In time for the United Nations High-Level Political Forum 2020, global civil society platform CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) raises the alarm on being off-track in achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs), and under further threat amid COVID-19, as shown by its survey on the implementation of the SDGs and the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

The HLPF 2020 is the UN’s main platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. For the first time, it is taking place virtually, with the theme “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the Decade of Action and delivery for sustainable development.”
“The 2020 HLPF is happening under extraordinary, once-in-a-generation, circumstances with a pandemic literally grinding the world to halt. The magnitude of its impact on the 2030 Agenda progress is yet to be fully realised, but it is certain to be substantial and as devastating as it had not been since the Second World War. Therefore, the reconstruction should include all of society, and engage the participation especially of civil society,” said CPDE Co-Chair Marita Gonzalez.

CPDE’s VNR study presents the perspectives of 43 CSOs from 32 countries. The study uses the lens of effective development cooperation to analyse SDG implementation and conduct of VNRs. The results show that effective development cooperation is key to putting the SDGs back on-track.

The full report can be read and downloaded here: https://bit.ly/2ACK9DQ.

“In our study, respondents acknowledged the integration of SDGs in national development planning, but suggest weak country ownership and institutional stakeholder engagement, as well as poor transparency and inclusivity in the SDG processes,” explained CPDE Co-Chair Beverly Longid.

Moreover, they identified major gaps in implementing SDGs, such as the inadequate engagement of CSOs, and anticipate challenges amid COVID-19.

“CSOs in our study expect challenges in attaining the goals in light of COVID-19: 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,” shared CPDE Co-Chair Richard Ssewakiryanga.
Respondents offer recommendations to improve SDG implementation, founded on fostering an enabling environment for civil society participation, especially embedding meaningful CSO participation in governance structures.

For CPDE’s part, it presents the Belgrade Call to Action as a means to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly to help reverse the global trend of shrinking civic space.

“Through the Belgrade Call to Action, we articulated measures that can be undertaken to promote civil society participation in the 2030 Agenda implementation,” explained CPDE Co-Chair Justin Kilcullen.

CPDE also calls on UN Member States to consider the COVID-19 as a wake-up call to rethink the socioeconomic model, and realise that delivering the 2030 agenda and the Decade of Action is a collective endeavour.

As CPDE Co-Chair Monica Novillo argues, “Achieving the SDGs was already a daunting challenge prior to the pandemic. The end of this crisis is still a long way off, but it presents the world with the challenge of rebuilding our societies with the furthest behind at the forefront.”

- Monica Novillo, CPDE Co-Chair

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Because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the 2020 United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) took place virtually last July, with theme “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.”

The two HLPF segments remained despite the virtual format: a thematic segment reviewing progress on specific sustainable development goals (SDGs), and a Ministerial segment, where a select number of governments presented Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). The official sessions were complemented by virtual side events covering a diverse range of issues related to SDG implementation. Expectedly, the pandemic itself loomed over all of the discussions.

As of this writing, an outcome document in the form of a Ministerial Declaration is yet to be agreed. In its absence, it is difficult to assess the strength of the messages and commitments coming out of the HLPF, but the fact that Member States are unable to strike an agreement given the circumstances does not imply a strong spirit of cooperation and healthy multilateralism.

The deliberations themselves were standard for the UN, with obvious special attention to the enormous challenge the pandemic has put in front of us when it comes to achieving the SDGs. At surface level, the statements made by Member States would suggest a political willingness to see the SDGs realised and the world emerge from this crisis with a common cause and greater solidarity in the face of a deadly plague. Regrettably, the actions of Member States suggest otherwise, as the Ministerial Declaration is stuck in a bitter negotiation likely over one or all of the familiar red lines that separate the G77 and the developed countries block – ostensibly the OECD countries – at every negotiation. If ever adopted, a weak Ministerial Declaration will really put into question the relevance and strength of the HLPF.
Then, the Voluntary National Reviews, which have already in previous years been something akin to rehearsed theatre were especially lacking in depth this year. Many countries chose to prepare pre-recorded presentations which appeared to be closer to promotional tourism videos than serious reporting on the 2030 Agenda. As in previous years, CSOs attempted the difficult task of responding to the country VNRs through the stipulated process of presenting a handful of questions and feedback to the presenting country or countries. On a positive side, some governments have started to set strong precedent for CSO engagement in their VNR processes, including CSOs in the official presentations.

