



A GUIDE TO ENGAGING WITH YOUR GOVERNMENT ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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INTRODUCTION

Action for Sustainable Development (A4SD) is a platform launched this year to inspire and to empower all people, especially those who have been marginalised, to collectively tackle the root causes of inequalities, injustice, human rights violations, poverty, environmental degradation and climate change. To reach these goals, the *A4SD Monitoring & Accountability Working Group (M&A WG)* invests in the capacity and confidence of civil society to monitor progress and hold governments to account on their sustainable development commitments and action, with a particular focus on the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) and UNFCCC agreement.

After being approved by Member States in September 2015, the SDGs moved to an implementation phase in 2016. While the SDG process at the global level is still important for tracking overall progress, most SDG-related activities will now take place within countries at the national, district, city and community levels. Given civil society's key role in delivering the 2030

Agenda, the M&A WG will thus support its members' efforts to undertake monitoring and accountability activities at these various levels, as well as share good practices and lessons learned among countries, as well as foster collaboration on specific thematic areas.

This short guide draws upon the experiences and lessons learned from the [DataShift](#) initiative's engagement with government and other stakeholders in Kenya and Tanzania on the use of multiple sources of data to monitor progress on SDG 5 (gender equality), along with inputs from an A4SD event held during the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) this September. It provides an information about some of the main opportunities, challenges and strategies for civil society engagement with government on SDG monitoring and accountability. The guide will be updated on an ongoing basis, therefore we encourage you to submit feedback and experiences from your country that can be included in future iterations.

INSTITUTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

CSOs can engage directly with national government ministries and subnational bodies, UN agencies, and other entities created by these institutions to implement and monitor the SDGs.

Therefore, a useful first exercise is to identify which entities are officially mandated or perhaps informally tasked with coordinating national efforts on the SDGs. In most countries, this will be one of the below mentioned entities. However it should be noted that the ecosystem of SDG institutions will vary significantly from one country to the next and few countries will possess all of the institutions listed below.

It is also worth emphasising, however, that while one department may be responsible for the overall coordination of national SDG delivery efforts, policies and interventions around specific Goals or process under the broader SDGs umbrella will likely be the responsibility of particular agencies or offices, such as the Ministry of Health for SDG 3 and National Statistical Office for the monitoring of progress on the SDGs.

Then, once the department leading on the agenda or your particular SDG of interest has been identified, it will be necessary to ascertain what mechanisms for engaging civil society exist. These can be both existing mechanisms and new ones specifically brought in for the SDGs. In some cases, a dedicated team or focal point will have been appointed to coordinate civil society engagement. If this information is not readily available, your existing contacts within government (or those of your partners) will likely be able to help you find out.

MINISTRIES OF PLANNING OR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Usually the planning and overall coordinating agencies for the Executive (office of the president/prime minister). They oversee national development plans and tend to host SDGs coordination units. They are sometimes responsible for reporting on progress, coordinating other Ministries, Departments, and Agencies. CSOs can find entry points through technical working groups or steering committees established by the ministries.

NATIONAL STATISTICAL OFFICES (NSOS)

NSOs are mainly responsible for the domestication of the indicator framework, mapping data sources and gaps, and defining the monitoring process. They provide a critical entry point for CSOs to understand how progress will be measured and how they can support this process.

SDGS COORDINATION UNITS/DEPARTMENTS

CSOs can proactively engage with the SDGs coordinating units or departments directly. They usually comprise of experts in various fields and be less tied to existing policy positions or political agendas and may therefore be more receptive to civil society ideas. However this also tends to mean they have less influence on key decisions and control of resources than higher level bodies such as the Ministry of Planning.

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES ON SDGS

Where these exist, they provide a critical avenue for CSOs to influence legislation. Given their oversight mandate, CSOs can also feed them with reports on whether progress is being made or not so they can hold the Executive to account. They also play

a critical role in national and subnational budget allocations and are therefore a key target for advocacy.

UN AGENCIES:

In most developing countries United Nations (UN) agencies, particularly the UN Development Programme (UNDP), play a substantive role in technically supporting governments to define, roll-out, and create frameworks for measuring development progress - including reporting. Other useful agencies include UN Environment Program (UNEP) and regional Economic and Social Commissions (eg; ECA, Africa; ESCAP, Asia-Pacific; ECLAC/CEPAL, Latin America and the Caribbean).

