

Mobilizing Parliamentarians

What is it?

A parliament – or legislature – is the body of government responsible for making the laws of a country. Composed of representatives or politicians representing different geographical areas or constituencies, a modern parliament tends to have the following core functions: law-making; budgeting; oversight of government bodies, especially the executive branch of government; and representing the interests of citizens. In performing these functions, parliamentarians may use a number of procedures such as: introducing legislation and amending laws; scrutinizing ministers, civil servants and other government actors through questions, holding inquiries and hearings to receive expert evidence; and gaining access to official documents and information.

Why is it important?

Parliaments play an important role in ensuring the implementation and monitoring of and compliance with international commitments at the national level. They are, in essence, the institutions formally in charge of making governments accountable for their international commitments. Notably, the 2030 Agenda acknowledges “the essential role of national parliaments through their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and their role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of our commitments.”³⁷

Parliaments can promote accountability for the SDGs in a number of ways. They can make or amend laws to ensure consistency with the 2030 Agenda. They can monitor the actions of the government and its agencies in implementing the SDGs. They can assess overall progress on the SDGs through periodic reports tabled in parliament. They can evaluate budgets and ensure an adequate allocation of financial resources to achieve the SDGs. They can also hold public hearings and inquiries on issues relevant to the SDGs, stimulating public debate in relation to policies to attain the SDGs, and providing opportunities for experts and citizens to offer their views on what is or isn't working on the ground. Moreover, the role that parliamentarians play in representing their constituents' interests is vital to SDG accountability, especially for vulnerable or marginalized groups who may have few avenues in which to raise their concerns.

How can it be used?

Citizens have the right to provide input into the work of parliaments³⁸ and there are a number of ways that CSOs can engage, educate and mobilize parliaments and parliamentarians in relation to accountability for the 2030 Agenda, including the following actions:

1. Engage with individual Members of Parliaments (MPs) – CSOs should seek to meet with, lobby and build relationships with individual MPs in order to promote accountability for the SDGs. In particular, CSOs should:

³⁷ United Nations (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, para. 45.

³⁸ According to the Declaration on Parliamentary Openness: “Parliament has a duty to actively engage citizens and civil society, without discrimination, in parliamentary processes and decision-making in order to effectively represent citizen interests and to give effect to the right of citizens to petition their government.” Cited in: The Open Government Partnership (2014), p. 222.

The potential limits of parliamentary action for accountability for the SDGs

Parliaments vary greatly in their composition, structure and mandate, and not all parliaments will necessarily be able or willing to play an active role in SDG accountability. In some cases, a lack of parliamentary openness may mean that citizens are not informed about the work of parliament and thus are restricted from engaging with parliamentarians. According to the Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Parliament, many parliaments do not provide public access to a variety of critical legislative documents that are necessary for citizens to be able to influence the parliamentary decision-making process, and even when such information is publicly available, it may not be presented in a manner that enables broad participation.³⁹ In other cases, parliaments may not have the capacity to take on the heavy demands of the SDGs⁴⁰ or there may be a lack of parliamentary oversight, with limited powers for parliaments to monitor or challenge the executive branch of government. Given these realities, it is essential that civil society actors assess – on an individual basis – the extent to which their parliament can support and promote accountability for the SDGs.

a. Educate MPs on the SDGs and their role as parliamentarians in SDG accountability – CSOs can ensure that parliamentarians are well-informed about the SDGs and the role that they, as MPs, can play in advancing accountability for the 2030 Agenda. In particular, CSOs can educate MPs – especially newly elected ones – on the use of their legislative, budgetary and oversight powers to further accountability for the SDGs.

b. Encourage MPs to legislate in relation to the SDGs – For example, CSOs can urge and support MPs to endorse or adopt the 2030 Agenda in Parliament, ensure that current laws are consistent with the SDGs, and propose new legislation in support of the SDGs.

c. Urge MPs to use their oversight role to monitor progress and action on the SDGs – CSOs can encourage MPs to monitor progress on the SDGs – for example, through regular progress reports or updates in Parliament – as well as to monitor and challenge the government's actions in implementing the Agenda including its budgetary allocations. CSOs should urge MPs to use existing parliamentary processes – such as open debates, parliamentary 'question time' or 'interpellations'⁴¹ – to question ministers on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and to draw attention to particular SDG issues.