Speaking of CSO inclusion in the HLPF, the online format yielded expectations of a broader and more robust participation or attendance, with the elimination of the typical limiting factors such as travel costs, security, and room capacities. Unfortunately, the virtual HLPF instead proved to be more limiting than its in-person form. This was true across the board, and not only specific to CSO participation, suggesting that the UN must take greater measures to adapt to remote working modalities.

For instance, the meeting even failed to provide interpretation of all official sessions into the six UN languages, typically a strict requirement for political processes of this nature. For most CSOs wishing to participate in this year’s HLPF, the only way to do so was through UN Web TV, which does not allow for any interaction and which has always been available for UN political processes of this nature.

A limited number of CSOs could follow the proceedings in the online meeting platform, but for little purpose since there would be no space to interact. Relatedly, official space for CSO interventions was limited and very hard to manage and coordinate. The number of CSO panelists was lower than in previous years and the possibility for “floor interventions” was limited, unclear, and impossible to plan for. On the latter, while it is normally understood practice that floor interventions are never guaranteed and will be determined by the moderator of a session, this approach is not feasible when participants are not in the room and must follow from different timezones.

The “official” Side Events were the only space where CSOs were able to participate freely in the discussions at this year’s HLPF. Side events are always more democratic spaces at the UN, and the difficulty in engaging in the official proceedings, gave them increased importance as spaces to present CSO messages. The online side events also appeared to attract greater cross-constituency participation than in-person side events, because they allowed for participation from beyond the UN circles (e.g. governments could be represented by different departments/ministries that would not necessarily be at UN Headquarters for the HLPF).

It is hard to come away from this year’s HLPF with many positive reflections. If one were to try to frame the HLPF in an optimistic, forward-looking light, it would be to draw parallels with the global context itself.

The pandemic has exposed huge cracks in our societies the world over, and in some cases mobilised a previously unimaginable level of response by governments and people. Most definitely, it started a needed debate on how to address some of the deep systemic failures hindering human advancement. The shortcomings of the HLPF as the apex accountability body of the 2030 Agenda have clearly been exposed this year as well. The question is whether the UN and its Member States will respond in kind, or double down on the old and tired divisions which have hampered the institution’s legitimacy in recent years.
Introducing the EU report on the implementation of effectiveness principles
Luca de Fraia, ActionAid Italy and Izabella Toth, Cordaid

The European Union just published a new report on development cooperation: Does the EU deliver? provides a detailed analysis of the EU institutions’ and Member States’ performance in the implementation of the effectiveness principles as agreed by the international community over the past ten years and more. For development actors closely following development cooperation patterns, the document offers fresh insights about EU donors’ performance as well as adjusting the monitoring framework. It is a valuable reference for continuing conversations on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, as we draw closer to 2030.

The report goes beyond the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation’s (GPEDC) Global Progress Report findings by, for instance, providing an EU collective indicator and qualitative interviews as well. This way, it provides a better picture of how relationships between the EU and its development partners work in practice. Possibly more importantly, it raises issues that should interest all development practitioners.

Let’s go back to July 2019, at the GPEDC Senior-Level Meeting. In the latest Global Progress Report, the Co-Chairs’ Statement pointed to “a mixed picture” on the implementation of the effectiveness principles. More specifically, it advocates “further action” to improve the alignment of development cooperation with partner priorities and country-owned results frameworks, and to promote transparency*. Against such a background, the EU takes a deep dive to present a comprehensive picture that helps stakeholders understand where more efforts are needed.