CITY/MUNICIPAL OR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Given their proximity to communities and citizens, cities and local governments have the ability to be more responsive to and more inclusive of their needs. It is at this level where the majority of planning and delivery of services related to SDG issues will take place, and it is also the level at which sustainable development outcomes and progress (or lack thereof) will appear most apparent. Furthermore, cities and urban environments have their own SDG (11) and may therefore have a dedicated institution or plan for implementing and monitoring it that can be identified and engaged with.

Local perspectives/data collection and campaigning can therefore highlight both persistent challenges and innovations related to SDG progress (or lack therefore). Therefore even if mechanisms for feeding local realities up into national SDG monitoring and accountability are weak or absent, the SDGs provide a useful framework for holding local authorities to account.

PROCESS ORIENTED OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to bilateral engagement with government and UN entities, you should also establish which multi-stakeholder and sector-specific committees, working groups and civil society platforms already exist in your country. They may provide spaces for advocating for the wider SDG implementation process, as well as expert forums dedicated to specific issue areas. Below you can find a list of example process oriented opportunities.

FEEDING INTO THE GLOBAL SDG FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW PROCESS

In the spirit of continuous improvement and accountability, through the '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', the world's governments commit to "fully engage in conducting regular and inclusive reviews of progress at subnational, national, regional and global levels." The agreement states that these processes should be inclusive and multi-stakeholder, therefore governments should, in theory, be developing processes and mechanisms for enabling this. Therefore in countries where such mechanisms don't yet exist, there is a clear mandate for civil society to advocate for their creation.

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Some countries will set up or adapt existing National Commissions for Sustainable Development to develop revised national development plans/strategies to incorporate the SDGs and new climate commitments. These commissions themselves are often multi-stakeholder in nature, be relatively independent from but well connected to government, and usually contain clear mechanisms for engaging civil society. Therefore where these plans exist, there will likely include a clear mandate and mechanisms for civil society participation in their

design and delivery. And in cases where they are absent, the SDGs represent a unique opportunity to advocate for their creation and could therefore be a worthy advocacy target for civil society, especially if successful practices from other countries can be brought to the fore.

TECHNICAL WORKING GROUPS

National, state and even municipal commissions will often have more technical working groups, including those that are multi-stakeholder, to discuss specific SDGs and issue areas. Ministries might also convene thematic discussions in which civil society could contribute according to their areas of expertise. For example, the [Brazilian Climate Change Forum](#) is a multi-stakeholder initiative that works to incorporate climate change (SDG 13) issues to public policies. Another example of thematic forum is the [RegionsAdapt](#) initiative, which offers a framework for regional governments to take action, cooperate and report efforts in climate adaptation.

CIVIL SOCIETY NATIONAL PLATFORMS/FORUMS

Civil society also has its own convening networks, which enable action locally, at the city/district level and nationally, as well as cooperation at the global level. Those networks provide engagement opportunities on different areas, such as SDG-related campaigns, advocacy, implementation and monitoring. For instance, [Action for Sustainable Development](#) (A4SD) is working to enable its members to monitor the SDGs at the national level, as well as promoting exchanges among different national civil society actors both within and across different regions. The [International Forum of National NGO Platforms](#) (IFP-FIP) also conveys national NGOs in several countries to act together in different issues, as the SDGs. There are also several

city-level platforms, such as [Rede Nossa São Paulo](#) and [Meu Rio](#) in Brazil.

SECTOR-SPECIFIC THEMATIC WORKING GROUPS

Existing sectoral groups, such as the Global Compact (business sector) and C40 (mayors and climate change) appear to be in the process of adapting their current forums to be more explicitly SDG-related. This includes many which engage directly with civil society to leverage its unique perspectives and expertise. In addition, there are existing initiatives such as the [Transparency, Accountability and Participation \(TAP\) network](#), which focus on issues related to SDG 16, that are examples of specific civil society convened thematic groups.

