



OFF-TRACK, UNDER THREAT: SDGs in the time of Covid

CSOPartnership 
for **Development Effectiveness**

Conducted by the global civil society platform CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness in time for the UN High Level Political Forum, this study presents the perspectives of 43 CSOs from 32 countries on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Voluntary National Reviews, using the lens of effective development cooperation (EDC).

While acknowledging the integration of SDGs in national development planning, respondents suggest weak country ownership and institutional stakeholder engagement, and poor transparency and inclusivity in the SDG processes. They identify major gaps in implementing SDGs, such as the inadequate engagement of CSOs, and expect challenges in attaining the goals in light of COVID-19. They also offer recommendations to improve SDG implementation, founded on fostering an enabling environment for civil society participation.

What's inside?

- 1 Executive Summary**
- 4 Background**
- 8 Key Findings**
- 19 Recommendations**

Executive Summary

This document presents the reflections and recommendations of civil society organisations (CSOs) on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the national level using the lens of effective development cooperation (EDC). This is based on the results of the survey conducted by the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) from May 19 to June 10, 2020. A total of 43 CSOs participated in this survey from 32 countries whose governments have or will be presenting their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).



According to the survey respondents, nearly all governments have integrated the SDGs into national development planning and/or development cooperation policy. Moreover, a clear majority of countries have an SDG strategy and a designated agency for implementing this strategy. On the other hand, there is still a low level of awareness among implementors at the national and local level, suggesting that there is actually weak country ownership of SDGs in most countries. National budgets are also not aligned with SDG priorities according to the CSO respondents of the survey.

In terms of partnerships with stakeholders and civil society participation, most countries have mechanisms for stakeholder engagement but there is still a generally weak level of institutional stakeholder engagement in the SDG processes at the country level. Moreover, while most countries allow CSOs to participate in SDG discussions and consultations, this does not necessarily mean that they actually influence the resulting policies and implementation.

The survey respondents identified major factors that hinder civil society participation in SDG processes in their respective countries, including lack of resources devoted towards civil society participation, and lack of information regarding SDG implementation. According to the survey respondents, a little over half of countries have easily accessible information about the SDGs and less than half have national reporting processes that are open to the public.

Political factors are also germane with a number of CSOs reporting that the process of participation is neither inclusive nor transparent – indeed, that critical voices are deliberately excluded.

In terms of results, the survey did not attempt to measure the attainment of SDGs per se. Rather, the survey merely probed “other positive impacts” of SDG implementation that are nevertheless important. While the list is not exhaustive, the survey confirms that there are

notable contingent benefits from SDG implementation in many of the countries covered by the study, such as the formation of multistakeholder partnerships and increased effort to promote gender equality in national development programmes.

All CSO respondents identified major gaps in SDG implementation. Among the most commonly cited were: government budget allocations not aligned with SDG priorities; low awareness regarding SDGs among implementors; and inadequate consultation/engagement of CSOs in SDG processes. All participating CSOs expect that the COVID-19 will make SDG attainment even more challenging as SDGs take a back seat while governments focus all efforts and resources at combating the virus and providing relief.

Major Recommendations



Background

This document presents the reflections and recommendations of civil society organisations (CSOs) on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the national level using the lens of effective development cooperation (EDC). It pays particular attention to the participation of civil society in SDG processes and examines the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on SDG implementation from the perspective of civil society.



This is based on the results of the survey conducted by the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) from May 19 to June 10, 2020 in countries whose governments have or will be presenting their VNRs in the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). A total of 43 CSOs participated in this survey from 32 countries – all are developing countries and 15 of which are scheduled to present their Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) in 2020.

