

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT, 'LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND', AND OWNERSHIP AT ALL LEVELS

WHAT IS IT?

Meaningful and systematic CSO inclusion in VNR and post-VNR processes, particularly as linked to national planning, policies, and frameworks, is critical to realizing SDG 16 and the larger 2030 Agenda. While often treated as a monolithic entity, CSOs differ in size, mandate, mission, and level at which they operate.

As such, CSO inclusion in VNR and post-VNR processes can take different tracks, though often entailing some form of **consultation, dialogue, and/or partnership** leading up to and following from the VNR.

- For example, countries can adopt an 'open drafting process' where parts of the VNR are delegated to different stakeholders free from government edits, as was the case with [Finland's 2020 VNR](#), with CSO input listed under specific SDGs..
- Alternatively, and as was the case for the 2019 VNRs from [Mongolia](#), [Pakistan](#) and [South Africa](#), governments can work with civil society and other actors in reporting on specific targets, in this case working with CSOs, Information Commissions and UNESCO with regards to SDG 16.10.2.
- Following from a VNR, countries can also continue their collaboration with CSO stakeholders and partners in implementing VNR recommendations.
 - Specific approaches and examples are detailed later in this module.
- For a comprehensive guide on approaches for civil society engagement around SDG16+, be sure to check out the TAP Network's ["SDG16+ Civil Society Toolkit"](#), which provide detailed guidance, tips and tools for civil society to work with SDG16+ at all levels.

In parallel to a country's VNR, CSOs can produce "[spotlight](#)" or "parallel" reports to promote [accountability](#) and ensure an independent and robust assessment of progress. These (are):

- Primarily generated by CSOs but also done in partnership with NHRIs, academia and others, can challenge or complement a country's VNR.
- Can be included as a supplementary addendum to a VNR or submitted separately.
- Provide a global platform for local CSO voices, set the stage for follow-up action, including with government partners.
- Particularly important in contexts where civil society would otherwise have little or no opportunity to engage.
- For comprehensive information on SDG16+ Spotlight Reporting, check out the TAP Network ["SDG16+ Civil Society Toolkit" chapter on Spotlight Reporting](#).

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

MEETING 2030'S AMBITION AND ACTING UPON SDG 16

As highlighted in the [2030 Agenda](#), the scale and ambition of the agenda are such that it can be achieved only through partnerships, with civil society key among them.

- The [2019 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG 16+](#), and the subsequent [2021 Rome Declaration on SDG16+](#), calls for amplified commitments and partnerships for accelerated action and reinforces the importance of this engagement, and outlines concrete recommendations for all stakeholders to take forward to advance SDG16+..

To this end, meaningful and diverse CSO participation in VNR and post-VNR processes:

- Reflects inclusive and effective governance and decision-making,
- Helps to ensure that SDG 16-related components of a VNR are advanced,
- Strengthens accountability, Should not be tokenistic, but rather systematic and reflective of a true multi-stakeholder process, embedded in human rights, and
- Is facilitated by finding champions of inclusion at all levels of government.

This trust deficit among governments, CSOs, the private sector, and the wider public makes it that much more important for governments at all levels to provide meaningful, participatory, and open channels for dialogue and engagement.

PUTTING INTO PRACTICE A LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND APPROACH

Core to the 2030 Agenda, Leave No One Behind (LNOB) [must be the starting point for all SDG strategies, policies, funding, and implementation.](#)

- However, while most countries acknowledge LNOB and its importance, [few indicate adequate strategies to implement it.](#)
- As highlighted by the [2019 Indigenous People's Major Group Statement on SDG 16](#), "while many of the VNRs acknowledge 'marginalized groups' as those left behind, most states do not provide mechanisms for their meaningful participation."

Empowering civil society and meaningfully including these actors in VNR and post-VNR processes supports government responsiveness in acting upon LNOB, an imperative amplified by COVID-19.

- Whether in delivering basic services, fostering peace as resources run scarce and misinformation runs rampant, or in tracking government procurement when opportunities for corruption are high, the impact of CSOs in ensuring a more just, equitable, and safe world, is clear.



