



TASKteam

CSO Development Effectiveness
& Enabling Environment

TASK TEAM
CSO development effectiveness & enabling environment
STUDIES

ACTIVATING CIVIC SPACE FOR
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

*Helping and Hindering factors for Effective
CSO Engagement in the SDGs*

- SYNTHESIS REPORT -

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Executive Summary

The 2030 Agenda recognizes that the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can only be successful with strong global partnerships and cooperation. Civil society organizations (CSOs), due to their direct connection with poor, vulnerable and marginalized communities, are recognized as key partners in the successful implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. In the face of this increasingly urgent agenda, the **Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment** ([Task Team](#)) commissioned a research study focused on the identification of factors that help and hinder the engagement of CSOs in the implementation of the SDGs.

The study was undertaken by the International Institute of Social Studies ([ISS](#)), a renowned higher education and research institute of social science that is part of [Erasmus University Rotterdam](#) under the leadership of the principle researchers Professors [Kees Biekart](#) and [Alan Fowler](#). Key messages highlighted here are derived from the Synthesis Report coming out of this study. The report synthesizes evidence from 21 case studies in six countries, selected because of differences in their freedom or 'space' available for CSOs. The countries are: **Costa Rica, Ghana, Hungary, Lao PDR, Nepal & Tanzania**.

The research design applied an 'SDG' lens as the empirical way to find out about CSO experiences when facing different degrees of constraint. The below findings span open to closed civic spaces and are grouped according to each part of the Task Team's [Four-Part Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness and a CSO Enabling Environment](#).

The research question:

"What factors in a country's environment help or hinder effective CSO participation in SDG-related processes and how is this practically felt/experienced?"

PART 1. MULTI-STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE (MSD)

- ➔ Many CSOs are not sufficiently engaged in formal SDG processes or consultations. CSOs that are part of the aid system and present in an urban location are much more likely to be engaged in MSDs
- ➔ Not recognizing the need to diversify the types of CSOs engaged in MSDs, perpetuates the participation of the same group of urban and aided CSOs.
- ➔ The degree to which CSOs are state and/or party aligned, acts as a filter for their inclusion or exclusion in MSDs.
- ➔ Familiarity with the SDGs and SDG dialogues are less visible and/or present in rural areas.
- ➔ There is little presence of businesses in SDG-related MSDs.



PART 2. CSO DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS, ACCOUNTABILITY & TRANSPARENCY

- For a segment of CSOs, the SDGs appear to provide a positive shared language and agenda for action.
- The lack of consistent availability of resources results in irregular engagement of CSOs in the SDG processes.
- Civic space determines the extent to which CSO self-regulation is politically tolerated and practically viable. Even when conditions permit, there are few indications that the SDG targets and measures provide reference points or performance measures for CSO accountability.
- The SDGs are not providing a mechanism for CSOs to learn from each other in areas like navigating constraints, negotiating with funders and improving implementation.



PART 3. OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION WITH CSOs

- There are few indications that the SDGs have led to any significant increase in collaboration between and coordination amongst donors.
- The SDGs do not appear to alter funders' conditions and modalities for CSO support. Unequal effects continue to favor large (inter)national entities with little activity found at lower (local) levels.
- Opening of civic space seems to be associated with a reduction in the contribution of official aid to CSOs for SDG engagement. In more open spaces, there is a growth of private funding to CSOs.
- Experiences of donor countries, which are themselves prioritizing their own domestication of SDGs, do not seem to be feeding into their own aid and CSO policies.



PART 4. LEGAL AND REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

- The influence of the legal and regulatory environment appears to be crucial for all elements in the Task Team's Four-Part framework. In that sense it is probably also the most important, with 'trickle down' effects elsewhere.
- Laws and regulations seldom formally inhibit government from collaborating with CSOs; this is more determined by government's attitude and policies than by the legislation as such.
- Except perhaps in civic spaces that are very open, legal provisions do not automatically entitle CSOs to undertake any SDG-related activity of their choosing. Sovereign governments retain both discretionary power and SDG decision-rights.
- Legislation to constrain CSOs is often used to encourage their self-censorship and policy compliance rather than serve as an instrument for day by day control.
- There is a general government interest in the additional resources that CSOs can bring to the table, but within narrowing rules, limiting their autonomy as 'independent' development actors.



CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

What do differences in a country's civic space mean for the engagement of civil society organisations (CSOs) in implementing the sustainable development goals (SDGs)? Answering this question is important for CSO effectiveness. In bringing together members of CSOs, southern governments and official aid donors, the Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (Task Team) makes an important contribution to finding answers.

