A race against time and tide
The 2023 CPDE study on the VNRs and SDG implementation
Executive summary

This study provides a comprehensive assessment of the inclusion of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes, as well as the institutional conditions of national SDG implementation. It highlights the urgent need for change and effective strategies at the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda.

CSO inclusion, for example, remains unrealised. Since 2018, the CPDE VNR Study series has shown the importance of institutionalised spaces for CSOs to contribute to the development process. Based on this report’s findings, while there is an increase in the number of these spaces, this has not necessarily translated into quality engagement. Many lack the necessary enabling factors, such as government consultation bodies, legal support, and funding. In terms of the VNR process, majority of CSOs are still not included where it matters most, such as in decision-making and finalisation of the reports.

Lack of country ownership of the SDGs is a key challenge. While many countries have integrated the SDGs into their national development planning, CSOs express that these are not representative of the realities on the ground. Out of the 84% of countries that have SDG strategies in this study, only 25% have been reported by CSOs as representative of them. This means that decisions on how to implement the SDGs, from financing to monitoring, are made without proper consultation with and feedback from civil society and marginalised groups.

The study underscores the urgent need to change perspectives and implement effective strategies to achieve the SDGs. The principles of Effective Development Co-operation (EDC) can serve as a catalyst for SDG implementation. It prescribes changes required to achieve a means of implementation that is democratic, inclusive, transparent, and impactful.

Main messages

Utilise the Effective Development Co-operation principles to ensure that development finance, especially ODA, contributes to the SDGs.

Donors must meet the 0.7% GNI target for ODA, and protect ODA’s core mandate to poverty eradication, in order to help build sustainable development pathways of partner countries.

More attention should be placed on achieving results that deliver the pledge to Leave No One Behind.

The quality of institutionalised spaces for CSOs participation in SDG implementation must be improved.

Only 17 out of 109 CSOs were able to contribute to their country’s VNRs

Persisting barriers and gaps to CSO inclusion in SDG and VNR processes

Limited participation in CSO consultation structures
Lack of information regarding SDG implementation
Lack of resources devoted towards CSO participation
Bureaucratic challenges and red tape in governmental processes
Main message

OVERARCHING DEMANDS

Utilise the Effective Development Co-operation principles to ensure that development finance, especially ODA, contributes to the SDGs. The halfway point of the 2030 Agenda will undoubtedly trigger discussion on new measures aimed at bridging the financing gap for the SDGs and identify new solutions to achieve the goals by 2030, but it is important that this does not distract from long-standing commitments on ODA volumes and quality. The EDC principles must be at the core of new financing and new solutions to ensure that they are accountable, impactful, and will prioritise those who are left behind.

Donors must meet the 0.7% GNI target for ODA, and protect ODA’s core mandate to poverty eradication, in order to help build sustainable development pathways of partner countries. Donors continue to miss ODA targets. For the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda, attention must be recast to the indispensable role of ODA in partner countries. Donors must also strive to use country results frameworks and refrain from double-counting ODA and diverting ODA to private sector instruments.

More attention should be placed on achieving results that deliver the pledge to Leave No One Behind. Achieving results, fulfilling the accountability of development stakeholders and ensuring sustainability must come hand in hand with implementing any SDG strategy. All efforts towards realising the SDGs must therefore enshrine the highest forms of transparency and accountability as well as include those that are being left behind.

The quality of institutionalised spaces for CSOs participation in SDG implementation must be improved. It is not enough to simply create institutionalised spaces for CSOs. Barriers that hinder CSOs from genuinely participating in these partnerships, must be eliminated. Financial and technical support to boost CSO participation and inputs must be mainstreamed. There needs to be an increase in the provision of resources and quality information to CSOs to allow better synergies for civil society contributions to SDG implementation.

Specific demands

Country ownership
Country results frameworks, SDG strategies, and national development plans must be reengineered with the participation, inputs, and vision of civil society and peoples at their core.

Inclusive partnerships
Governments must move beyond identifying institutionalised spaces for civil society to improving the quality of institutionalised partnerships. Governments must ensure proper representation by civil society and marginalised groups in multi-stakeholder partnerships by removing all barriers to representation such as bureaucratic red tape and disabling policies or laws.

Transparency and accountability
Measures around improving transparency and accountability must feature exhaustive efforts to gather accurate, comprehensive, and meaningful information, and making these accessible to civil society. This includes using CSO-generated data in country reports such as the VNRs, and ensuring timely, clear, and pertinent information is available in order to facilitate planning processes and synergies for advancing inclusive development processes on the ground.