Bottom Line: [Civil society is critical](#) to identifying who is left behind, what their most pressing needs are, and how best to ensure that those needs in policy, programming, advocacy, and data collection are met. As such, systematic CSO inclusion in all stages of the VNR cycle—preparation, validation, follow-up and implementation, and subsequent reporting – is key to LNOB.

HOW IS IT APPROACHED?

CSO engagement in the VNR processes can take various forms, including:

- Representation in national SDG Councils, Committees, and CSO-specific platforms,
- Consultations, hearings, and forums,
- Workshops and national dialogues, including online and through social media-based tools, and
- Spotlight/Parallel reports, as well as data and reporting support more generally.

Where possible, follow-up should be tied to NDPs, action plans, dialogues and/or sector strategies, with a view to align government programmes and projects with those implemented by civil society.

NATIONAL SDG COMMITTEES OR WORKING GROUPS

Some national SDG Committees or Working Groups directly include CSOs as members, with varying levels of input and leadership.

As such, these committees and groups also provide a useful [entry point for continued, post-VNR engagement](#), action, and accountability.

- This may be especially true for CSOs engaged in VNR preparation and human rights reporting.

Case Study: Awareness Raising, Stakeholder Engagement, and Follow-on Action, SDG Working Groups and CSO Inclusion, the SDGs Kenya Forum, Kenya

Kenya recognizes that stakeholder engagement and public participation are integral in developing, designing, and implementing policies and development strategies that benefit all Kenyans. As such, the government created the Inter-Agency Technical Working Group (IATWG), which includes a diversity of stakeholders to advocate, implement, and report on the SDGs. The IATWG comprises all key umbrella institution representatives.

The IATWG co-convenors include Kenya's State Department for Planning's SDGs Coordination Directorate, the SDGs Kenya Forum, and the Kenya Private Sector Alliance. Within this Working Group, CSO engagement and SDGs coordination is spearheaded by the SDGs Kenya Forum.

As the actor responsible for mobilizing, gathering, and organizing all civil society input, the SDGs Kenya Forum is critical to supporting the Government of Kenya's whole-of-society VNR approach. Input provided by the Forum is integrated into the final VNR and separately annexed to ensure that CSO voices are clearly represented. (Kenya first presented in 2017 and again in 2020.) In addition to its VNR civil-society-convening role, the SDGs Kenya Forum's also organizes national and multi-stakeholder biennial reports for local consumption, designed to continuously track Kenya's SDG progress. The first was produced in 2019 led by the National Treasury and State Planning-SDGs Unit.

Both the VNR and the biennial reports revealed information gaps among CSOs as related to SDG 16, despite its relevance to their work. In response, the Forum began to organize CSOs through 'Goal Groups' aligned to SDG targets and indicators. These groups provided a more structured and effective means of engagement for CSOs either working on SDG 16 or interested in doing so.

Under the aegis of the SDGs Forum, ARTICLE 19, as the SDG 16 lead, held three workshops for government, media and CSOs working within the scope of SDG 16 targets. This was instrumental in bridging stakeholder gaps, leveraging sector experience and expertise and aligning organizational mandates for better monitoring and accelerating action.

With a diversified stakeholder base, this new SDG 16 Goal Group was able to further strategize on the structure of engagement of state (through the National Steering Committee on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management within the Ministry of Interior) and non-state actors working on SDG 16. This resulted in the formation of four working groups: Violence and Conflict Prevention, Gender-Based Violence and Non-Discrimination, Rights and Freedoms, and Corruption and Illicit Financial Flows.

Notwithstanding the challenges of a new convening strategy amid the COVID-19 pandemic, CSO input on SDG 16 saw an increase during the 2020 VNR (17 organizations contributing), with even more engagement during the validation process. This was significantly higher than the 2017 VNR process or the biennial progress report engagement.

Take-Aways and Going Forward: VNR recommendations need proper financing and budget allocations. Most fall outside of Kenya's budget and are therefore not acted upon. Others fall outside endorsed laws and thus bottleneck intervention.

Reporting guidelines should ask countries to articulate post-VNR processes at country level, including as linked to human rights mechanisms, noting challenges and measures taken to scale best practices, and providing lessons learned for improved implementation.

* This case study draws from 2019 interviews with the SDGs Kenya Forum.