Some areas of the GPEDC monitoring framework have come under greater scrutiny than others as the review is about donors’ performance, namely: alignment and Country Results Frameworks (CRFs), forward visibility and predictability, use of country systems, and tied aid. The substance of the report revolves around three chapters: country leadership (chapter 3), significantly linked to the SDG 17.5.1 and country policy space; transparency (chapter 4); and the drivers behind the EU’s performance (chapter 5), the most political section. It also features the questionnaire submitted to EU Member States and 17 country profiles.
Data-wise, one distinctive feature is the approach to assess the EU’s combined performance (EU institutions and Member States together): 1,756 projects have been pooled together** in a single database that generates the EU collective indicator. This way, regional trends are not derived merely from a combination of national averages. The granularity of data is improved by a review of the findings through a categorisation of donors (DAC, vertical funds, multilaterals, etc.), of development partners (fragile, Africa, LDCs, etc) as well as of instruments, channels, and sectors.

It is not possible to summarise here the richness of the report. For now, we need to take stock of the fact that there are signs of regressions overall. The EU’s performance is not improving or has worsened in some areas: short and medium predictability, use of partner country systems, transparency, use of nationally owned indicators and shared evaluations with partner countries. The essence of the problem that the report explores is why there are such negative shifts. Which drivers are behind such negative trends?

According to the qualitative analysis, there is still general support for the effectiveness agenda within the EU Member States. From this angle, the volatility in performances from 2016 to 2018 cannot be explained with donors changing their policies as dramatically as it would be required to bring about such ample shifts. The report does take into account several drivers that may be at the play. In fact, findings do explore implications from trends such as those regarding the prevailing political priorities that may be negatively affecting the realisation of the effectiveness principles. The report notes that focus on migration, climate change, and trade interests may conflict with the effectiveness agenda.

However, there is also another line of thinking from the EU report that calls into question the quality of data and of the very same reporting process under the GPEDC. As dry this argument may sound, it may embody some of the essential issues to development partnerships as well as to the monitoring process as it is now. It is worth recalling that the GPEDC has been established under a very powerful credo that called for the new partnership – replacing a system based in the OECD DAC – to be global light and local heavy; one major implication was a monitoring process in principle largely based on data coming from partner countries. The EU report is then voicing trust issues that speak to the quality of the data systems of partner countries and to the limitations to the GPEDC reporting that do not allow for proper data vetting and validation; we have to notice that such an approach is already gaining momentum once we consider that the GPEDC is in the process to review its own evidence offer.

However, fractures may run deeper as the report’s conclusions plant the seeds of doubt as to development cooperation effectiveness and effective programming: the two things may not be 100% overlapping in the eyes of many leading officials. Many factors may be at work simultaneously here, starting with diminished familiarity with the effectiveness agenda and the GPEDC workings in particular, greater political pressure shaping development priorities, and donors’ diminished tolerance to partner countries’ capacity and management issues. The fate of budget support may offer a telling story in this regard. Practical ways out may include standard maintenance of the Busan monitoring framework and some major changes as well, specifically in those areas that are most problematic such as use of country systems, which, according to the EU report, may require major fixes.

The EU has taken bold steps to look into its performance in the implementation of the effectiveness agenda by publishing Does the EU deliver?. As we need other opportunities for deeper conversations on the findings, the importance of fact-driven, evidence-based policies is one overarching message for everyone to ponder; efforts to improve global, comprehensive, and regular reporting on effectiveness indicators and principles can never be emphasised enough. All development stakeholders, but especially civil society, can take advantage of the EU report, and use our learnings to inform our ways of engaging with the European Union in particular, and pursuing the effectiveness agenda in general.

* For the CSO perspective by CPDE: https://www.effectivecooperation.org/content/civil-society-reflections-progress-achieving-development-effectiveness-inclusion
* More specifically: 784 projects for 2016 and 972 for 2018, respectively in 73 and 78 countries, in line with the GPEDC Global Monitoring Rounds (GMR).

[LDF1]NB the collective indicator and the interviews are two distinct features.
The month of June opened with the 2020 DAC CSO Dialogue, the third installment of the annual meeting between CSOs and the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC). It brought together 30 civil society representatives from all over the world and a roughly similar number of DAC delegates, including the DAC Chair, Susanna Moorehead, and the Development Cooperation Directorate Director, Jorge Moreira da Silva.

