SDG 16+
CIVIL SOCIETY
TOOLKIT

TAP
NETWORK
Transparency, Accountability &
Participation for 2030 Agenda

Civil society spotlight reports

Civil society reports, or spotlight reports, serve as an important mechanism for holding national governments accountable for making progress on their commitments

Overview

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

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' reports also can provide key findings and make recommendations for SDG implementation at the national level.

Putting into practice

Meaningful civil society participation in encouraging inclusive and open SDG implementation, follow-up and 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 can therefore play a key role in monitoring and reviewing processes at the national level.[170]

Furthermore, providing civil society reports 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 by building trust and rapport so that governments see civil society as partners to be engaged in achieving shared goals.[171]

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170 https://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/TAPPaperonSDGCivilSocietyReporting.pdf
171 TAP Network 2030 (2021). SDG Accountability Report, 70

Getting Started

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.[172]

Is the context right for a civil society report?

Prior to beginning the reporting process it is essential to understand the political climate for reporting. CSOs thinking of creating SDG reports should be mindful of the political climate in their respective 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. 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 investing in producing a report.[173]

Reporting Process and Key Steps

1. **Preparation: Identifying partners, funding and project plans**

    - A comprehensive civil society spotlight report that monitors Agenda 2030 implementation at the national level and involves numerous CSOs can take several months to produce. This depends on the number of people and organizations involved and the amount of time they can spend working on the report.

    - 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.[174]

    - A collective effort to develop a CSO spotlight report will likely require one or a few organizations to form a "core team." This team should take the lead on drafting the report - at least in the early stages - and do some advance planning, including identifying potential partners with the necessary expertise.

    - It is important from early on to identify other organizations or experts who might be interested in collaborating on the spotlight report or in "signing on" to the report once it is completed.

2. **Adapting to Context**

    - **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 and scope of the report from the outset. Often, many CSOs do not have the capacity to carry out a full assessment of the implementation of all 17 SDGs. National or local civil society coordination platforms can be very important in this regard. One of the best ways to make a civil society report effective with limited 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 basis it should be possible to build the data and narrative of the report.[175]

172   https://sdgaccountability.org/working-with-informal-processes/spotlightreporting/
173   https://sdgaccountability.org/working-with-informal-processes/spotlightreporting/
174   Forus International (2018). Guidelines for CSO spotlight Reports: Monitoring the Implementation of Agenda 2030 at the National Level.
175   Forus International (2018). Guidelines for CSO spotlight Reports: Monitoring the Implementation of Agenda 2030 at the National Level

- **Concrete, realistic and action-oriented recommendations:** 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 progress on the national implementation of Agenda 2030 should be achieved. Recommendations should be concrete, realistic and action-oriented. It is useful to suggest practical and realistic solutions and, where appropriate, time frames for their implementation and the specific body responsible.[176]

- 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 take action.[177]

- **Data and information:** It is important to ensure that the report contains data and information that is credible, relevant and up-to-date. Focus on qualitative as well as quantitative data. For example, qualitative data such as interviews with individuals who have expert knowledge in specific areas can be a good way of filling information gaps. It is important to identify experts who both have an in-depth knowledge of the relevant subject areas and also are unlikely to be affected by affiliation with the government or a political party.

  - Also consider other sources of information for the spotlight report including focus groups, thematic discussions with relevant stakeholders, media reports, responses to written questions to authorities, structured surveys and case studies. See the following link for more information on data (http://civicus.org/thedatashift/)[178]

3. **Outreach and Consultations**

   - **Once key partners are identified, organize consultations with wider group of CSOs and local authorities for a more inclusive process, through the following steps:** [179]

     - Hold consultations with other civil society actors working on SDG16+ issues to encourage their input and contributions;
     - Consult local authorities where appropriate;
     - If resources allow, make sure consultations are held not only in capital cities but also in smaller towns and rural areas;
     - If resources allow, create an online tool to collect further data (online surveys, WhatsApp outreach); and
     - Ensure outreach to minority groups, women, youth and other underrepresented groups.

   - Reach out to the government and UN regarding the report process (if feasible): If politically viable, engage government and UN offices to provide information about the forthcoming report. If possible, ask government and UN offices to provide any data or evidence of implementation efforts.[180]

   - **Focus on constructive working relationships with governments and public officials if possible:** Civil society reports should avoid focusing exclusively on the shortcomings of governments in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda.[181] Working in constructive ways with governments can be helpful, ideally by building trust and rapport so that governments see civil society as partners to be engaged in achieving shared goals, instead of the government perceiving the report to be confrontational in nature. Thus, providing civil society reports on SDG implementation can serve as a way for civil society to build a positive working relationship with governments in support of the SDGs.[182]

