when failing to ask participants to approve meeting minutes or reports was another common shortcoming.

Policy inclusion was the weakest category and one that the UNDG template gave little direction on, despite its importance in the literature.[7] Moldova scored perfectly here by initiating long-term partnerships with communities to inform government strategies. Most strong performers reported the input from marginalised groups separately, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence. Weaker strategies solicited opinion among marginalised groups, but aggregated these data with that of the majority in their reports. Other weak areas in this category were the failure to integrate consultations with national policy processes and failure to adequately inform communities of the results through accessible reports to allow them to understand and address their own needs. However, weak performers might still be able to identify marginalised views from meeting transcripts and use them to inform the communities and national policy.

The results also revealed several conflicts among categories. Inviting CSOs rather than communities was externally excluding, yet empowered representatives were engaged and aided internal inclusion. Asking CSOs to design and conduct consultations enhanced external inclusion, while direct government involvement may have increased the likelihood of integrating consultation results into policy processes.

The unprecedented reach of the national consultations has shown the potential for the use of inclusive and participatory methods to inform global policy. They have the potential to enhance the legitimacy of the SDGs, but only if the results inform the negotiators. Strong performers can inform future UN consultation guidelines. However, the true value of the consultations depends on their rigour.

The most enduring benefit of the national consultations can be their relevance to national policies. Even with the impending MDGs 2015 deadline, the consultation process is only just beginning. The national consultations highlighted in this Correspondence can provide inspiration to recognise and share best practices, creating and sustaining inclusion in the adaptation, monitoring, and implementation of the SDGs at the national level.

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