Table 1

Countries covered by the CPDE 2020 survey

Countries	No. of CSO respondents	No. of individual respondents	VNR Country (2020)
Argentina	3	3	Y
Armenia	1	1	Y
Belarus	1	1	
Bolivia	1	1	
Bulgaria	1	1	Y
Burundi	1	1	Y
Cameroon	2	2	
Central African Republic	1	1	
Chad	1	1	
Colombia	1	1	
Democratic Republic of Congo	1	1	Y

Table 1

**Countries covered by
the CPDE 2020 survey**

Countries	No. of CSO respondents	No. of individual respondents	VNR Country (2020)
El Salvador	1	1	
Eswatini (Swaziland)	1	1	
Gabon	1	1	
India	2	2	Y
Jamaica	1	1	
Kenya	1	1	Y
Kyrgyz Republic	1	1	Y
México	1	1	
Morocco	1	1	Y
Nepal	1	1	Y
Nicaragua	2	2	
Niger	2	2	Y
Nigeria	1	1	Y
Papua New Guinea	1	1	Y
Philippines	1	1	
Republic of Guinea	5	5	
Republic of Moldova	2	2	Y
Senegal	1	2	
Sri Lanka	1	1	
Ukraine	1	1	Y
Vanuatu	1	1	
Total = 32 countries	43	45	15

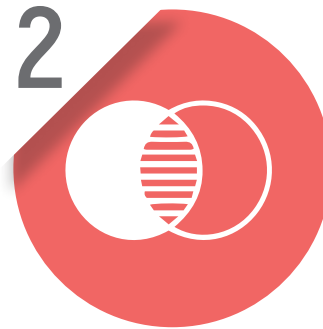
What is Effective Development Cooperation?

Effective development cooperation (EDC) is a framework that seeks to shape and align development programs and policies to ensure that all stakeholder, especially those belonging to the marginalised sectors, are involved in the process of addressing the structural causes of poverty, inequality, and social marginalisation.

It embodies four shared principles:



Ownership of development priorities by developing countries: Countries should define the development model that responds to their needs.



Transparency and shared responsibility: Development cooperation must be transparent and accountable to all citizens.



Partnership for development: Development depends on the participation of all actors, and recognizes the diversity and complementarity of their functions.



A focus on results: Creating a sustainable impact should be the driving force behind investments and efforts in development.

Key Findings

Figures 1 to 5 summarize the results of the survey in terms of select indicators of effective development cooperation



Country Ownership

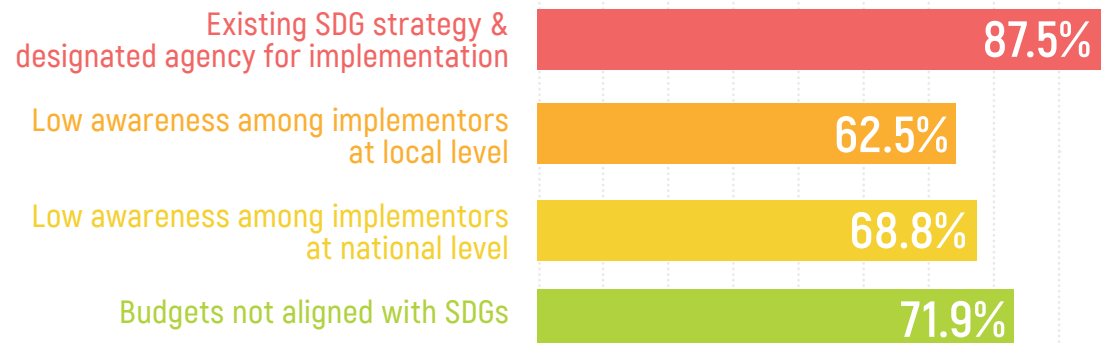
The survey results suggest that there is still weak country ownership of SDGs in most countries. While a clear majority of countries have an SDG strategy and a designated agency for implementing this strategy, there is still a low level of awareness among implementors at the national and local level. Moreover, national budgets are not aligned with SDG priorities according to the CSO respondents of the survey. This is also discussed under Focus on Results.

All the respondents in the survey were able to identify at least one government agency responsible for implementing the SDGs or the specific SDG strategy in their country. Interestingly, in 23 out of 32 countries, the lead agency identified was the economic or

Figure 1

Ownership Indicators

Percentage of countries covered by survey (n=32 countries)



planning ministry. It would be interesting to investigate whether this is reflective of a disproportionate weight given to economic goals compared to the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in these countries.