Focus on results
Governments must ensure that SDG implementation positively impacts the people, especially the most in need. Effectiveness principles must be at the heart of resource mobilisation and budget planning.
Methodology & background of the study

Ahead of the High-Level Political Forum in New York in July 2023, and the UN SDG Summit in September 2023, the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) conducted a survey from the 15th of March to the 15th of May 2023. It aimed to assess the inclusion of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes, as well as the institutional conditions of national Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation across the world, through the effectiveness lens.¹

Figure 1: Returning respondents of the CPDE VNR series from 2018 to 2023

The 2023 CPDE VNR study is the sixth edition in CPDE’s series on VNRs. Carried out yearly since 2018, the research showcases the importance of civil society in promoting genuine implementation of the SDGs, despite the limitations established by national governments for meaningful people’s participation and people’s centred development.

The study engaged a diverse range of CSOs participants, with a total of 109 respondents from 64 countries. Out of this number, 19 countries conducted VNRs in 2023. Notably, 28% of the respondents had previously participated in the survey, while the remaining 72% were new contributors. This year’s edition stands out as the largest and most comprehensive of CPDE’s VNR studies, representing triple the number of countries in the 2022 study. It also exhibits a more diverse participation; there are now more respondents from Europe and North America. The number of developed countries has also increased from one in 2022 to eight this year.

This study is limited to contributions from respondent CSOs who are either CPDE focal points in their respective countries or members of national CSO platforms. They do not necessarily represent, or are exhaustive of, all civil society of their countries.

¹ Using the EDC principles as a lens to assess the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is unique to this study. It is anchored in the understanding that delivering SDGs relies on development finance and on leaving no one behind – the central promise of the Agenda. EDC is enshrined in four principles: country ownership, inclusive partnership, transparency, and accountability, and focus on results. This is further elaborated in Figure 2.
Table 1: Countries covered by the CPDE 2023 VNR study

64 countries 109 total respondents 19 VNR Reporting Countries

- **64 countries**
- **109 total respondents**
- **19 VNR Reporting Countries**
Effective development cooperation (EDC) is a framework that seeks to shape and align development programmes and policies to ensure that all stakeholders, 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.

**Partnerships for development:** Development depends on the participation of all actors, and recognises the diversity and complementarity of their function.

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

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

The year 2023 marks the halfway point of the 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs. Yet instead of news of progress and good practices, the situation, according to the United Nations, is in “deep trouble”.

Current estimates by the UN report indicate that only 12% of the SDG targets are on track. Only a third of the member-states are expected to halve their population that are living in extreme poverty by 2030. Worse, it is globally acknowledged that not only are we in trouble, but developing countries, marginalised groups, and the most vulnerable, are expected to be the ones to bear the brunt of negative impacts of multiple crises. With seven years on, the promise to Leave No One Behind remains aspirational and the hope to achieve this by the deadline is “in peril”.

The 2023 CPDE VNR study rallies CSOs at halftime. It revisits the state of attaining the SDGs by 2030 and presents remedies through the lens of Effective Development Co-operation (EDC). In this sixth installment of the CPDE VNR series, inputs have been gathered from 64 countries to assess the inclusion of CSOs in their VNR and VLR processes as well as the conditions of their respective national SDG implementation. The study looks at the progress of development planning and SDG integration at the national and local levels, the extent of stakeholder engagement mechanisms across the different countries, the transparency and accountability measures of governments, and the results attained so far.

Looking back since the first study in 2018, many challenges remain unresolved. The first editions presented the struggles CSOs faced in terms of the quality of their participation in VNR processes. These were often tokenistic and ad-hoc, while resources, especially funding, for CSO participation was non-existent. Through the years, especially by 2021, SDG strategies began to mature in many countries. By 2022, CSOs were more involved in the VNR and SDG processes, but the quality of engagement and existence of institutionalised spaces for CSOs are still not up to par with the 2030 Agenda promise of inclusion.

Ultimately, the realities unearthed by this year’s study are very telling of today’s situation, where the most basic promises and issues identified in the beginning of the 2030 Agenda process remain unresolved. The progress thus far observed has occurred mainly at the façade. Barriers and gaps, especially for CSO engagement in the VNR and SDG processes, remain the same. Governments still do not support civil society; SDG information is still scant, while disabling policies in many countries still prevent CSO involvement and any form of real progress for the SDGs. People, especially those furthest behind, continue to suffer the consequences of the inaction and neglect of their governments.