176 https://sdgaccountability.org/working-with-informal-processes/spotlightreporting/
177 Ibid
178 Forus International (2018). Guidelines for CSO spotlight Reports: Monitoring the Implementation of Agenda 2030 at the National Level
179 Saferworld: Practical Guidance on Civil Society Reporting on SDG16. p. 4
180 Saferworld: Practical Guidance on Civil Society Reporting on SDG16. p. 4
181 https://sdgaccountability.org/working-with-informal-processes/spotlightreporting/
182 https://sdgaccountability.org/working-with-informal-processes/spotlightreporting/

4. **Report Development**

- *For specific steps on the drafting process, see section below: "Drafting framework and proposed outline"*

- **Be clear and brief:** It is important for CSO spotlight reports to be clear and brief. Instead of including long explanations in the report, references can be made and links provided to reports which provide more detail or evidence, and supplementary information can be provided in annexes to the report.[183]

- **Neutral & balanced style**: The report should try to be balanced – reflecting both positive and negative aspects – and should adopt a practical style using neutral language. The report must not contain unfounded statements that are not supported by facts or documents, especially if statements relate to particular individuals or legal entities. Such statements should be verified by using several sources. The report should contain references to the information sources used.[184]

- **Utilize a rating system:** CSOs could 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.[185]

- 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 governments.[186]

5. **Production and Dissemination**

- **Report dissemination** – At this time, there are no formal 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.[187]

- 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:

  - 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);
  - 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.

183   Forus International (2018). Guidelines for CSO spotlight Reports: Monitoring the Implementation of Agenda 2030 at the National Level
184   Forus International (2018). Guidelines for CSO spotlight Reports: Monitoring the Implementation of Agenda 2030 at the National Level
185   Ibid
186   IBID
187   Forus International (2018). Guidelines for CSO spotlight Reports: Monitoring the Implementation of Agenda 2030 at the National Level

Drafting Framework and Proposed Outline for SDG16+ Spotlight Reporting[188]

The following section provides an outline for any civil society stakeholder to use when putting together a civil society report on SDG implementation in your country. Additionally, you will find more detailed guidance on how to approach drafting each section of this report, including some key questions to consider answering and other relevant information you might find useful in this drafting process.

INTRODUCTION
• Executive Summary • Background Context • Process: Data & Methodology
CONTENT

a. Review of Legal and Legislative Framework and Policies
    i. Brief introduction
    ii. Assessment of frameworks
    iii. Challenges and recommendations
b. Review of Country-level Implementation
    i. Brief introduction
    ii. Assessment of progress
    iii. Challenges and recommendations
c. Review of International Commitments (if applicable)
    i. Assessment of progress
    ii. Challenges and recommendations
d. Civil Society Participation in SDG Implementation / Follow-up
    i. Assessment of civil society space around the SDGs (and in general)
    ii. Challenges and recommendations

CONCLUSION
• Conclusion • Recommendations
ANNEXES
• List of Organizations Consulted • Data Sets • National Development Plans or Frameworks • Other Sources (if applicable)

Approaches and Methodologies for Civil Society Reporting on the SDGs and 2030 Agenda (2021)

While there is no one-size-fits all approach to producing Spotlight Reports, this resource from the TAP Network provides practical guidance on methodologies to consider when drafting an SDG Spotlight Report. Additionally, it provides a suggested template that organizations could use for their report, with specific tips for each chapter and approach, as well as key questions to consider when drafting the content of your report.

For more guidance on spotlight reporting, please see TAP's updated Spotlight Reporting Guidelines resource: https://tapnetwork2030.org/sdg16reporting/

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188 https://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/TAPPaperonSDGCivilSocietyReporting.pdf

CASE STUDY: Centre for Law and Democracy

Assessing the Right to Information (SDG Indicator 16.10.2) in Canada

Centre for Law and Democracy

In 2020, the Centre for Law and Democracy in Canada performed an assessment of Canada's implementation of its right to information laws. The assessment was performed across the areas of Proactive Disclosure, Institutional Measures and Responding to Requests. Several weaknesses in applying the letter of law and provisioning accessible and straightforward services to provide information were identified. The methodology was applied in two other countries in 2020, Pakistan and Ukraine, and can serve as a critical tool in identifying gaps and achieving full implementation of SDG 16.10.2 in countries. You can find the comprehensive methodology through the FOIANet website here.[189]

To read the full-length version of this case study, visit www.sdg16toolkit.org/case-studies

CASE STUDY:

Spotlight Reporting Methodology for Tracking Progress on Corruption Elimination

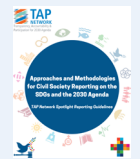**Transparency International - spotlight reports of governments' progress towards SDG targets 16.4, 16.5, 16.6 and 16.10**
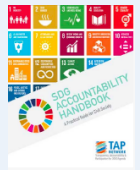
In 2017, Transparency International developed a common methodology to enable civil society organizations to track their countries' progress towards four SDG 16 targets especially relevant for anti-corruption, namely target 16.4 on illicit financial flows, target 16.5 on corruption and bribery, target 16.6 on accountable and transparent institutions, and target 16.10 on access to information and fundamental freedoms. Since then, over 45 of TI's national chapters have used the tool to produce spotlight reports that provide independent appraisals of their governments' anti-corruption efforts, which are essential to improve implementation of the 2030 Agenda across all SDGs. You can find the comprehensive methodology on the Transparency International website here

To read the full-length version of this case study, visit www.sdg16toolkit.org/case-studies

SDG 16+

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189   More information on the Centre for Law and Democracy's assessment of Canada's right to information practice is available here.