Then other new initiatives on specific thematic areas have emerged particularly in response to the SDGs. For example, a number of different stakeholders, including many CSOs are working on a an SDG 2 accountability framework initiative, which is aiming to include an innovative and universal data portal focusing specifically on the nutrition, food security and agriculture data. Similarly, the SDG16 Data Initiative is a multi-stakeholder collective seeking to support the open tracking of these global commitments on peace, justice, and strong institutions by complementing the current efforts underway to develop an official indicator framework for monitoring the SDGs.

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP RELATED OPPORTUNITIES

A number of global multi-stakeholder partnerships that focus on a specific sustainable development issue have activities which directly relate to or support SDG monitoring and accountability at the national level. For instance, the [Global Partnership](#)

[for Effective Development Cooperation](#) (GPEDC) shares many objectives with the 2030 Agenda, especially Goal 17 (means of implementation) and is in the process of adapting its activities to support its stakeholders, including civil society, to realise the SDGs. In addition, the [Open Government Partnership](#) (OGP) is doing similar things, related to Goal 16 in particular, with civil society playing an important role in the design, implementation and monitoring of OGP national action plans.

Also, the [Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data](#) is leading a process to support countries to develop national data revolution roadmaps, specifically focused on enabling all stakeholders at this level to harness the inclusive data revolution that is required to effectively monitor SDG progress. And should global initiatives such as these not exist in your country currently, then can potentially represent a strong advocacy target for civil society organisations to rally around.

BARRIERS TO CSOS ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENT ON SDGS

Despite the valuable contribution that civil society can make to the delivery of the SDGs at the national and local level, government engagement with civil society on this agenda remains suboptimal in the majority of countries. Below is a number of key barriers that we must work collectively and innovatively to overcome if civil society is to realise its full potential as a critical actor in the delivery of the Agenda 2030.

LACK OF FORMAL FRAMEWORKS FOR ENGAGEMENT:

Most government-CSO engagement is informal, unstructured, ad hoc/unpredictable, and mostly left

to the discretion of government. The government, therefore opens doors when it feels it should, or when it wants to appear to be engaging, or needs the endorsement of CSOs on certain matters.

LACK OF INFORMATION OR AWARENESS:

One year after the adoption of the SDGs there is very little information, or awareness on the SDGs in the public domain. In both Kenya and Tanzania, for example, there are no formal channels to communicate the emerging domestication and implementation process to the public.

APATHY:

Many CSOs are yet to fully comprehend the significance or utility of the SDGs and draw linkages to them in their work on the ground. Others think the SDGs are not relevant to their work. This is a sentiment that can be in part attributed to negative experiences from the MDG period, where opportunities for engagement and collaborative action with government were often very limited. Therefore if we are not able to change this trend we risk the SDGs possessing the same weak levels of accountability, which will make the the realisation of this more ambitious agenda even harder still.

LACK OF MUTUAL TRUST:

Historical attitudes, biases, and bad blood between civil society and government creates insurmountable barriers to their engagement. This includes the fear of the unknown, where one or the other is unsure or suspicious of the other's real intent or interest in a particular process.

WORKING IN SILOS:

There is a belief by CSOs or governments that each should work exclusively on their own initiatives; each carving out a territory for themselves. This creates

a sense of entitlement that makes it difficult for one to open the door to the other. It also triggers competition for resources - something that the SDGs may amplify. And, crucially, it deters joined-up policy making, both within and between civil society and government.

LIMITED CAPACITY (INCLUDING TECHNICAL) WITHIN GOVERNMENT OR AMONG CSOS:

When government is unsure or not confident about its technical ability to, for example, effectively domesticate the SDGs, it may have a tendency to close up to avoid "exposing" its weaknesses to CSOs and other external stakeholders. The same applies for CSOs who may lack the skills to engage on technical matters, therefore keeping them disengaged from such processes.

LACK OF COORDINATION:

It's difficult and confusing for government to engage with hundreds of CSOs at once - often on similar issues. Similarly, when government functions are spread across multiple government agencies - coordination can be a challenge, making it difficult to identify or locate key actors for engagement. This can be frustrating for CSOs, especially when they get tossed around government offices to obtain information or want to engage on specific issues.

LACK OF RESOURCES:

Engagement is resource intensive. It requires time and money. The absence of dedicated budgets or resources can be an impediment for both CSOs and government to engage.

...AND HOW WE CAN TRY TO OVERCOME THEM!