Progress has fallen short of the timetable. The 2023 Sustainable Development Report does recognise that the world until 2019 had made modest progress but these have gone “seriously off-track” since the COVID-19 pandemic. These impacts are greatly felt by developing countries where most of the world’s population lives. But even then, according to the OECD, members of its Development Assistance Committee (DAC) have not even reached half of their

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2 "Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet", May 2023
3 Ibidem
total agreed target of 0.7% GNI for Official Development Assistance (ODA).\(^5\)

Increasingly, there have been discussions at the global level on Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFF) as a means to provide the much-needed boost to SDG implementation at country level in the post-COVID-19 world. The intended purpose of the INFFs is to facilitate more efficient ways of strengthening national planning process and mobilisation of development finance. CSOs remain sceptical. At the latest Financing for Development (FfD)\(^6\) Review Forum in May, member-states stressed these needs. However, as CPDE highlighted at the FfD, there is still a need to properly involve CSOs in the INFF processes.

The urgency for these trends to change is undeniable.

At its heart, the 2023 CPDE VNR study shows that there is a need to change perspectives on how to implement the SDGs, if the aim is to attain sustainable development for all.

Now, more than ever, the effectiveness principles can serve as a foundation for implementing and achieving the 2030 Agenda. With resources growing thin and governments desperately scrambling for financing, the need for attaining donor commitments on ODA and adopting the EDC principles as a guiding framework at the global, national, and local levels becomes even more pronounced. The use of the EDC principles will strengthen implementation and monitoring mechanisms of the SDG and VNR processes by involving civil society. It will also generate more responsible and effective resource mobilisation for the SDGs, especially considering the cost-of-living crisis. Finally, it will promote localised approaches for more impactful public policies centred on enabling inclusion processes for ever-increasing groups of marginalised people.

With the 2030 Agenda’s conclusion in the horizon, there is no time left for upscaling effective strategies to eradicate poverty, address inequality, overcome the climate crisis, and democratise public policy.

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6. “From the 2023 UN Financing for Development Forum: CSOs must be included in the INFFs conversation”, May 2023
84% of countries have national SDG strategies yet only a quarter of these are effective.

In 2016, member states adopted the SDGs promising to achieve the Global Goals together by 2030. The first step to realising this ambition is to mainstream the SDGs into their national policy frameworks. Now at the halfway point of the SDGs, 55 out of 64 countries, or just 84% of those surveyed by this study, show that they have integrated in one form or another, the SDGs into their national development planning or development co-operation strategies.

In terms of implementing a dedicated SDG strategy into their national planning, the findings show that there are even more countries who have not started this process. These countries range from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Fiji, Jordan, Kenya, Myanmar, and Zambia, to middle income and developed countries such as Australia, Belgium, Croatia, Poland, and Portugal. In fact, one European CSO states that even the European Union (EU) has no overarching strategy to implement the SDGs.

Even for those whose governments have implemented an SDG strategy, CSOs report that the quality varies. In some, national commissions and/or development plans have completely mainstreamed the SDGs such as those found in Honduras and the Philippines. However, in many, the SDGs have been relegated to a single ministry, an advisory body, or even a small group that was simply tasked to develop a technical paper.

The lackluster implementation of the SDGs at country level is reflected by the reported satisfaction of CSOs over the effectiveness of their country’s SDG strategies. Only a quarter of the respondents have indicated that they are very satisfied or satisfied while a third of the respondents remain neutral and almost 40% of the respondents declared that they are unsatisfied or extremely unsatisfied. Although the percentage of CSOs which are satisfied with their country’s SDG strategies has increased from 0% in 2022 to about 26% in 2023, there remains the need to continue to enhance the degree and quality of the integration of SDG strategies in national development planning for the majority of the countries.

In fact, according to the OECD, when looking at the use of country results-frameworks, no OECD member countries are even observed to extensively use said frameworks. Figure 4 shows that for many of the OECD donor (provider) countries, their use of partner country-owned results frameworks is far from the target of 97-100%, excluding only two countries, Iceland and Finland. 7

This reality is indicative of the global progress of the SDGs as assessed by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) where many countries across the world struggle to stay on track with the 2030 deadline. In their Sustainable Development Report 2022, the proportion of regions and income groups who are stagnating on SDG implementation is very alarming. The chart in figure 5 shows how countries, especially least developed to middle-income countries struggle with only two out of 17 SDGs on track to be achieved by 2030. Developed countries and OECD member states are not that far ahead, staying on track in four SDGs out of the 17.