Similarly, entry points through related multi-stakeholder processes, such as national dialogues and existent forums, offer opportunities for enhanced and sustained coordination among governments, CSOs, and other stakeholders, including as linked to the VNR, NDPs and sector strategies. For example:

- The International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS) is a tripartite forum for political dialogue that brings together countries affected by conflict and fragility, development actors/donors active in the FCV-domain, and civil society, coordinated through the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS).

- Through the Open Government Partnership, governments and civil society work together to create action plans which are used as a basis to promote accountability between member governments and citizens.

In supporting post-VNR implementation, related processes, and CSO capacity for implementation and monitoring, funding for CSOs at national and local levels warrants more attention.

- This is particularly true, depending on the context, as support for SDG 16 related work may be redirected towards more immediate COVID-19 related concerns.
- Funds should also be made available to facilitate meaningful and equal participation in international forums, such as HLPF.

Case Study: CSO inclusion, Complementary Dialogue Processes, and the Need to Localize, the National Coalition of Civil Society Organizations for the New Deal, Central African Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR) faced significant challenges in presenting its 2019 VNR. In 2018 and following six years of civil war, the National Peace Recovery and Consolidation Plan (RCPCA), a formal peace agreement, was signed. However, armed rebel groups still controlled about 70 percent of the country, posing immense security challenges. Despite such obstacles, CAR and its partners moved forward with the VNR, aligned with the RCPCA and its NDP, also in anticipation of elections in December 2020. In 2018, a National Committee was also established to nationalize 2030 targets and indicators.

The National Coalition of Civil Society Organizations for the New Deal (CNOSC), a coalition of 30+ organizations supported by CSPPS, was the main civil society partner involved in CAR's VNR, working closely with the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Cooperation. Adopting an inclusive approach, CNOSC built upon its pre-existing relationship with the government, including as related to its involvement in local and national dialogue processes around the RCPCA, to effectively engage in VNR/post-VNR efforts.

In preparing for the VNR, little local ownership of the 2030 Agenda was observed. Further, a national gender profile showed women as severely underrepresented in political, economic, and administrative decision-making. Despite a law on gender, women make up only 6.5 percent of National Assembly deputies and 17.6 percent of members of government. Inequalities are more pronounced for rural women. As such, the VNR proposed 29 recommendations, including on girls' education, rebalancing the gender parity index as related to the law on parity, and on awareness-raising, ownership, and capacity-building. In response, the CNOSC established a series of actions aimed at recommendations focused on SDG 16 and SDG 5, awareness-raising and ownership of the 2030 Agenda, and building synergy and collaboration around implementation, particularly at the local level. Not exhaustive, these included:

- Documenting the VNR preparation processes (key messages and lessons learned);
- Producing a short film on the process for national television and awareness-raising campaigns;
- Supporting CSO collaboration in post-VNR processes and national development planning;
- An awareness-raising campaign and capacity-building project to improve participation of women as trained candidates in the presidential and legislative elections (December 2020); and
- A sensitization campaign focused on CSOs and others at the local level to catalyse implementation and action.

* Much of the above has been stalled due to a lack of funding/redistribution of funding related to COVID-19, social distancing, and stay-at-home orders. The pandemic has fueled social divisions, with growing distrust between the population and the government.

Take-Aways and Going Forward: Civil society's technical and operational capacities, including in manipulating quantitative tools and methodologies, should be strengthened to promote ownership of achievements and perspectives and increase community engagement.

Financial support for CSOs locally is crucial to implementation. Improved statistical data for future reporting should also be considered. Finally, collaboration between CNOSC, the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Cooperation and partners during the VNR should continue in support of the peace and development targets in the NDP. Inclusive planning, monitoring and evaluation processes are critical to effective action, particularly in FCAS (Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings)..

* This case study draws on 2019 interviews with CNOSC.

GROUNDING VNR AND POST-VNR PROCESS IN LOCAL REALITIES AND THROUGH NETWORKS

VNR and post-VNR processes present an opportunity to act on inclusion and participatory approaches to policy, programming, and capacity development.

To this end, civil society is particularly well-positioned to support VNR localization and related SDG and SDG 16 implementation.