Over the course of some ten years, the Task Team, as a unique multi-stakeholder coalition, has produced [key messages](#) to advance inclusive development. One Task Team method has been to commission studies generating knowledge and insights feeding into information sharing and policy contributions to United Nations High Level Forums and similar consultations.

This document sets out the findings of a multi-country study undertaken in 2019/20. Its objective is to improve understanding of how different levels of openness of civic space practically enable or constrain CSO engagement in implementing the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs). Reflecting a conclusion of the 2018 IDS study (page 4), the focus is on SDG 17, which encourages the application of multi-stakeholder arrangements to reach Agenda 2030, as well as SDG 16 which looks at governance and civic space. In doing so, this initiative is similar to, but also differs from, a previous Task Team investment in [studies](#) undertaken in 2017/18. Then the objective was broader - to identify what makes multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) effective and why – as well as being more 'academic' in the sense of treating policy development as a secondary outcome. The present study is more narrowly focused on CSO involvement in SDG implementation, in addition targeted at generating specific policy outcomes.

A similarity between these two research initiatives was for the Task Team to establish a Reference Group (RG) composed of a representative from each stakeholder group. This group was tasked with facilitating communication with researchers to identify a leading question for study as well as providing periodic feedback to Task Team members and seeking their guidance. In this present case, [a literature review](#) (Melo 2018) identified insights from existing information as well as knowledge gaps worth filling. With this background, a survey of Task Team members in June 2018 pointed to the value of a study that paid direct attention to the degree to which the context for taking forward the SDGs was conducive for CSO engagement. In other words, the issue of deteriorating operational conditions for CSOs in many countries (elaborated in SDG 16) was agreed to be of particular policy relevance. By dedicating several sessions to reach a consensus, the study agenda was defined and owned by Task Team members. This process confirms the priority given by the Task Team to pursue these studies.

With the task clarified, the research co-leaders set up a design in terms of countries and stages which was shared with the Task Team. A difference from the previous study was a conscious decision to speed up the generation of potential policy messages by, inter alia, ensuring that this expertise was available from the outset. This capacity was to be provided by Jaqueline Wood, former Senior

Strategy and Policy Advisor at the Task Team Secretariat, and now by capabilities within the Task Team Secretariat. A further difference was a decision to identify in-country researchers actively involved with the CSO-related processes in country rather than university-based individuals. Reasons were: (i) to be less pre-occupied with producing academic outputs; and (ii) gaining easier access to the major stakeholder groups of CSOs, governments and donors. Another difference was the availability of a [Four-Part Framework](#) on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment created by the Task Team that could be used in research design.

The present report concentrates on distilling key findings of six country studies involving twenty-one practical cases. Results of analysis are offered as resource from which the Task Team's stakeholders can craft what they consider to be useful for their respective constituencies. The studies were executed by local researchers who came from CSO as well as from government backgrounds. Their commonality is personal expertise in SDG implementation, easing access to sources of information on a sensitive topic. Some had studied at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in the past, which also hosts the Task Team Secretariat. Other researchers often had academic degrees from other European universities. Two international workshops were convened at the ISS. One was used to discuss the study design (in July 2019). The other, in early 2020, to review preliminary findings just before the COVID-19 virus entirely paralyzed world travel. A field guide was developed by the co-leaders in order to orient the researchers in the identification of interviewees and interview protocols. It explicitly encouraged approaching persons from all three stakeholder groups.

In more constrained countries, researchers experienced restrictions and risks in finding and interviewing resource persons. By way of emphasis and clarification, this report is rooted in empirical data from twenty-one cases in six countries. However, for security reasons it was decided not to publish the separate country studies, nor to identify local researchers as well as their interviewees. As discussions related to CSO engagement often encountered potentially punitive reactions by authorities, this decision protects the safety of researchers as well as the identity of their sources. For solidarity and consistency this decision also applies to countries where restrictions encountered by CSOs had been less of an issue.

The following chapter reviews the concepts and theories of relevance for the study, particularly the notion of civic space. Evidence and information available from recent publications enables an update to the work produced by Melo (2018). It also introduces the Four-Part Framework produced by the Task Team, cited above and explains how it is applied in field data collection.

Chapter Three describes the methods employed, problems encountered and limitations in terms of the evidence collected. The body of the report is set out in Chapter Four: findings derived from data analysis accompanied by case illustrations. It provides a synthesis of information from country reports and case studies in terms of factors helping and hindering CSO engagement in the SDGs. One level of findings are general observations, the other level is disaggregated into each part of the Task Team Four-Part Framework.