Figure 3: CSO satisfaction over the effectiveness of their country’s SDG strategies

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their national development plans, sounds the alarm that country ownership is far from reality. This is only corroborated by the fact that almost all OECD countries have yet to fully utilise country results-frameworks. Despite being at the halfway point of the SDGs, the SDG index chart in figure 04 show that progress is very limited and much more needs to be done in devising a way to implement the SDGs at the country level.

**SDG implementation at the local level is improving but further commitment is needed**

The SDGs have always been about reaching the furthest behind. In recent years, this meant bringing SDG implementation down to the local level. In the 2022 VNR study of CPDE, only 20% of 26 countries have reported localised SDG implementation. This year, that number has reached 38% of 64 countries. That is a jump from five countries who have identifiable SDG localisation in 2022 to 25 in 2023.

Over 4 out of 10 of the respondents have also confirmed that Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are being conducted in their respective countries. However, there is also a considerable number of respondents, just about under 4 out of 10, who express unawareness regarding the existence of VLRs in their countries. These findings suggest the need for increased awareness and communication about VLRs to ensure a comprehensive understanding of local-level progress towards achieving the SDGs.

**Multi-faceted issues remain over progress towards the SDGs.**

In many of the countries that do have SDG strategies in place, CSOs report that many are still rife with several critical issues. These include the lack of focus on policy coherence for sustainable development, poor governance, and lack of effective institutions, limited civic space for engagement, and insufficient funding and capacity building for civil society. In terms of VNR processes many also report that there is still a lack of periodical implementation reports, and monitoring and evaluation systems, while data transparency remains a challenge. A growing concern by many of the CSOs is the inadequate attention given by governments to other social and economic problems such as climate action, gender equality, peace, and support to marginalised groups.

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**Figure 4: Use of country-owned results frameworks and planning tools by providers of development co-operation in 2018**

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### 2023 SDG dashboards by region and income groups (level and trends)

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**Note:** Excluding OECD specific indicators. Population-weighted averages. Source: Authors’ analysis
Inclusive partnerships

Institutionalised CSO engagement mechanisms have increased but many remain underutilised.

However, out of the 70% of CSOs acknowledging the existence of institutionalised mechanisms in their country, only half report having a government body dedicated to consulting stakeholders, as seen in the second bar of Figure 7. Furthermore, only 44% have legal support or policies that speak to CSOs being included, and only 20% of the respondents claim to have access to funds for stakeholder engagement processes. These show that although there has been gradual improvement in the number of CSO engagement mechanisms, many have inadequate structures and conditions necessary for genuine engagement by CSOs.

CSOs still struggle to participate in the VNR processes

Out of the total respondents, only half have indicated that they participated in the consultation process for the VNR. Given that 70% of the respondents’ report that their countries have CSO engagement mechanisms, this would indicate that in some countries, CSOs are still excluded from the process despite the existence of said engagement mechanisms. In Nigeria for instance, despite having a CSO engagement mechanism, the government refused the participation of the CSO focal point.

In 2022, 6 out of 10 CSOs report having engagement mechanism for the SDGs. Although the number has improved to 7 out of 10 this year, it is still far from the target of ensuring the genuine inclusion of CSOs in SDG implementation across every country. This is particularly alarming considering that one of the core tenets of the SDGs is partnerships. However, halfway into the 2030 Agenda, some countries’ SDG implementation remains exclusive to governments, corporations, and multilateral partners.

But it is also not enough to simply rely on the number of institutionalised mechanisms for CSO participation and engagement. After all, achieving inclusive partnerships is not solely about having available institutionalised spaces for dialogue. There must be enabling factors that will support CSOs to engage the SDG process.

Figure 6: CSOs reporting existing civil society engagement mechanism for SDG planning, implementation, and review processes in their respective countries.

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47.18% Yes, institutionalised
24.08% Yes, but not institutionalised
28.74% No
For those that were engaged in the VNR consultation process as can be seen in Figure 9, about 6.2 out of 10 were involved in planning, 4.5 out of 10 were involved in implementation, and 5.8 out of 10 were involved in evaluation.

