

Publishing Civil Society SDG Spotlight Reports

What is it?

Civil society plays an important role in international monitoring processes through the production of independent “civil society reports”—which can also be referred to as “shadow reports,” “spotlight reports,” and/or “parallel reports.” While the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process is the primary channel for reporting on country-level progress on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, civil society reports are vital to ensuring an independent, robust and accurate assessment of progress within countries, and provide a direct means to promote this government accountability to its citizens.

CSOs may wish to produce a civil society SDG spotlight report to challenge or provide an alternative perspective of SDG implementation to their country's official VNR report. These reports are particularly important where civil society have little or no opportunities to engage in official VNR processes at the national level. Such comparative independent assessments shed light on how governments are involving civil society in their implementation and review of the SDGs, and consider questions around the issue of leaving no one behind.

The scope of any civil society SDG spotlight report depends largely on the capacity and goals of the CSO carrying out the assessment. While some reports include a full evaluation of the implementation of all 17 SDGs, others may be more limited—for instance, spotlighting progress on just one SDG or even a single indicator of that Goal. In the same vein, civil society SDG spotlight reports can be produced by a single CSO or in partnership with civil society coalitions, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), academia or other stakeholders.

There is no one size-fits-all approach to reporting on SDG issues, and numerous templates and guidelines have been created in recent years to support CSOs in the drafting and dissemination process.

Why is it important?

Meaningful civil society participation in encouraging inclusive and open SDG implementation, follow-up, review and accountability is critical to ensuring that governments are responsive to the demonstrated needs of the diverse segments of each society. In many ways, civil society stakeholders serve as the most indispensable part of the measurement, monitoring and accountability framework for the SDGs, as they often provide a critical link between governments and stakeholders. Nationally and locally-focused civil society stakeholders therefore can play a key role in monitoring and reviewing processes at the national level.

Working in constructive ways with governments is important to doing this, ideally by building trust and rapport so that governments see civil society as partners to be engaged in achieving shared goals. Providing civil society reports on SDG implementation is just one of the many ways that civil society can continue to build a positive working relationship with governments in support of the SDGs.

In general, civil society reports serve as an important mechanism for holding national governments accountable for making progress on their commitments to the 2030 Agenda. They can complement or call into question States' official reports and also provide an avenue for civil society voices to be heard on national and inter-

Why produce a 2030 Agenda civil society report¹⁸⁷

Governments are expected to take the lead in monitoring and reporting on progress made against each of the SDGs and their targets. However, there are many opportunities for CSOs to participate, either as part of the official review process, or independently through parallel reviews and civil society reports.

CSOs are a crucial link between national concerns and international frameworks. They are important partners where public commitments made by States are concerned, because of their advocacy and monitoring activities. Independent, public scrutiny by civil society has the potential to make sure that governments' reports of national-level implementation of the 2030 Agenda are accurate when they are provided for regional and global monitoring processes. CSOs' civil society reports also can provide key findings and make recommendations for SDG implementation at a national level.

national stages—thereby showcasing the value of civil society engagement in SDG implementation and monitoring.

How can it be used?

Civil society reporting represents an unofficial mechanism for monitoring and holding governments accountable on SDG implementation. As such, the processes for creating and utilizing these reports are not formalized in the same way as official government-led reporting. Given this reality, it is critical for CSOs to take care in determining whether civil society reporting is the most effective accountability mechanism to use in monitoring SDG implementation and, if so, to ensure that their reports are properly prepared and disseminated for maximum impact.