Rather than recommendations for action, Chapter Five provides reflections for the Task Team to consider in enhancing its relevance. Chapter Six closes the report with stakeholder-oriented perspectives on answers to the research question.

CHAPTER 2. CONTEXT AND CONCEPTS

The study of CSO engagement is known for its difficulties in arriving at agreed definitions, often with an inconsistent use of concepts. This Chapter therefore clarifies how this study understands the SDG agenda and the notion of civic space.

SDGs and MDGs

The development and adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 SDGs in 2015 was a major step forwards compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The latter lacked the all-embracing aspects of global development, whereas the SDGs were now covering a wider set of objectives, including a sense of solidarity ('leaving no one behind') with equal responsibilities for realising this agenda in high-income (donor) countries. Of particular relevance for this study is the recognition that both MDGs and SDGs provide an overall architecture for dialogue, alignment of purpose and effort across multiple actors.

Relevance of CSOs for SDGs

The development of the new Agenda 2030 was strongly influenced by a range of civil society organizations, especially those operating at the global level, often together with UN agencies, but also those working at national levels in order to influence their governments in the pre-SDG negotiation process. The involvement of these international and national CSOs helped in crafting a rights-based agenda for development that often went far beyond the ambitions of the earlier MDGs. An example was the inclusion of sexual and reproductive health and rights as cross-cutting themes in many different SDGs.¹

Another example of this ambition was the inclusion of SDG 17, which by revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, paid extra attention to the quality of multi-stakeholder dialogues and processes. Multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) are central to the realization of every other SDG, and it is vital "to mobilize, bolster, and scale them up if transformative action and systematic change is to ensue."² It would give civil society organizations an institutionalized seat at a multi-sectoral table, which so far was occupied mainly by governments and donors, and (sometimes) by the private sector.

Through these processes, but also via its coalitions and networks, civil society organizations have played several roles in SDG implementation processes. First is, of course, to provide information about the purpose and diversity of the SDGs, which especially at local levels and remote areas is very much needed. A second way has, via advocacy efforts, been to support and/or encourage governments to be committed to their implementation plans. A third area where CSOs contributed directly to SDG implementation was by realizing their own service-

¹ See Dattler, Raffaella (2016) Not without us: Civil society's role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. *Entre Nous*, The European Magazine for Sexual and Reproductive Health, No. 84, pp. 18-21.

² Melo, Veriene (2018) Collaborative Efforts for Sustainable Development: Surveying the Literature on Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) to Realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Task Team CSO (May 2018), p. 3.

delivery projects in the many areas highlighted by the SDGs (ranging from environment, to health, to microfinance). A final area, but that also is cross-cutting with the previous roles, is that CSOs with their strong local roots contribute to bottom-up SDG monitoring as part of wider (often limited) national reporting processes.

However, for CSOs to contribute in these various ways to SDG implementation, they require to operate freely as societal actors, and here they encounter several limitations. Recent analysis of trends in governance systems across the world speaks of 'autocratization' processes, rather than 'democratization'.³ In at least fifty countries worldwide civil society groups encounter serious constraints in their engagement with governments, not least by governments restricting foreign funding to local CSOs.⁴ Other restrictions relate to the freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, as well as to access to justice. All signatories to the Agenda 2030 have committed themselves under SDG 16 to guarantee "effective, accountable and transparent institutions", as well as to "responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making."⁵ The expansion of an enabling environment for CSOs includes, amongst other priorities, the official advancement of policies and practices allowing these organizations to enjoy more open legal, regulatory, and political frameworks, which guarantee their freedom of expression, association, and assembly.⁶

Therefore, the role of CSOs will be enhanced if these liberties are guaranteed and institutionalized at national as well as local levels. After all, the sustainability of such an institutionalized environment for CSOs at the national level, with international backing, can facilitate the localization of development efforts. CSOs have the role of "identifying, bringing attention to, and demanding that governments deliver on the issues that are most pressing to their constituents at the local level."⁷ This favourable context is essential for SDG implementation at all levels. But, as will be analysed in the next section, the operating environment offers a diversity of contexts that are often less favourable. Hence the emergence of 'civic space' as a term pointing to the quality of operating in which CSOs are increasingly encountering limitations.

The civic space discussion

In recent years, several CSO networks started to use 'civic space' as a concept to focus on factors shaping civil society strength when exercising several key civic rights.⁸ Enshrined in the International Convention for Civic and Political Rights

³ V-Dem Institute. (2020). *Autocratization Surges - Resistance Grows: Democracy Report 2020*. Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.