In 2022, the trend begins with more CSOs included during the planning stage with a steady decline of participation until only very few report to have been involved in evaluation. While it is noteworthy to have as many CSOs involved in evaluation and in planning (see first and second bars), and to even have a select few involved in the official delegations (see fourth bar), this remains far from the goal of having CSOs included in every stage of the VNR process. CSOs still have only limited access to the SDG implementation and VNR processes despite the existence of CSO engagement mechanisms.

In Figure 10, we see the numbers decline further when the quality of participation is discussed. Only 4 out of 10 CSOs involved in the VNR process were asked to contribute information or comment on SDG documents in their respective countries. The third bar, denoting the number of CSOs whose inputs were incorporated into their VNRs, exhibits the lowest value, with the inclusion of only 1.57 out of 10 CSO inputs.

This means out of the 109 CSOs in this study, only 17 CSOs succeeded in contributing to their VNRs. See Figure 10.
Looking at the role of civil society today, despite an increase in CSO engagement mechanisms and partnerships across countries, the perspective and contributions of civil society remain underutilised. This study’s findings show that CSO roles are still relegated to independent reports, outreach and advocacy campaigns, and limited participation in consultations. Although some have reported their governments have included their inputs, this is the exception rather than the norm. Majority of civil society are still not included where it matters, such as in decision-making processes and finalisation of the VNRs.
It is also alarming that CSOs report that many of their inputs and campaigns have remained largely unchanged through the years. Their knowledge and expertise have increased greatly, but much of the core CSO asks remain the same. This points to multiple possibilities, such as governments failing to adhere to the demands of civil society, and CSOs still suffering from limited or constrained participation.

The findings of this study corroborate this possibility, given that barriers to genuine and inclusive participation of CSOs have also not changed in the last few years.

In Figure 12, majority of the issues reverberate around the lack of support to civil society. This comes in the form of the lack of available resources and of information provided by governments regarding plans for and progress in SDG implementation. The second leading concern would be the structural barriers, such as bureaucratic challenges and the limiting design of stakeholder consultations. In sum, issues continue where the demands of CSOs have yet to be acknowledged by governments while counter-productive measures for inclusive participation remain unchanged.

Despite having 7 out of 10 CSOs claim having institutionalised spaces for civil society engagement at national level, most are largely unsatisfied with the quality of the partnerships. Improving the quality of said partnerships by creating an enabling environment for civil society to contribute to SDG implementation must be top priority. This used to be the case when the SDGs first came to being in 2016, but in 2023, it remains an unrealised ambition for many countries.
Positive progress on transparency and accountability, but support to CSOs must be top concern

About 6 out of 10 CSOs in the study report having national results framework and reporting processes on SDG implementation. This is similar to the figure from the 2022 study. Where it differs is while last year only a fraction had access to these frameworks, this year, over 70% of CSOs have access or partial access to these frameworks. In figure 13, the top and third bars show just this. In terms of SDG-related information, over 70% reported having access to this information versus only 50% of the respondents last year. These are reflected by the second and fourth bars from the top of figure 13.

The white shaded areas represent existence of the category, black represents partial existence, and grey represents negative. What this shows is that taken together, positive development outweighs the negative.

The findings of this section on transparency and accountability are consistent with country ownership and inclusive partnerships with the implementation of their own SDG contributions and projects. A further three out of 10 CSOs feel these are only partially relevant while the rest of the respondents feel these are irrelevant. These findings indicate the need for further evaluation and alignment of the information provided to fully tap the potential civil society can bring in SDG implementation.

Figure 13: Progress on transparency and accountability aspects of reporting mechanisms, data, and information on SDG implementation

Although it is encouraging to see positive development in increased transparency and accountability of governments on reporting mechanisms, data, and information; active and transparent engagement that is useful to civil society remains the unachieved goal. For only 4 out of 10 CSOs report that the SDG information they have access to and use is actually relevant for planning and...
Focus on results

Little evidence of this innovation and recommitment despite international calls

Compared to last year’s, the CPDE 2023 VNR study shows that almost nothing has changed in terms of impact and results. The level of impact of SDG implementation on national development in terms of awareness raising, promotion of gender equality, and increase in partnerships remains the same. The areas with the least impact from last year – such as the allocation of funds and tracking public allocations for gender equality – also continues to be neglected.

A similar trend can be observed for persisting barriers and gaps to SDG implementation. Figure 15 shows how the leading issue remains to be insufficient consultation with CSOs and marginalised groups, low awareness on the SDGs at the local level, and issues with budget allocations and their alignment with SDG priorities.

What the findings on focus on results show is that despite gains in transparency and accountability, as well as some progress in terms of inclusive partnerships and country-ownership, these have yet to materialise into actual impacts felt by the people.