CPDE was well-represented among the participating CSOs, with members from both the South and North and across the different CPDE regions and constituencies present and involved in the discussions.

Originally, the dialogue was slated to take place in Paris in April but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and eventually had to take the form of a virtual meeting. The agenda covered a range of priorities, from effective development cooperation to how DAC donors support CSOs. Over time, the dialogues have continued to improve as the DAC Community and members of the DAC CSO Reference Group developed a more familiar rapport and build on and learn from the previous meetings.

There were a number of highlights from the event, first of which is there are several common priority areas between the DAC Community and CSOs. The common agenda is very encouraging and grounds for continued engagement in the future.

An important theme for CPDE addressed during the dialogue was the DAC’s role in advancing the effectiveness agenda. CPDE spoke on behalf of the
reference group to emphasise the importance of effective development cooperation, especially in the current context of a global pandemic.

In addition to highlighting the role for effectiveness in light of COVID-19, the reference group emphasised the need for the DAC to accelerate progress on its effectiveness commitments and the importance of a robust global monitoring framework to do so. In response, the DAC informed the dialogue that some initiatives are underway to elevate the profile of the effectiveness agenda in the DAC’s work on both the political and technical fronts. As civil society, it will be important to reinforce DAC members on the issue, to ensure that they enjoy the kind of political support needed to make effectiveness a top priority in the DAC work.

Another important theme covered during the dialogue involved the content of the recent study on How DAC Members work with Civil Society. The reference group brought some top-line reflections and feedback on the study to the dialogue, much of which was in support of its findings and recommendations.

Importantly, the reference group supported an idea to turn the recommendation of the study into an official OECD Recommendation, which could be considered a strong endorsement of the study. That is because OECD Recommendations have some legal standing for its members, and while not legally binding, are quite powerful instruments of the Organisation.[1] An OECD Recommendation on the study findings would therefore have strong and mostly positive implications for the work on civic space and enabling environment at the DAC, and the OECD more broadly. So, following the reference group’s endorsement of a Recommendation, CSOs will need to continue advocacy in this direction.

Several other topics discussed over the course of the dialogue include the need for donors to maintain and even increase ODA levels in light of the current crisis, the role for the private sector in development, climate finance, peace and security, gender and preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, DAC reform, debt relief, and how the COVID-19 crisis is impacting CSOs.

Some discussion also arose on the role of CSOs pushing for non-DAC donors to uphold some of the same principles and commitments we expect of the DAC. The reference group reassured the dialogue that CSOs try to hold non-DAC governments to account, which can be evidenced, in its starkest form, by how CSO space is being infringed upon in many countries as a direct result.

Overall, the event was marked by active participation from both sides of the conversation. It is clear, however, that an annual three-hour meeting is not enough to accommodate the type of rich and meaningful discussions that would benefit both the DAC and civil society. Suggestions during the dialogue to have more specific and ongoing thematic discussions to allow for a more sustained and comprehensive engagement between CSOs and the DAC Community were then most welcome in this respect.

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[1] - Recommendations: OECD legal instruments which are not legally binding but practice accords them great moral force as representing the political will of Adherents. There is an expectation that Adherents will do their utmost to fully implement a Recommendation. Thus, Members which do not intend to do so usually abstain when a Recommendation is adopted, although this is not required in legal terms.
Why effectiveness matters in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic

This paper provides a conceptual framework anchored on EDC to serve as entry points for our platform’s engagement on the issue of Covid response. This document is part of the efforts of the Task Force on Covid-19 and was initiated by CPDE ICSO sector’s Luca de Fraia.

It was collectively developed thanks to the inputs of our Coordination Committee members and CPDE members who attended the webinar titled “Why Effectiveness Matters in the Response to Covid-19” held last 30 June 2020.