Key TAP Network resources:

Approaches and Methodologies for Civil Society Reporting on the SDGs and 2030 Agenda (TAP Network, updated 2021)	Recently updated guidance by the TAP Network provides an outline template for a civil society report and guiding questions to consider answering during the crafting process. **Available at: https://tapnetwork2030.org/sdg16reporting/**	
Empowering Civil Society for National Reporting and Action on SDG16 (TAP Network, 2018)	This report features a compilation of national civil society case studies and civil society spotlight reports on SDG 16. It provides analysis of a range of approaches and methodologies utilized by civil society for implementation and monitoring of SDG 16 by civil society, specifically with regards to drafting and disseminating of spotlight reports. **Available at: https://tapnetwork2030.org/empowermentreport/**	
SDG Accountability Handbook: A Practical Guide for Civil Society (TAP Network, 2018)	This handbook provides guidance on the different approaches and steps that can be taken by civil society to ensure national government accountability for the SDGs. It includes a chapter on 'Publishing Civil Society Reports.' **Available at: https://sdgaccountability.org/working-with-informal-processes/spotlightreporting/**	
SDG16 in VNRs and Spotlight Reports: Reporting on Progress, Reflecting on Inclusive Accountability Measures and Recommendations for going ahead (GIZ and TAP Network, 2020)	This report evaluates VNR and spotlight reports submitted to the 2019 HLPF for a select group of countries. It examines whether and how spotlight and VNR reports relate to one another and identifies the main commonalities and differences between the perspectives of governments and civil society. **Available at: https://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GIZ_TAP_2020_SDG-16-in-VNRs-and-Spotlight-Reports_Final-Version.pdf**	
TAP Spotlight Reporting Platform	'Share Your Civil Society Spotlight Report,' by the TAP Network, is an online platform to collect and showcase spotlight reports from civil society stakeholders. **Available at: https://tapnetwork2030.org/sdg16reporting/**	

Key resources

GPPAC SDG16 Toolkit	A flowchart guides peacebuilding actors through a series of key steps. The flow-chart points you towards how to develop an advocacy plan on SDGs, where to find the governmental SDG focal point in your country, how to influence key actors on SDG16+ implementation and how to write a "SDG16+ shadow report." **Available at: https://gppac.net/sdg16-toolkit**
Practical Guidance on Civil Society Sporting on SDG16 (Saferworld)	Practical guidance, drafting outline and tips to help craft a spotlight report on SDG 16. Includes a specific step-by-step process. **Available at: https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1201-en-hancing-accountability-for-peaceful-just-and-inclusive-societies-practical-guid-ance-for-civil-society-reporting-on-sdg16?utm_source=smartmail&utm_medi-um=email&utm_campaign=Reporting+on+SDG16%2B%3A+a+practical+guide**
A4SD Template	Action for Sustainable Development's HLPF 2018 Civil Society Report Template helps national CSOs consider how governments are involving civil society in their official implementation and review of the SDGs, and provides questions around the issue of leaving no one behind. **Available at: https://action4sd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/HLPF-VNR_CSO-Report-Template_2018.pdf**
Guidelines for CSO Shadow Reports (Forus International, 2018)	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. **Available at: http://forus-international.org/en/resources/8**
How should civil society stakeholders report their contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2018), Dr. Graham Long	This is a technical paper written for the Division for Sustainable Development, UN DESA. **Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/18445CSOreporting_paper_revisions_4May.pdf**
Corruption and the Sustainable Development Goals: Parallel Reporting Tool for 16.4, 16.5, 16.6 AND 16.10 (Transparency International, 2018)	The purpose of this research tool is to enable civil society organizations to conduct an independent appraisal of their respective country's progress in fighting corruption, tackling illicit financial flows and improving transparency and access to information, as national governments implement the Agenda 2030. **Available at: https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/product/corruption-and-the-sustainable-development-goals-parallel-reporting-tool-for-16-4-16-5-16-6-and-16-10**
SDG 16 Spotlight Reporting Website (Transparency International, 2021)	Transparency International has launched a platform for CSOs and partners to publish and share their spotlight reports: **Available at: https://sdg16.transparency.org/**