To turn these gains into reality, many CSOs recommend the importance of investing time and energy into the coordination and engagement of stakeholder by their governments. Governments must also align budget allocations with SDG priorities and increase awareness regarding the responsible entities for implementing the SDGs, at both local and national levels.

Another crucial aspect mentioned is the consultation process, which should begin at the grassroots level and involve all relevant stakeholders, including the government, civil society, media, and researchers. By fostering collaboration and inclusivity, these consultations should give way to a national strategy that is results-driven and more impactful to the people.

![Figure 14: Impacts of SDG implementation on national development](image1)

**Figure 14: Impacts of SDG implementation on national development**

- There is greater awareness of SDG at the local level
- Multi-stakeholder partnership to localise and promote SDGs were formed/strengthened
- More funds were allocated for SDG priorities
- Government mechanisms for SDG implementation were established/strengthened
- There is increased effort to promote gender equality in national development programmes
- Systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality and women’s empowerment have been established and/or improved (SDG 5.c.1)
- No additional positive impacts
- Others (please specify)

![Figure 15: Barriers and gaps to SDG implementation](image2)

**Figure 15: Barriers and gaps to SDG implementation**

- Government budget allocations are not aligned with SDG priorities
- There is low awareness regarding SDGs among implementors at the national level
- There is a low awareness regarding SDGs among implementors at the local level
- CSOs are not sufficiently consulted/engaged in SDG processes
- Other relevant stakeholders (including minority groups) are not sufficiently consulted/engaged in SDG processes
- Others (please specify)
Conclusion

The findings point to the need to continue to enhance the degree and quality of the integration of SDG strategies in national development planning, for most of the countries reviewed. The same can be said of the implementation process. Notably, transparency and accountability in SDG implementation and reporting processes have shown substantial improvement. However, when examining the impacts, it becomes evident that results and outcomes have remained largely unchanged.

Regarding Country Ownership, which is measured by the integration of SDG strategies into national planning, implementation hurdles persist. Only a quarter of CSOs report satisfactory implementation, as many governments either lack follow-through, fail to thoroughly cascade strategies within their governance structures, or lack implementation altogether beyond the mere creation of strategies.

Developing and sustaining inclusive partnerships also face similar issues. While more engagement mechanisms exist, many are superficial, with limited involvement of CSOs. Furthermore, the usual obstacles that hindered CSO engagement prior to the SDGs persist, including inadequate financial support, limited information sharing, bureaucratic challenges, and legal constraints.

Transparency and accountability have seen the most progress. However, governments, as duty-bearers, must now enhance the quality of their information and data provision. Although CSOs have gained better access to information, they often find the data and resources provided not particularly useful for SDG implementation purposes. CSO-generated data remains underutilised as well and remains an untapped resource in producing more transparent reports for the SDGs.

Focus on results sheds light on the persistent issues in SDG implementation. Despite relative progress on other principles, the findings reveal that the impact on the ground remains largely unchanged. SDG implementation has primarily raised awareness of social issues rather than effectively lifting people out of poverty. Additionally, unresolved barriers and gaps have resurfaced, from inadequate CSO consultation to the misalignment of public funds. Government efforts, now halfway into the SDG implementation, fail to match the level of ambition set in 2016.
Key recommendation

Across all four EDC principles, this study has provided a deeper understanding of SDG implementation at the country level in the context of development co-operation in as many as 64 countries. The findings show that the progress attained is insufficient given the halfway mark of the 2030 deadline. The need to consolidate partnerships for development is an imperative now more than ever, yet this is also challenged by an increased loss of trust among development stakeholders, as the world is running the tide generated by multiple crises against time.

Accelerating recovery, the fate of the future, and “innovation” are set to be highlighted at the SDG Summit this September 2023. Ambition should remain high. Although these “solutions” are limited and probably insufficient to address the root causes of poverty and the enduring suffering of peoples across the world, they must still always be guided by a focus on the furthest behind first and the principles of effective development co-operation, to ensure that SDG implementation is executed with the interests of peoples at its core.

Overarching demands

Utilise the Effective Development Cooperation principles to ensure that development finance, especially ODA, contributes to the SDGs. The halfway point of the 2030 Agenda will also be the launching point for new and innovative measures that seek to bridge the financing gap for the SDGs and identify new solutions to achieve the goals by 2030. The EDC principles must be at their core to ensure that these solutions are accountable, impactful, and will prioritise those who are left behind.