TIPS for engaging with individual Members of Parliament (MPs):

- Seek to engage with MPs as early as possible in their term – ideally within their first year of office – in order to maximize impact in the long-term.
- Build positive relationships with the staff of MPs, who often play a key role in organizing their day-to-day calendars and may influence their policy and legislative priorities.
- Seek to engage with MPs from all political parties. Governments change and MPs in opposition can often become influential ministers within only a few years
- Ensure that MPs have the power to put your recommendation or "asks" into action.
- Target or create champion MPs for the SDGs who will be influential in pushing accountability for the 2030 Agenda forward.

2. Engage with parliamentary committees and working groups – CSOs should engage with parliamentary committees that address issues related to the SDGs, including permanent standing committees as well as ad hoc committees that deal with specific tasks. Parliaments may mainstream the SDGs across existing parliamentary committees and/or establish a dedicated

³⁹ The Open Government Partnership (2014), p. 224. The Declaration on Parliamentary Openness (section 2, provisions 13-26) contains a comprehensive list of information that parliaments should make available, as does the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites.

⁴⁰ CESR and UN Women (2017), p. 12.

⁴¹ In many countries, the legislature will have a process that enables any legislator to ask a question of a minister on any issue they choose. In parliamentary systems, this is known as "Question Time," whereas in other systems the process involves what are called "interpellations." TAP Network (2016), Goal 16 Advocacy Toolkit, p. 26.

committee or working group on the SDGs.⁴² As a starting point, CSOs should determine whether the SDGs have been included in the formal mandate of one or more committees and whether a specific committee on the SDGs has been created.

CSO engagement with parliamentary committees may take a variety of forms, including: educating committees on the SDGs through information seminars and training sessions; offering briefings, feedback and/or oral or written submissions to committees on SDG implementation (e.g. what is or is not working); and providing technical advice and expertise on SDG issues. CSOs can also advocate to influential parliamentary committees to have a thematic focus on the SDGs broadly or on specific goals or targets.



TIP: CSOs can support the creation of informal cross-party mechanisms – such as parliamentary friendship groups – to focus on the SDGs or specific SDG issues. In many countries, issues-based legislative “friendship groups” exist within legislatures, bringing cross-party groups of legislators together around a particular cause.⁴³

3. Participate in parliamentary hearing and inquiries – Parliamentary inquiries and hearings provide spaces where governments can be held responsible for their SDG commitments.⁴⁴ One way that CSOs can engage with parliaments is by giving oral or written submissions on SDG implementation and/or review to parliamentary hearings and inquiries. Notably, the 2030 Agenda recognizes the role of national parliaments in supporting processes for regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels.⁴⁵

Parliamentary committees should have the power to call public hearings to garner citizens’ views on implementation as well as to call on government officials to provide information on the impact of its policies.⁴⁶ Such hearings can also offer a mechanism for parliaments to receive citizen input on draft or existing legislation in relation to the SDGs.

4. Help connect citizens to parliamentarians – CSOs can play a key role in bridging the gap between legislators and citizens in relation to SDG implementation and review by organizing lobbying campaigns – such as letter writing campaigns – as well as constituent visits in

Innovative ways to engage parliaments

CSOs should consider innovative ways to engage with parliaments and parliamentarians in order to further accountability for the 2030 Agenda, including through the use of new technologies. In particular, CSOs can support the development and use of digital platforms and capacities – such as social media, mobile and SMS technology – to enable citizen engagement with parliamentarians.⁴⁷ Many parliaments are adopting the use of digital technologies as low-cost ways to reach citizens in various geographic locations or who lack the means to participate in-person.⁴⁸ Such technologies can be used by CSOs and citizens to offer direct feedback to parliamentarians on SDG implementation and review, provide comments on draft legislation, or submit letters or questions to elected representatives in a public forum.⁴⁹

42 CESR and UN Women (2017). pp. 11-12.

43 TAP Network (2016). Goal 16 Advocacy Toolkit, p. 31.

44 CESR and UN Women (2017). p. 12.

45 United Nations (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, para. 79.

46 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2016). Parliaments and the Sustainable Development Goals: A self-assessment toolkit, p. 12. <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/handbooks/2017-01/parliaments-and-sustainable-development-goals-self-assessment-toolkit>