Below are helpful tips and guidelines to consider for civil society reports:

- **Preparation for reporting: Identifying partners, funding and project plans** – A comprehensive civil society report that monitors SDG implementation at the national level can take between three and six months to produce, depending on the number of people, organizations and resources involved. It is important to secure the necessary finances and other resources early on by, for instance, approaching international or larger NGOs

for grant opportunities or partnering with other CSOs who could make a financial contribution to the project. Conducting a joint project involving multiple CSOs can be a challenge, so building out a coherent project management plan and putting together a balanced team of subject matter experts is critical to ensuring timely, effective report production.¹⁸⁸



TIP: CSOs should consider identifying other organizations or experts who might be interested in collaborating as partners on the report or “signing on” to the spotlight report once it is completed.¹⁸⁹

- **What do you want to achieve? Clarifying goals and scope** – In preparing to draft a civil society report, it is important to be clear about the goals of the report and to clarify its scope from the outset. Often, many CSOs do not have the capacity to carry out a full assessment of the implementation of all 17 SDGs. CSO development platforms can be very important in this regard. Some platforms have developed spotlight reports by sending a short survey to their members asking for each organisation's assessment of the progress made by its government in implementing the SDGs in their particular area of concern, backed up by facts or data if possible. This information is then collated and forms the basis of the CSO spotlight report. One of the best ways to make a civil society report effective with lim-

¹⁸⁷ Forus International (2018). Guidelines for CSO Shadow Reports: Monitoring the Implementation of Agenda 2030 at the National Level.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*

ited time and resources is to decide on a limited number of key messages or priority areas to highlight for the country in question. From this it should be possible to build the data and narrative of the report.¹⁹⁰

 **TIP:** CSOs should try to find a consistent approach to rating the government's success in implementing different aspects of the 2030 Agenda. For example, some spotlight reports use the visual aid of a "traffic light system" for evaluating government performance in different areas. A green light indicates positive progress, an orange light indicates intermediate progress and a red light indicates little or no progress at all. Alternatively, the spotlight report might use a simple rating scale such as (i) Substantive action taken, (ii) Initial Action Taken, and (iii) No Action Taken.¹⁹¹

• **How do you put a report together? Guidelines for drafting** – Numerous resources have been developed in recent years to assist CSOs with the drafting and dissemination of civil society reports on SDG implementation at the national level. CSOs interested in creating an impactful report to share at the HLPF and other forums should be sure to review 2030 Agenda-specific guidelines and templates for civil society reporting, such as those created by the TAP Network, Forus, Action for Sustainable Development, and UN DESA. In addition, CSOs may find resources on human rights civil society reporting by national and/or international human rights institutions, which useful, as the objectives, processes and audiences are similar to those of SDG civil society reports.

 **TIP:** CSOs should consider linking SDG commitments to laws in the country. This will help identify gaps in the implementation of SDGs and where the government may be legally bound to some action.

• **What can you do with it? Report dissemination** – At this time, there are no formal submission mechanisms for collecting civil society reports focused on SDG implementation. However, many civil society coalitions, including the TAP Network, are working to formalize collection and dissemination processes for

civil society reports in order to increase their reach and impact. It is not enough to just document a government's successes or challenges in implementing different aspects of the 2030 Agenda. Distribution of these findings is critical, and if done effectively, such reports can have impact at not just the national level, but also regional and global levels, including at the HLPF. At a minimum, CSOs should make sure their final reports can be uploaded and disseminated online. These reports should be published as stand-alone, downloadable documents that can be easily shared and disseminated online.¹⁹² Beyond passive publication, CSOs also should make efforts to use their reporting to start dialogues and build relationships with others working on SDG monitoring and implementation. CSOs can do this by developing advocacy strategies around the publicization of their reports and plans for distributing findings to interested actors, including:

o *National-level actors:*

- Governmental officials at all relevant levels and ministries, including in the executive branch, parliamentarians, local authorities and relevant agencies responsible for SDG implementation; and
- Non-governmental institutions and groups, including SAIs, NHRIs, civil society groups and the media (traditional and social – see chapter on media)

o *Regional and global-level actors:*

- UN agencies, including UNDP country offices;
- Civil society actors that have created SDG civil society report submission portals and distribution networks, such as the TAP Network; and
- Other relevant bodies working on SDG monitoring, including IHRIs and the media.