Donors must meet the 0.7% GNI target for ODA, and protect ODA’s core mandate to poverty eradication, in order to help build sustainable development pathways of partner countries. Donors continue to miss ODA targets. For the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda, attention must be recast to the indispensable role of ODA in partner countries. Donors must also strive to use country results-frameworks and refrain from double-counting ODA and diverting ODA to private sector instruments.

More attention should be placed on achieving results that deliver the pledge to Leave No One Behind. Achieving results, fulfilling the accountability of development stakeholders and ensuring sustainability must come hand in hand with implementing any SDG strategy. All efforts towards realising the SDGs must therefore enshrine the highest forms of transparency and accountability as well as include those that are being left behind.

The quality of institutionalised spaces for CSOs participation in SDG implementation must be improved. It is not enough to simply create institutionalised spaces for CSOs. Barriers that hinder CSOs from genuinely participating in these partnerships, must be eliminated. Financial and technical support to boost CSO participation and inputs must be mainstreamed. There needs to be an increase in the provision of resources and quality information to CSOs to allow better synergies for civil society contributions to SDG implementation.
Specific demands

**Country ownership**

Country results-frameworks, SDG strategies, and national development plans must be reengineered with the needs of the people and participation, inputs and contributions of organised civil society at their core.

*Improve* effectiveness of country-level SDG strategies and national development planning by ensuring that SDG implementation is driven by democratically-formulated national and regional priorities and realities on the ground.

*New* approaches to support SDG implementation, such as the use of INFFs, should enshrine the concerns of civil society and marginalised groups.

*Donors* must use country results-frameworks as a default in their development co-operation and ODA policies.

*Eliminate* half-measures to SDG implementation such as relying on only one ministry or working group for SDG implementation.

*Governments* should continue to implement the SDGs at the local level and specify SDG targets that best appeal to the local populace.

**Inclusive partnerships**

Governments must move beyond simply identifying institutionalised spaces for civil society engagement and also focus on improving the quality of this engagement. Barriers to genuine participation of civil society must be removed. Enabling support that will improve the quality of civil society participation, and capacitate and amplify civil society concerns and contributions, must be prioritised.

*Governments* must continue to mainstream the importance of civil society as independent development actors and implementers of the SDGs, especially at the local levels.

*Ensure* the creation of institutionalised multi-stakeholder partnerships that inform SDG implementation at the national, sub-national, and local levels.

*Focus* more on the quality of institutionalised partnerships by ensuring proper representation by all civil society and marginalised groups, and removing all barriers to representation such as bureaucratic red tape and disabling policies or laws.

*Be more* proactive in supporting civil society participation in multi-stakeholder spaces by providing adequate information to civil society on SDG implementation and ensuring civil society has access to funds for representation in such spaces, and even implementation of their own SDG projects.

*Given* the disproportionate emphasis on forming partnerships primarily with the private sector, while often neglecting or inadequately including civil society, it is necessary to establish improved government regulations and monitoring mechanisms to ensure accountability in business conduct.

*There* should be an emphasis on collaborative efforts between governments and civil society to safeguard and uphold the rights of all citizens to independently monitor and review the entire development agenda.

*National* and local civil society should actively engage in collaboration with other international CSO networks to enhance the influence and effectiveness of CSOs, enabling them to provide more substantial recommendations to their respective national governments, and to make a stronger contribution to their country’s SDG implementation.
Specific demands

Transparency and Accountability

Improving measures on transparency and accountability must go hand in hand with more purposeful information being made accessible to civil society.

Continue to improve information sharing and reporting measures on SDG implementation.

Governments need to better align the information they provide and the services they offer to what civil society requires to improve CSOs contributions to the SDGs.

Planning and verification processes on the VNR and SDG implementation should better incorporate the participation and inputs of civil society.

To ensure the accuracy of national reporting and implementation processes, it is important to utilise research, publications, and other knowledge products generated by CSOs to validate government findings.

There must be explicit efforts by governments, especially donor countries, to provide disaggregated data that considers various factors such as sex, age, race or ethnic origin, disability, migratory status, geography, income/wealth, as well as climate impact and other context-specific issues.

Focus on results

Governments must ensure that SDG implementation positively impacts the people and the most in need. Effectiveness principles must be at the heart of resource mobilisation and budget planning.