Nearly all respondents (28 out of 32 countries) reported that their governments have integrated the SDGs into national development planning and/or development cooperation policy. CSOs from a handful of countries – Armenia, Bolivia, El Salvador, and Papua New Guinea – reported that their governments have not yet established a specific SDG strategy although the governments of Armenia and Papua New Guinea report otherwise in their VNR. This suggests that there may be gaps in these governments' outreach or communications with civil society or the general public about SDGs.

Inclusive Partnerships

In terms of partnerships with stakeholders and civil society participation, most countries have mechanisms for stakeholder engagement but there is still a generally weak level of institutional stakeholder engagement in the SDG processes at the country level. Moreover, while most countries allow CSOs to participate in SDG discussions and consultations, this does not necessarily mean that they actually influence the resulting policies and implementation.

CSOs from 27 countries reported that there are existing mechanisms for engaging CSOs and other stakeholders in their country's SDG planning, implementation, and review processes. However, just a little over half (17) of the countries covered in this survey have institutional processes for stakeholder engagement according to the CSO respondents. At the minimum, this means having a specific government body designated to reach out to stakeholders. In nine out of these 18 countries, a law or policy is in place for stakeholder engagement. But only five of the 18 countries were reported to have funding available to support stakeholder engagement.

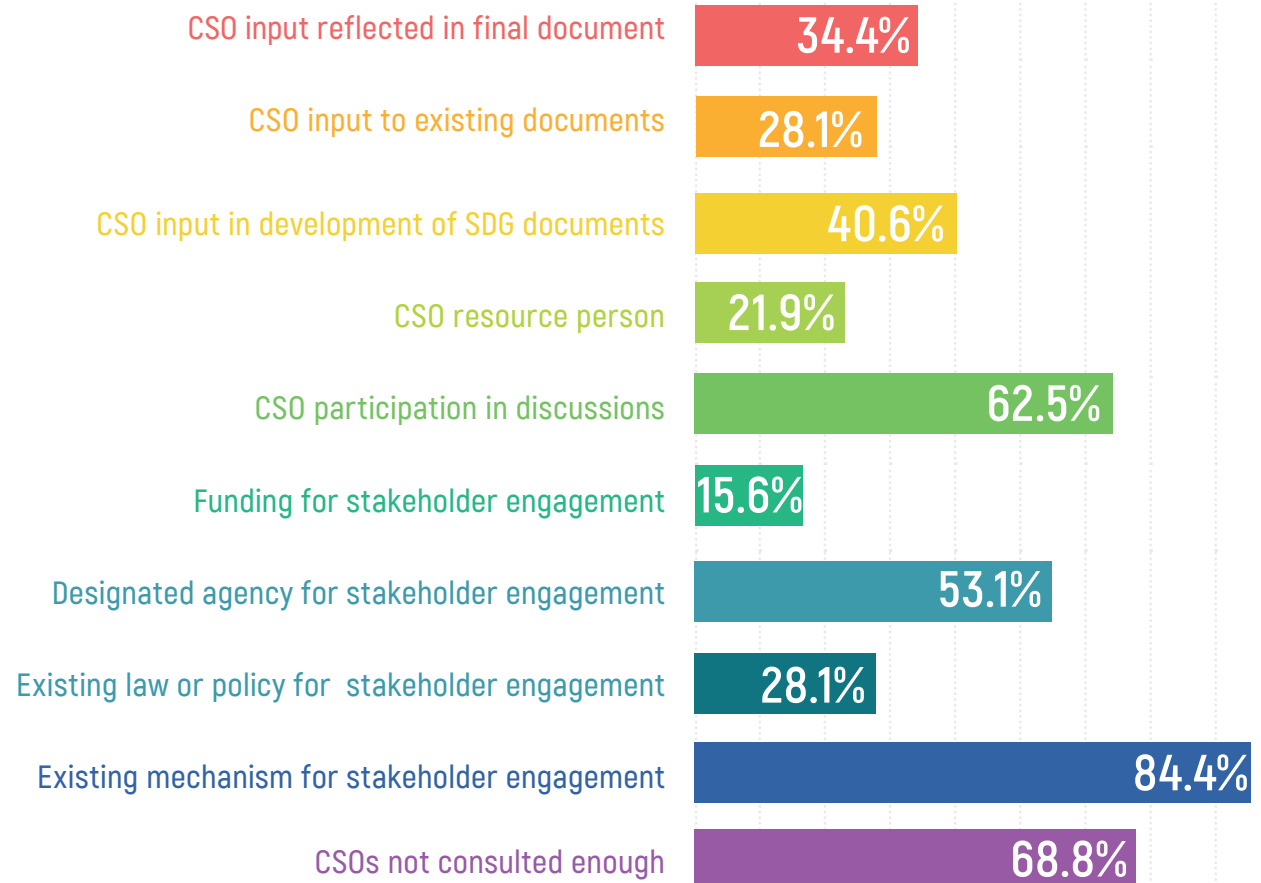
Focusing on the role of civil society, two-thirds or 29 out of 43 CSO respondents reported that they have been able to participate in SDG consultations in their country. In less than half of these cases, the CSOs were asked to contribute to the development of SDG-related documents while in nine cases, they were asked to provide inputs to already existing SDG-related documents. A smaller number – seven CSOs – were tapped for resource persons in SDG consultation sessions.