- Many CSOs are comparatively advantaged in terms of their understanding of local challenges, opportunities, and in delivering relevant and requested capacity development in terms of other civil society actors and local/regional government.

Further, empowering and enabling civil society **networks** can help drive local ownership and engagement, connecting the dots across actors at community and regional levels, and supporting a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach.

- Networks like the Transparency, Accountability & Participation (TAP) Network that work on SDG16+ specifically, can help support national action and accountability around the SDGs. Platforms like the TAP Network's "Partner Action Platform" look to mobilize concrete commitments from civil society towards advancing SDG16+, while also building out a network of civil society experts and resources that you can also work with. Find out more about joining the TAP Network, showcasing your organization's work, and how you can contribute to advancing SDG16+ at www.tapnetwork2030.org/join

Case Study: Civil Society, Localizing SDG 16, and Responding to COVID-19, the SDGs Network, Iraq

The "SDGs Network", formed in 2019 with the support of UNDP Iraq, is a network of 38 Iraqi CSOs that aims to support the Government in implementing and monitoring the SDGs at national and sub-national levels, with a focus on SDG 5, SDG 16, and SDG 17.

While the network has undertaken several SDGs related initiatives, including having had an innovative role in deriving informal data on SDG 16 for Iraq's Voluntary National Review in 2019, the Network has had a particularly critical role in supporting women and girls through the COVID-19 pandemic under an SDG 16 framing.

In line with SDG Targets 16.1 & 16.2, and with the support of UNDP Iraq, the Network launched an initiative aimed at measuring the direct and indirect psychosocial and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on the lives of women and girls. Through the initiative, and with the support of UNDP, as related to its support for social cohesion, the Network enhanced the skills of 95 social workers to reach 7,700 girls and women with online psychosocial support.

In addition, and under the same UNDP pillar and in response to the recent call of the Secretary-General to place women and girls at the core of COVID-19 responses, the Network developed a pilot study by collecting survey responses from women in five newly liberated governorates (Ninewa, Anbar, Salah al-Din, and Kirkuk) addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives.

The Network's success in working in partnership with governmental entities, civil society organizations, and international organizations to support the local community has brought attention to the importance of civil society organization in the development and recovery process, providing a starting point to a 'resilience for peace' approach towards building peaceful and inclusive societies.

Source: UNDP

SPOTLIGHT REPORTS



As mentioned, CSOs can produce “spotlight”, “parallel”, or “shadow” reports to demonstrate progress, or lack thereof of, in terms of SDG 16 implementation.

- These can involve a wide range of local and subnational actors in their findings and reporting.
- In addition, and in instances whereby the national government may be precluded from reporting, CSOs can use these reports to maintain focus on SDG 16, its implementation at national and local levels, and its advancement through broad base engagement and reporting.
- The TAP Network’s “SDG16+ Civil Society Toolkit” provides detailed guidance to help CSOs produce Spotlight Reports on SDG16+, including:
 - Overall tips and tools for drafting Spotlight Reports
 - Spotlight Reporting guidelines, methodology and template
 - A compendium of indicators and data sources to utilize in reporting
 - Case studies and more

Case Study: Localizing SDG 16+: Somaliland and the SDG 16+ Coalition, Somaliland

Localizing SDG 16+: Somaliland and the SDG 16+ Coalition

While endorsing the 2030 Agenda and integrating the SDGs into its NDP, Somaliland has never presented a VNR largely due to its unrecognized status. Civil society decided to fill this gap and lead the process themselves, producing the ‘Somaliland SDG16+ Civil Society Progress Report’ in 2019.

Over two years (2017–2018), civil society carried out a detailed review of progress made in achieving SDG 16+ priority targets and related processes, holding workshops throughout Somaliland with 55 different CSOs representing women’s groups, youth groups, those focusing on minority rights, disability groups and others. Efforts to identify and mobilize champions within the government were also prioritized, focusing on the Office of the Chief Justice, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of National Planning and Development – all critical for SDG 16+ implementation. By the end of 2018, the Chief Justice, the Justice Minister, officials from the Ministry of Planning and the Attorney General’s Office had made public statements about SDG 16+ or included it in their work plans.

In Somaliland, the SDG 16+ Coalition used the process of developing and following up on the 2019 baseline report to promote civil society inclusion in SDG 16+ efforts nationally and locally, combining civil society and “official” data.