Developing the national budget by governments should consider the furthest behind first. Development and financing plans, especially those targeted towards the SDGs, should have institutionalised participation by marginalised groups such as indigenous peoples and women and girls.

Premium should be given to development co-operation as an essential cog in the means of implementation of countries towards the 2030 Agenda. Donors should meet the 0.7% GNI target.

The quantity and quality of financing must be addressed. It is especially important to enhance public financing streams, including ODA, and not rely on mobilising private sector financing as a stand-alone remedy.

Target the most marginalised groups and those left behind, especially women and children, rural populations and Indigenous Peoples, migrants, persons with disabilities, older persons, and persons engaged in the informal sector, unpaid care work, and transformative economy.
Appendix I

From reflection to action: The evolution of the CPDE VNR series in mainstreaming the principles of Effective Development Co-operation as a catalyst to implement the 2030 Agenda

The CPDE VNR series have come a long way since its inception in 2018. The first reflection document was a mere 4-page synthesis, with eighteen respondents from sixteen countries. Despite this, the 2018 CSO Reflections on the VNR Process and SDG Implementation provided perspective in the respective roles of CSOs in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process and SDG implementation.

As the years progressed, and the 2030 Agenda at country level were institutionalised, the CPDE VNR studies expanded in scope and depth, encompassing a broader range of CSOs and countries. The subsequent reports, with their comprehensive analysis and diversity of voices, have delved into the complexities, challenges, and successes encountered by CSOs in their engagement with VNR processes. A noteworthy observation has been the increasing number of civil society organisations from various countries that take part in the surveys yearly. From 16 countries represented in the 2018 survey, the pool of participants grew to 64 countries today. In fact, every year, more of these CSOs become returning respondents, allowing CPDE to cross-check and compare information from different years and identify trends in the data gathered.

The CPDE VNR series have shed light on the critical role of CSOs in holding governments accountable, advocating for meaningful, inclusive and diverse participation in the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda, and driving transformative change towards the achievement of the SDGs.

Recurring themes have surfaced in the studies throughout the years, particularly on the gaps and challenges CSOs encounter. Government budget allocation for SDG implementation and CSO participation was a constant gap identified since 2018. Despite more recent improvements, CSOs reported a lack of meaningful partnership with their respective governments. And while civil society were consulted in the VNR and SDG implementation process either formally or informally, most of them deemed these consultations inadequate. For instance, in 2022, only 7 CSOs out of 47 total respondents reported to have their recommendations incorporated in their respective countries’ VNR. This year, there has been no significant improvement reflected in this sense, with only 17 out of 110 total respondents claiming that their inputs were integrated into their countries’ VNRs.

Local implementers also lack awareness regarding the SDGs, which poses a challenge for policy coherence as the VNR reporting is mainly a government-centred process in most of the participating countries. Non-state actors such as civil society, marginalised groups, and other sectoral groups are not involved in the same degree as government agencies and ministries. Private sector representatives, on the other hand, have had an increasing influence in implementing development plans. In 2019, several respondents reveal that in their country, the current development priorities and SDGs implementation are “more corporate-driven which are more facilitated by the government through development strategies and policies” rather than focusing on inputs and feedback from sectors directly being served by the SDG strategies.

In 2020, CPDE released the 2020-2023 CPDE Strategic Plan: Leveraging Effective Development Co-operation for Inclusive Partnerships to Deliver the 2030 Agenda. This plan aims to build from recent successes in terms of the attainment of the SDGs, and identify clear strategic imperatives to promote development effectiveness in a variety of areas. Since 2020, CPDE has acknowledged the significant impact of the pandemic and COVID-19 response has been incorporated in the study as well.

The fifth installment of the CPDE VNR study series in 2022 focused on pandemic recovery. Compared to the 2020 and 2021 VNR studies, perspectives have shifted in the 2022 document—evidently seen on the ways forward and key recommendations. Priorities have been realigned to place the furthest behind first, including vulnerable groups who are the most hit by the socio-economic impact of the pandemic. Effective development co-operation remains to be a framework highlighted as the key driver for implementation.

The journey towards attaining the SDGs requires collaboration, which demands the active engagement of CSOs as key development actors in their own nature. As we navigate towards the 2030 Agenda, governments should be enjoined to focus on challenges and recommendations identified by research studies such as the CPDE VNR series. These insights call for continued collaboration and concerted actions to address the identified challenges. By prioritising budget alignment, enhancing accessibility of SDG reporting, and institutionalising effective stakeholder engagement, the world can accelerate progress towards the SDGs.