CSO inputs in these processes were quite diverse, including participation in training and capacity-building workshops, awareness-raising activities, situational analysis, implementation of specific goals, providing feedback on drafts, and monitoring and evaluation. But only 11 CSOs reported that their inputs were integrated in the final version

Figure 2

Partnership Indicators

Percentage of countries covered by survey (n=32 countries)



of the documents. The evidence, therefore, suggests that there is still limited space for civil society participation in SDG processes in many if not most countries. Moreover, even where there is opportunity for civil society participation, their inputs are often ignored or glossed over.

The survey respondents identified major factors that hinder civil society participation in SDG processes in their respective countries. Among the most common factors mentioned were:

- lack of resources devoted towards civil society participation (87.1% of CSO respondents)
- lack of information regarding SDG implementation (64.5%);
- bureaucratic challenges/red tape in CSO participation (58.1%);
- different priorities as an organisation (32.3%)

But political factors are also germane. A number of respondent CSOs complain that the process of participation is not inclusive or transparent. In a few countries (e.g. Niger, Philippines), the government reportedly selects which CSOs are allowed to participate, excluding those that have a critical stance vis-a-vis the government's policies and programmes. In one country (Democratic Republic of Congo), the CSO respondent reported that the most marginalised groups are typically excluded or left behind in these processes.

Other notable factors mentioned were: the pro-corporate bias of the government, government perception that CSOs are not development actors in their own right, low level of trust in government on the part of CSOs, and low level of technical capacity among CSOs.

Transparency and Accountability

In terms of transparency, the record is also worrisome. According to the survey respondents, a little over half of countries have easily accessible information about the SDGs and less than half have national reporting processes that are open to the public.

CSOs in 13 of the 32 countries covered by the survey reported that SDG-related information is not readily accessible to civil society groups or they are not communicated well to the public. CSOs from 26 countries reported that there is a national reporting process in their country on the status of SDG implementation. However, CSOs in 11 of these countries reported that the reporting process is not accessible to the public. In six countries, the CSOs were not aware of any national reporting process on SDGs.

Figure 3

Transparency Indicators

Percentage of countries covered by survey (n=32 countries)

Public access to SDG information

59.4%

National reporting is accessible

46.9%

Focus on Results

In terms of results, the survey did not attempt to measure the attainment of SDGs per se. Rather, the survey merely probed “other positive impacts” of SDG implementation that are nevertheless important. While the list is not exhaustive, the survey confirms that there are notable contingent benefits from SDG implementation in many of the countries covered by the study.