- *Be proactive.* Team up with other CSOs and together reach out to government representatives to explore or create long-

term opportunities for engagement.

- *Be patient and persistent.* Building relationships with government takes time. While it might seem obvious, if you're not receiving responses via email, pick up the phone or even head to the relevant government office to try and request a meeting.
- *Get out there.* Invite government officials to events you host related to the SDGs. And attending government events on related topics to network and ask questions about the SDGs can yield positive results.
- *Create awareness.* Via campaigns and resources to spread the word about the SDGs. If possible, try to tailor these to the different audiences you're trying to reach. But in general, easy to understand language and shorter, more concise briefings are more effective.
- *Communicate.* Write articles for newspapers, publish blog posts, and share SDG materials on social media.
- *Be an SDG ambassador.* Share your knowledge and understanding about the importance, opportunities and challenges of the SDGs with other CSOs.
- *Identify champions.* Amongst civil society champions among government representatives and foster cooperation.
- *Break down silos.* Use the SDG as an opportunity to break traditional NGO silos - as an universal agenda, there is potential for multi-stakeholder collaboration across different issue areas. For example, gender equality and climate change have their own Goals (SDG 5 and SDG 13 respectively) but are issues which cut across almost all other SDGs.

- *Invest resources.* Commit time and funds (if possible) to exploring training opportunities that can build the capacity of your organisation, including around advocacy with governments and other stakeholders. And let global networks like A4SD and INGOs know about the training materials your organisation needs in this regard.
- *Unite.* Together we are stronger! Join or create a CSO coalition working for the delivery of the SDGs - Governments are more likely to engage with a group of NGOs than hosting many bilateral meetings.
- *Fundraise.* Although engaging in the SDG agenda can be resource intensive, it can also bring new funding opportunities, for both linking your core/existing work to this agenda, as well as specific new SDG-related projects.

POSSIBLE APPROACHES FOR CSO ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENTS ON SDG MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

After using the previous sections of the guide to assess the engagement opportunities (and barriers) in your country or locality, you should hopefully be in a good position to start planning your engagement with government. Below is a checklist to help you with this process:

- ✓ Check whether your government already has released an implementation plan for the SDGs
- ✓ Identify relevant government processes,

departments, working groups and actors working on your priority issues and enquire about what formal opportunities exist for you to engage

- ✓ Attempt to engage with relevant processes and actors via:
 - ✓ bilateral meetings and multi-stakeholder thematic forums (civil society convened); and/or
 - ✓ official technical working groups (government convened)
- ✓ Propose/discuss proposals for the likes of:
 - ✓ engagement principles and mechanisms to create a clear framework for your interactions going forward
 - ✓ contextually relevant indicators and monitoring frameworks which leverage civil society expertise and data, especially in areas that government struggle to adequately monitor
- ✓ Create awareness amongst your communities and constituents about the commitments governments made on their priority issues through the SDGs, as well as potential engagement opportunities, through the likes of short, simple to understand booklets that are made relevant to local contexts
- ✓ Identify other organisations working on similar/linked issues and undertake joint advocacy efforts, potentially creating new platforms or networks to support this collaboration (or better still, find an existing platform and engage with them on the SDGs)
- ✓ Collect and analyse data on issues related to your priority SDG targets and indicators. This can support both independent shadow reporting (which will likely be more

effective if done collaboratively) and direct collaboration with NSOs as part of 'official' monitoring processes

- ✓ Match SDG targets to local government priorities and plans, thereby helping to localise the SDG agenda for local decision makers, organisations and communities
- ✓ Document and share evidence and lessons from engagement with government on SDG-related issues, especially approaches that have yielded positive results. Platforms like A4SD can provide an ideal vehicle for doing this, both nationally and internationally.

A4SD plans to compile national case studies about CSO engagement with governments on SDG implementation and monitoring, which will integrate an updated version of this guide. **You can forward your testimonials to us by sending an email to datashift@civicus.org with the title "[YOUR COUNTRY NAME's experience in engaging governments on SDG M&A]". Deadline is 1 March 2017.**

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Making Use of Citizen-Generated Data](#), DataShift and Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data.
- [Goal 16 Advocacy Toolkit](#), TAP Network.
- [Sustainable Development Goals: A Practical Guide for National Action and Accountability](#), Amnesty International.



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