47 The Open Government Partnership (2014). p. 233.

48 *Ibid*

49 *Ibid*

parliamentarians' electorates or districts. As elected representatives of the people, parliamentarians have an obligation to engage with their constituents throughout their term of office and not just during election times.⁵⁰

CSOs facilitating outreach and communication between citizens and their representatives can help parliamentarians identify gaps and weaknesses in SDG

implementation that may not be apparent in general government reports or national statistics.⁵¹ Regular dialogue with parliamentarians also allows citizens to provide information and insights on local implementation of the SDGs, and may encourage parliamentarians to place additional pressure on governments to implement the 2030 Agenda.

Key Resources:

- ***Engaging parliaments on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: representation, accountability and implementation, A handbook for civil society (2018)***, produced by Together 2030, provides guidance on how to engage with parliaments and parliamentarians to promote, support and track the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. See: <https://www.together2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Engaging-parliaments-on-the-2030-Agenda-and-the-SDGs.pdf>
- ***Parliaments and the Sustainable Development Goals: A self-assessment toolkit (2016)***, by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UNDP provides parliaments with the framework to evaluate their readiness to engage on the SDGs and seeks to help parliamentarians identify good practices, opportunities and lessons learned to institutionalize and mainstream the SDGs into the legislative process. See: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/handbooks/2017-01/parliaments-and-sustainable-development-goals-self-assessment-toolkit>
- ***The Inter-Parliamentary Union*** is the organization of national parliaments that works with parliaments to safeguard peace and drive positive democratic change through political dialogue and concrete action. See: www.ipu.org

⁵⁰ IPU and UNDP (2016), p. 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid*

Case Study: Ensuring Institutional Memory of SDG Work through Relationship-Building Efforts with National Parliamentarians

Sierra Leone: In June 2017, Sierra Leone Coalition 2030, a civil society alliance for the SDGs, held a capacity-building retreat with 25 MPs. The training targeted the most strategic figures in parliamentary work on the SDGs: members of the informal Parliamentary Action Group on the SDGs and parliamentary leadership, including the Deputy Speaker, the Majority Leader and others. In order to maintain institutional memory beyond the electoral term, the training also engaged parliamentary clerks. The participants expressed the need to gain more knowledge on the SDGs to be better equipped to carry out their representation, oversight and monitoring functions. In addition to providing technical capacity, the training was also used as an opportunity to develop a memorandum of understanding setting out a plan for continuous engagement between the civil society alliance and members of the Parliamentary Action Group on the SDGs.⁵²

Denmark: In 2016, Global Focus, a Danish network comprising 80 development and humanitarian CSOs decided to become more involved with the Danish parliament and government on the 2030 Agenda. One of the main challenges was the need to develop new relationships with MPs and government representatives beyond their existing allies in order to increase CSO influence on SDG implementation. Global Focus partnered with other networks and organizations, including the Danish 92-group (which focuses on the environment), the private sector, unions and local authorities to organize a major multi-stakeholder conference in the spring of 2017. More than 150 CSOs, politicians, government representatives and other stakeholders debated Denmark's implementation of the SDGs at home and abroad. Following up on the conference, a Danish Social Democrat established an all-party coalition on the SDGs in the Danish Parliament with the purpose of engaging policy makers and civil society with the 2030 Agenda. The Coalition currently has 46 MPs, including representatives from all political parties, and meets several times throughout the year. Having demonstrated its capabilities to mobilize a wide range of stakeholders for the 2030 Agenda, Global Focus was invited to provide support to the Coalition's secretariat and advisory board, in partnership with the Danish 92- group. This has translated into closer, institutionalized engagement with members from almost all parties within the Danish parliament, with strategic opportunities to promote issues on the parliament's agenda and to recommend speakers for debates and discussions related to the SDGs.⁵³

52 Together 2030. Engaging Parliaments, p. 34. <https://www.together2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Engaging-parliaments-on-the-2030-Agenda-and-the-SDGs.pdf>

53 Together 2030. Engaging Parliaments, p. 41. <https://www.together2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Engaging-parliaments-on-the-2030-Agenda-and-the-SDGs.pdf>