 **TIP:** In an SDG civil society report, CSOs should consider citing examples of the activities they will be undertaking to deliver the 2030 Agenda either independently, alongside other stakeholders or in partnership with government.¹⁹³

190 Forus International (2018). Guidelines for CSO Shadow Reports: Monitoring the Implementation of Agenda 2030 at the National Level.

191 *Ibid.*

192 *Ibid.*

193 *Ibid.*

Approaches and Methodologies for SDG Civil Society Reporting¹⁹⁴

The TAP Network created a suggested outline and guidelines on how to approach drafting a SDG civil society report, including key questions to consider answering. Below is a sample of TAP's guidance:

Proposed Outline for SDG Civil Society Report

1. Executive summary
2. Introduction
 - a. Background and context to the report and outline of methodology
3. Review of Legal and Legislative Framework and Policies
 - a. Brief introduction
 - b. Assessment of frameworks
 - c. Challenges and recommendations
4. Review of Implementation
 - a. Brief introduction
 - b. Assessment of progress
 - c. Challenges and recommendations
5. Review of International Commitments (if applicable)
 - a. Assessment of progress
 - b. Challenges and recommendations
6. Civil Society participation in SDG Implementation / Follow-up
 - a. Assessment of civil society space around the SDGs (and in general)
 - b. Challenges and recommendations

Key questions to consider:

- Which government body or bodies are in charge of the implementation of the national SDG implementation process?
- Have there been high-level commitments by the current administration to strengthen the legal framework, policies or institutions that are relevant to your issues?
- How has your government reported its progress on the SDG issues that you cover, and does it differ from civil society's assessment of progress?
- Has the government encountered any unanticipated obstacles in making progress on your issues? How have they worked to overcome these challenges?
- Has your government set national-level indicators to track country-level progress on the SDGs? And if so, has civil society been able to provide and contribute to this national indicator process?
- Are there any entry points for these SDG civil society reports for your government to formally consider your progress assessments and recommendations?

See: <http://tapnetwork2030.org/civilsocietyreporting/>

• **Engaging in the HLPF for the official VNRs** – Each July, the UN holds a meeting of the HLPF, which provides an opportunity for national governments to present VNRs on progress towards SDG implementation in their countries. Some governments involve civil society in the VNR process—even including them in official VNR delegations at the HLPF. In other countries, however, civil society is excluded from official processes. Civil society reports are even more relevant and necessary in these contexts, so that the perspective of civil society can be provided. Reporting by CSOs outside of government-led VNR processes is also critical, as there are some limitations in the official limitations to official monitoring mechanisms, including those related to selected indicators, the availability of data, and general reporting credibility. CSOs should still push to be involved with national processes, where possible, and also look to CSO coalitions, such as the TAP Network, for other opportunities to present civil society reports at official HLPF events and side events.



TIP: Through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the UN Human Rights Council reviews the fulfilment by each of the 193 UN Member States of their human rights obligations and commitments. The UPR process provides for the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including NGOs, NHRIs and regional mechanisms. CSOs can submit written information for the HRC's final report, including the findings from their SDG civil society reports.

• **What's next? Encouraging the creation of a formal space for CSO reporting** – Despite growing calls for more independent civil society reporting on SDG implementation at the national level, no official forum exists for the findings of these reports to be collected and analysed, nor is there a mechanism to hold governments accountable where gaps and challenges are found. Yet, more and more CSOs are recognizing the value of civil society engagement through reports on SDG implementation, even outside official monitoring and accountability institutions. To strengthen the impact of individual reports, large CSO alliances like the TAP Network are making efforts to formalize collection and submission processes. TAP and other CSO alliances note that CSO advocacy and monitoring work helps showcase the value of civil society engagement, demonstrate good practice in civil society collaboration and reinforce its commitment to implementation. In

addition, these efforts—especially from collective international networks—help to make it clear that civil society is a supportive partner and important stakeholder in 2030 Agenda implementation. The more CSOs can work in coalition to make their voices heard, the more difficult it will be to exclude civil society from official processes, such as VNR delegations to the HLPF. *(To learn more about the TAP Network, partnership opportunities, and resources for supporting SDG civil society reporting, visit their website at TAPNetwork2030.org.)*