Despite the many challenges in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, CSOs from 19 countries believed that SDG implementation has yielded “other positive impacts” on national development. These include:

- the formation of multistakeholder partnerships (13 countries);
- increased effort to promote gender equality in national development programmes (13 countries);
- greater level of awareness of sustainable development at the local level (11 countries);
- establishment or strengthening of government mechanisms for SDG implementation (9 countries); and
- greater funds allocated to SDG priorities (6 countries).

On the other hand, CSOs from 13 out of the 32 countries saw no “other positive impacts on national development.” Indeed, all CSO respondents identified major gaps in SDG implementation. Among the most commonly cited were:

- government budget allocations not aligned with SDG priorities (25 countries)
- low awareness regarding SDGs among implementors at the national level (24 countries)

- low awareness regarding SDGs among implementors at the local level (22 countries)
- inadequate consultation/engagement of CSOs in SDG processes (24 countries)

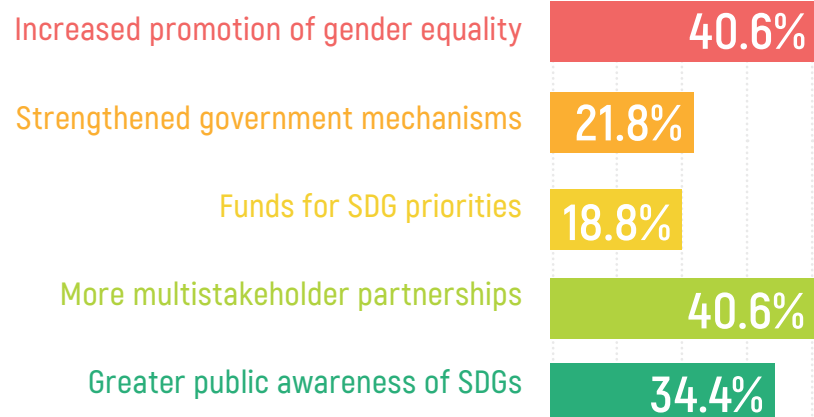
Other notable gaps mentioned were:

- inadequate budgets;
- lack of institutional framework for effective implementation of SDGs;
- leadership problems;
- lack of transparency; and
- lack of dialogue between stakeholders.

Figure 4

Results Indicators

Percentage of countries covered by survey (n=32 countries)



The Covid-19 Crisis

However, whatever progress has been made towards achieving the SDGs over the past five years is now in danger of being clawed back by the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel coronavirus has already killed hundreds of thousands of people worldwide and continues to spread without letup. Moreover, the measures necessary to contain the virus are also exacting untold social and economic costs in terms of lost livelihoods, foregone production, disrupted learning, and attenuated social institutions.

Aside from these direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on people's health and well-being, the CSO respondents in the survey identified other adverse implications of the COVID-19 crisis on the attainment of the SDGs. CSOs in nine countries expect the budget allocations for SDG-related programs to decline as a result of both economic contraction and reduced government revenues. A similar number of CSOs anticipate delays or even the cancellation of projects and activities related to SDGs including meetings and consultations with civil society. CSOs from eight countries believe that the SDGs will very likely take a backseat as governments focus all efforts on combatting the virus and providing relief to the people.

Notably, CSOs in five countries reported that there is less transparency and even less opportunity for civil society engagement amidst the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, some states may be taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to crack down on growing dissent over governments' failed or inadequate response to the pandemic as well as long-standing inequities and injustices that are being compounded by this unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

These developments make the Belgrade Call to Action campaign, led by the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness, Action for Sustainable Development, Balkan Civil Society Development Network, CIVICUS, and Gradanske Inicijative, even more relevant as it calls on

all UN Member States to take concrete steps to protect and enable space for civil society, and to ensure meaningful accountability to people in development practices. Half of the CSO respondents reported that they have already incorporated the Belgrade Call to Action in their public information and education campaigns, and advocacy activities since it was launched last year. However, an equal number of CSOs reported that they have not yet adopted the call as part of their efforts to improve the enabling environment for civil society at the national level. Some cited the “lack of information” as the reason while a number of respondents also mentioned “lack of funding” or lack of opportunities among the challenges they face in this regard.