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Out now: The CPDE Strategic Plan 2020-2023

Titled Leveraging Effective Development Cooperation for Inclusive Partnerships to Deliver the 2030 Agenda, this document discusses the context of CPDE’s work for the next four years, our Vision, Mission, Values, and Principles, Theory of Change, Strategic Policy Objectives and Success Indicators, and Strategic Organisational Goals.

Through this Strategic Plan, we express our enduring commitment to promote development effectiveness with greater focus on effective and inclusive development partnerships. We will do so by building on our strength as a truly global and constituency-based platform that draws its driving force from the aspirations and struggles of the impoverished and marginalised peoples of the world.

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We, women belonging to different women’s organisations, united under the Feminist Group sector of the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness, are deeply concerned with the diverse and multidimensional gendered impacts of Covid-19 on developing countries as well as developed countries.

In the face of this pandemic, gender commitments, as highlighted by no less than the UN Secretary-General and the Committee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention, demand the urgent attention and actions of governments, donors, and other development stakeholders. Measures must be implemented to ensure equality between women and men, to counter violence against women and domestic violence, and to mobilise development finance from all sources for protecting women and girls.

We express our concern regarding a lack of women’s participation in decision-making during emergency situation and accountability on women’s issues and to women, the low level of gender-responsiveness among institutions in our countries, and the growth of already heavy burden of care and unpaid domestic work on women.

The glaring weaknesses in inter-ministerial coordination, cooperation, and collaboration between and amongst various stakeholders in the national mechanisms for gender equality and the empowerment of women leads or adds to the isolation of women’s rights and gender equality in the responses to Covid-19. To begin with, the consequences of the crisis are already severe for women, who constitute the majority of those who first face the health crisis and provide care in families and communities. According to UN Women, “globally, women make up 70 per cent of frontline workers in the health and social sector, like nurses, midwives, cleaners and laundry workers.” Women are overrepresented and underpaid in care-related sectors, women, and the crisis has only increased the amount of their unpaid work.

Government policies must address this situation. Sadly, despite the significant data and knowledge available, most of the states’ responses have been inadequate. We also note the impacts of Covid-19 in relation to existing issues affecting women globally:
Growing Violence Against Women

Of the 87,000 women victims of murder around the world in 2017, more than half were killed by intimate partners or family members. This means that every day, 137 women across the globe are killed by a member of their own family. Notably, more than a third, or 30,000 of these murders were committed by current or former intimate partners.

Moreover, each year, as many as 35% of all women experience sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual violence, or rape, and around 74 million women living in low- and middle-income countries deal with unintended pregnancies. The latest UN global estimates also show that 303,000 women die during childbirth or due to pregnancy-related complications annually. This translates to about 830 women dying every day, or roughly one every two minutes.

We hope that the sheer magnitude of numbers of women facing needless death and violence on a daily basis draws as much attention as Covid-19 does, and lament the insane contrast between how more seriously one is taken than the other. The sad reality is that these problems faced by women and girls will only be intensified during quarantine. Indeed, reports from China, the United Kingdom, USA and France show dramatic increase in gender violence since the lockdowns, and the responses among states have been inexcusably weak and slow.

We also bear witness to the pandemic’s increased impact on vulnerable groups, including on homeless, single and elderly women, migrants, and informal workers, along with the lack of crisis centers and assistance mechanisms in emergency situation. These have been compounded by neoliberal policies, which promoted state abandonment of social services, such as healthcare, housing, and education.


Worldwide, the response to the pandemic can be described as heavily militarised. The crisis generated by Covid-19 has been likened to war, and the language and scenery of war is very present on TV and political messages.

The declaration of alarm has led to a widespread deployment of armies in the streets. In many countries, it has been an excuse for imposing control and sur-
veillance measures by governments (Israel) and the concentration of powers that pose a risk in states managed by extremist and/or totalitarian regimes (Russia, Hungary, United States, Brazil, Egypt, The Philippines) or in countries that during the last year faced strong social protests, such as Chile and Ecuador in Latin America.