• **Is the context right for a civil society report? Understanding the political climate for reporting** – CSOs thinking of creating SDG civil society report should be mindful of the political climate in their home countries—specifically taking into account the risks of such monitoring and accountability efforts. Before undertaking reporting efforts, CSOs must consider if the environment is safe by asking questions like, “How does my government respond to criticism?”, or “What are the national laws in my country concerning freedom of speech?”. While it is important to hold national governments accountable to international norms, it is also necessary that CSOs pursue such actions in safe spaces, using regional and international forums or partners if independent reporting within a country is too risky. CSOs interested in reporting can work with global organizations such as the TAP Network or Human Rights Watch to help analyse and judge the appropriateness of their political climate before undertaking a civil society report. They should also determine whether an enabling environment for drafting an impactful report exists. If the purpose of drafting a SDG civil society report is to encourage a national government in action, then it is key to assess the likelihood that such work will bring about change before undertaking the investment of producing a report.



TIP: Civil society reports should avoid focusing exclusively on the shortcomings of governments in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda. General or sweeping statements are difficult for governments to respond to, and easy for them to ignore. The reports should make constructive recommendations about how to achieve progress on national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Recommendations should be concrete, realistic and action oriented. It is also useful, where appropriate, to suggest time frames for solutions' implementation and the specific body that should be responsible.

Key Resources:

- ***Beyond Voluntary National Reviews: Approaches and Methodologies for Civil Society Reporting on SDG16 (2018)***, by the TAP Network, provides an outline template for a civil society report and guiding questions to consider answering during the crafting process. See: <http://tapnetwork2030.org/civilsocietyreporting/>
- ***Guidelines for CSO Shadow Reports: Monitoring the Implementation of Agenda 2030 at the National Level (2018)***, by Forus International, includes examples of civil society reports and key steps to follow when preparing and producing a civil society SDG report. See: <http://forus-international.org/en/resources/8>
- ***Action for Sustainable Development HLPF 2018 Civil Society Report Template***, by Action for Sustainable Development Coalition, helps national CSOs consider how governments are involving civil society in their official implementation and review of the SDGs, and questions around the issue of leaving no one behind. See: https://action4sd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/HLPF-VNR_CS0-Report-Template_2018.pdf
- ***How should civil society stakeholders report their contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2018)***, by Dr. Graham Long, is Technical Paper for the Division for Sustainable Development, UNDESA. See: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/18445CS0reporting_paper_revisions_4May.pdf
- ***Share Your Civil Society Spotlight Report***, by the TAP Network, is an online platform to collect and showcase spotlight reports from civil society stakeholders. See: <https://tapnetwork2030.org/sdg16reporting/>

Case Study: Civil Society Reporting on Afghanistan's Progress towards Achieving the SDGs

Afghanistan: Transparency International released a country-level “civil society report” or “shadow report” for Afghanistan. The report titled, ‘Policy, SDGs and Fighting Corruption for the People: A civil society report on Afghanistan’s Sustainable Development Goals,’ builds on a series of analyses conducted in 2017, which use a common methodology to examine country progress towards SDG 16. Looking particularly at SDG targets 16.4 (reduce illicit financial and arms flows), 16.5 (substantially reduce corruption and bribery) and 16.10 (ensure public access to information), the report outlines how corruption negatively affects development through poor service provision and insecurity. It highlights Afghanistan’s progress on these three SDG 16 targets, such as establishing anti-money laundering efforts and institutions to protect against corruption, but flags that, in practice, there is an implementation gap and low inclusion of civil society in anti-corruption legislation.¹⁹⁵