Figure 5

Expected implications of Covid-19 on Agenda 2030 implementation

Percentage of countries covered by survey (n=32 countries)





Strengthen ownership of development priorities by developing countries

- **Raise the level of awareness** of the national SDG strategy among implementors from the national to the local level.
- **Translate the 2030 Agenda** into local plans, programs, and monitoring efforts together with civil society, and ensure that local priorities inform national plans and the VNR process.
- **Localise the implementation strategies** for Agenda 2030 adapted to local people's concerns, institutional structures, capacities, and resources.
- **Review and align national and local budgets** according to the country's SDG strategy and priorities, implementing participatory budget processes to reflect needs of local communities.

Strengthen inclusive partnerships for development

- **Ensure civil society engagement** in the 2030 Agenda implementation by formalising and embedding meaningful CSO participation in governance structures.
- **Support and strengthen civil society participation** through enabling laws, mechanisms, resources, and capacity development for civil society, especially those from marginalised groups.
- **Conduct regular consultations and dialogue** with civil society using a range of opportunities for multistakeholder engagement including through online and in-person means; soliciting inputs to and feedback on draft reports; and inclusion of CSOs as partners in implementation and monitoring.
- **Set clear guidelines on multistakeholder engagement** in the 2030 Agenda to ensure that inputs from CSOs and other stakeholders are not disregarded or rendered irrelevant in formulating policies and strategies, and in the VNR process.
- **Respect and protect the rights of all citizens** to conduct their own independent monitoring and review of the 2030 Agenda, including those who may be critical of state policies and programs.

Improve transparency and accountability

- **Develop a creative and effective communication strategy** to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda on an ongoing basis among the general public, including in partnership with local government units, civil society, and other non-state actors.
- **Spell out plans to review progress** on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level – not just at the HLPF – to bolster accountability to citizens. This should include consulting with civil society in the identification of gaps in implementation and the necessary measures for course correction.
- **Involve CSOs from the outset** in developing and providing inputs to VNRs. Draw on civil society expertise and citizen-generated data. Provide space for CSOs to review the VNRs prior to publication.
- **Ensure that national SDG review processes** are open to the public and information dissemination is conducted in a manner that connects with citizens, not just technical experts (e.g. use of national languages/ vernacular).
- **Provide information on the status of data collection** or plans to improve data availability especially on efforts to address inequalities and “leave no one behind.”

Enhance focus on results

- **Develop the national SDG results frameworks** together with civil society and ensure that the VNR presents progress and achievements for specific marginalised groups and communities.
- **In reporting progress** in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the links between specific policies and programs with results must be explicitly and clearly mapped out.
- **Review existing development policies**, programs, and projects in terms of their implications on the achievement of SDGs including large energy, agri-business, and infrastructure projects.
- **Review systemic barriers to the SDGs** at the international level such as unjust trade and investment treaties, tax competition, financial deregulation, etc.

Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis

- **Ensure transparency and accountability** in Covid-19-related actions of governments and donors.
- **Strengthen public health systems** at the community level as the frontline of defense against the pandemic.
- **Harness civil society knowledge**, expertise, and initiative in addressing the pandemic.
- **Focus efforts of ameliorating the impacts of COVID-19** on the vulnerable, impoverished, and marginalised sectors.
- **Stop using pandemic containment** as a pretext for monitoring and suppressing political dissent.

The CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) is an open platform that unites CSOs from around the world on the issue of effective development cooperation (EDC).

Through its advocacies and messages, CPDE brings together CSOs, as well as thematic groups and sectors, from different countries. At the moment, CPDE's membership covers six (6) geographic regions and eight (8) sectors. Its work is guided by five (5) advocacy priorities complemented by working groups to provide policy expertise and lead advocacy engagement.

Know more
about the CSO
Partnership for
Development
Effectiveness



csopartnership.org



[@CSOPartnerships](https://www.facebook.com/CSOPartnerships)



[@CSOPartnerships_](https://twitter.com/CSOPartnerships)



bit.ly/CPDELinkedIn



[@csopartnerships](https://www.instagram.com/csopartnerships)