Peacebuilding efforts have since been severely affected by rampant human rights violations during the pandemic, including the suppression of freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press, as well as attacks on women human rights defenders. Covid-19 has greatly impacted on ongoing violence, armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies, where refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are at an extremely high risk. Furthermore, travel and mobility restrictions have prevented the delivery of essential services and humanitarian aid to many refugees and IDPs and other vulnerable groups.

The situation is further aggravated by dwindling resources, which have also disrupted the work of many women’s organisations and civil society groups working to promote and protect women’s rights, and build inclusive and sustainable peace.

**Official Development Assistance and women’s rights**

In the face of the pandemic, we call on states to mobilise financial resources for supporting national responses to Covid-19 and crisis transition and recovery. These, we believe, must be distinct from funds categorised as Official Development Assistance (ODA). We likewise call on donors, financial institutions, and the private sector to support small and medium women’s economic activities in developing countries during the crisis.

For their part, donor countries must more thoroughly track the proportion of official development assistance (ODA) that will go towards the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, through gender-responsive budgeting in developing countries.

In light of all these alarming developments related to the global Covid-19 situation, we call for immediate actions to protect women’s rights. Such actions must be supported by comprehensive and timely data, as well as conscious efforts to involve women in decision-making and political processes, in order to develop gender-sensitive responses to the pandemic.

We also express the following recommendations, gathered from our membership composed of women’s rights advocates around the world:

1. Set up a multi-stakeholder partnership for comprehensive response to such emergency situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Develop a detailed plan that will describe the roles of all stakeholders, including expected commitments to specific actions addressing women’s needs. The activities compiled therein must be publicised in a timely manner.
   - Ensure effectiveness of separate units within police departments and telephone hotlines to swiftly respond to domestic violence.
   - Ensure women’s timely access to necessary and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services and treatment during the crisis, such as maternity care, emergency contraception, safe abortion, and delivery.
   - Reinforce social and equality policies and responses to crisis. We defend a response in line with the “Women, Peace, and Security” agenda, based on securing “human security” dimensions, strengthening community resilience, the peaceful resolution of conflicts and crises, protection of human rights, and women’s rights defenders, and the participation of women in all the responses to the crises.
3. For governments to realise an all-of-government approach and coordination in addressing challenges faced by women, marked by the strong and meaningful participation of women’s organisations.

4. For governments to immediately convene an inter-ministerial committee or working group, chaired by the head of the national mechanism for gender equality and the empowerment of women. This body must bring together all ministries and agencies to address women’s needs during the Covid-19 crisis in our countries and ensure that all vulnerable groups’ needs are included. It is important to include representatives of women’s movements in such a committee.

5. Ensure that local and municipal government authorities take on roles and responsibilities and make important contributions towards protecting women from negative impact of Covid-19, promoting their social protection, and preventing discrimination and violence against women.

6. Increase allocation of local, national, and international budgets for addressing challenges faced by women and especially vulnerable groups in order to leave no one behind.

7. Reform compensation mechanisms for women amid the growing burden of care work.

   i. Include data on impact on diverse groups of women
   ii. Conduct differentiated data collection on impact of Covid-19 on women from informal sectors, elderly women, disabled women, etc.

9. Increase the gender-responsiveness of Covid-19 strategy through:
   a. Ensuring the transparency and public access to all pertinent policy, programs, budgets, and actions
   b. Promoting the inclusion of women in various decision-making bodies
   c. Setting up a concrete accountability mechanism for women’s rights and gender equality at various levels for all development stakeholders.

10. Ensure that ODA for developing countries is accountable to WRGE and directly contribute to realising gender equality through their own programs, projects and actions.

11. Mobilise additional to ODA funding for women’s rights and gender equality with a separate accountability process.

12. Provide women’s organisations in developing countries with adequate funding for their work on promoting women’s rights and empowerment.
We are the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness, a platform that unites civil society organisations (CSOs) from around the world on the issue of effective development cooperation.

We work in 117 countries, and our members come from seven regions and eight major sectors: faith-based, feminist, indigenous peoples, international CSOs, labour, migrants, rural, and youth. Together, we strive for a more effective development, the kind that truly responds to poverty and inequality.