The 2019 report has helped to ensure that commitments made to SDG 16+ implementation are kept and remain localized, that shortcomings are highlighted, and that there is a way to measure and incentivize future progress.

Take-aways: This experience shows how the SDG framework can help activists articulate their own priorities for peace, justice, and inclusion, and galvanize collective action. For specific results, see Mainstreaming Case Study and Saferworld’s Somaliland site.

* Case Study comes from 2019 interviews with SDG 16+ Coalition and relevant Saferworld reports.

GOOD PRACTICES

In strengthening CSO engagement in SDG 16 VNR and post-VNR processes, there are also a few good practices to highlight.

AWARENESS-RAISING, CAPACITY-BUILDING, AND MOBILIZATION WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

- Engage, organize, and mobilize as early as possible, sharing best practices among civil society organizations in engaging with state actors.
- Build capacity of civil society to improve and increase participation, from mapping national and local contexts to assessing progress across sectors and identifying civil society comparative advantage in supporting implementation as a diverse sector.
- CSO Networks, such as the TAP Network, serve as a platform to bring together a wide range of civil society experts and activists around the SDGs support, contribute to and strengthen capacity of civil society stakeholders to localize and report on the SDGs and SDG16+ in their own contexts, and to provide a platform for collaboration, collective advocacy and peer-learning around SDG16+ issues and accountability for the 2030 Agenda more broadly.
 - Its flagship capacity-building resource the SDG16+ Civil Society Toolkit: A practical resource guide for planning, implementation and accountability to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies, provides up-to-date and detailed guidance, tips and tools for civil society and other stakeholders, as well as reflections, case studies, best practices and lessons learned to advance SDG16+ at all levels.
 - At the global level, there are good practices that aim to raise awareness and showcase the work of CSOs at all levels. The TAP Storytelling Initiative highlights the work of TAP organizations and the challenges, successes, failures, processes and problem solving that comes with it, while promoting it widely on outreach channels. These showcasing opportunities not only offer heightened visibility of the work of CSOs but also inspires and educates a wider audience on SDG16 and transparency and accountability for the 2030 Agenda as a whole.

PLUG INTO EXISTING PROCESSES WITH GOVERNMENT AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS, INCLUDING NDPS, NATIONAL STRATEGIES AND NATIONAL ACTION PLANS

- Use VNR consultations and workshops as a strategic entry point for continued dialogue and coordination around NDP next steps, strategies, public policy, programming, and budgeting processes.
- Maximize other already open and functioning dialogue channels for VNR follow-up on SDG 16 and related recommendations through coordinated action, policies, and strategies.
- This can help mainstream implementation, consolidate the multi-stakeholder processes often behind such policies and programming, and better measure progress.

MAINTAIN COMMUNICATION LINES, STRATEGIZE, AND PUBLICIZE

- Strengthen communication feedback loops and network-building among civil society and others for a coordinated approach. This will help drive alignment with SDG 16 and related targets for strategic impact, while broadening the pool of stakeholders through a network approach.
- Raise awareness of successful initiatives and best practices among government institutions and include local/national donor delegations as stakeholders in the post-VNR process.
 - Another showcasing tool and collaboration platform for CSOs engaging in the 2030 Agenda and the VNR Process is the TAP Partner Action Platform, an interactive database featuring the work of TAP organizations. It aims to promote the wide-ranging work of CSOs that make specific commitments to , as well as the collective efforts of civil society around SDG16+, and serves as a foundation to facilitate better collaboration and among relevant, key stakeholders within the SDG 16+ community.
- Disseminate the VNR at national and subnational levels, ideally in local/national languages.
- Issue a press release, public statement or hold a press conference about your country's VNR and how to take it forward.
- Ensure transparency over the VNR and how it works, issuing clear information on timelines, procedures, objectives, the officials and institutions involved, and where to go with questions. Information should be available in local languages and sensitive to those discriminated against.
- Hold post-VNR workshops to continue dialogue processes and partnerships, if possible.

TRUST

- Identifying SDG champions at national, subnational, and local levels is key to building trust and promoting civil society engagement and multi-stakeholder partnerships.