⁴ Bhargava, V., Little, S., Ritchie, D., Clark, J., and Elmendorf, E. (2016). *Civil society & development: Global trends, implications and recommendations for stakeholders in the 2030 Agenda*. The Partnership for Transparency Fund (PTF).

⁵ Dattler (2016), op cit. p. 21.

⁶ Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment. (2017). TT Global Partnership Initiative 2 Country Level Engagement: Summary of Initial Findings and Discussion on Next Steps for Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Myanmar and Honduras.

⁷ Melo (2018) op. cit, p. 27.

⁸ This section is building on a draft conference paper: Biekart, K & Fowler, A. (2019) Questioning civic space: A civic-driven change perspective. Prepared for the 5th Nordic Development Research conference, Copenhagen - 27-28 June 2019.

(ICCPR), is citizen's right to participate in public affairs, the SDGs being but one example. Curtailing rights 'politicises' civic engagement. From a theoretical point of view, as often deployed, this terminology can be: (i) confusing and inconstant; with (ii) a tendency to de-politicise CSO engagement in SDGs as an option, not as a right.

Civic space is, for example, described by CIVICUS in the following way:

"Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organisations are able to organise, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions. These are the three key rights that civil society depends upon."⁹

With this definition, civic space can be loosely defined as: 'the public arena used by citizens and civil society organizations, and provided by the state, to exercise the fundamental rights of association, assembly, and expression'. Often the terms 'civic space' and 'civil society space' are used interchangeably.¹⁰ In practice, civic space is viewed as the public realm in which civil society organizations can express themselves, voicing their opinions and concerns.

However, it seems this space is the same as the one already defined as '*civil society*' itself. Take, for example, the comprehensive definition of civil society proposed several decades ago by Gordon White:

"Civil society is an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values".¹¹

This can (still) be seen as a clear and strong definition. Why? Because it highlights civil society as an intermediate realm (or call it a 'space') between public (the state) and private sphere (the family) in which civic rights are claimed and exercised by autonomous associations formed by citizens. It is often argued that civil society is the arena arising from and maintained by social struggle. But this 'energised' perception of constant agency by citizens may be conflicting with the more static idea of conditions that make a public space 'civic'. One can therefore argue that a new 'civic space' - an added realm that apparently would exist between civil society and the state - is in fact (unintentionally) depoliticising this implicit potential of civil society. Several proponents of civic space argue, however, that civic space is not necessarily depoliticising civil society as it is only pointing at the operational space provided by the state to allow civil society organizations to perform their civic rights.

⁹ See the CIVICUS Tracking Civic Space Monitor website:
<https://monitor.CIVICUS.org/whatis-civicspace/>

¹⁰ Hossain, N et al. (eds.) (2019) Development Needs Civil Society: The implications of civic space for the sustainable development goals. Synthesis Report for ACT Alliance. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, p. 13, note 1.

¹¹ White, G (1994) 'Civil society, democratization, and development (I): Clearing the analytical ground'. *Democratization*, 1 (3): 379.

There appears to be another important reason triggering the civic space discourse: the emergence of a digital civic sphere which is important for civic action, but hard to locate inside civil society. With the increased use of social media as a tool for protest and resistance, the internet has clearly become one of the main fora for civic action. Following White's definition, social media and other internet communications are not really defined as part of civil society: after all, it is about apps, tweets, and social communications rather than organizations. But digital communications and social media are certainly part of the so-called 'Habermasian' public sphere, which comes closer to what the proponents perceive of the key features of a civic space in which critical debate is allowed and encouraged. Obstructions to citizens using this digital public sphere are obviously determined by the state interventions as well as a product of business models and their approach to risk. Governments in many parts of the world abuse their power to restrict online access to and online freedoms of expression for critical voices and opposition forces.¹²

A further attractive element of the term 'civic space' is that it is a common tool for mobilizing citizen activism. The term was popularized by (moderate) activist organizations such as International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), CIVICUS, Carnegie Foundation and others.¹³ However, in its practical use, there is a tendency to argue that 'civic space is shrinking' always and for all dimensions of people's associational life. Seldom do activists and/or human rights defenders point at where there is a selective 'widening' of civic space in the sense of greater propensity for and public accommodation of 'uncivil' expressions and opinions within the plurality of civil society. This bias is likely because it means overtly acknowledging the right of citizen expression which, for example, is conservatively populist, intolerant of others and therefore is not shared by 'our' civil society¹⁴. One result are complex relational dynamics within civil society itself.

Researching civic spaces for CSO engagement in SDGs

The previous discussion informs thinking, design, implementation and interpretations of research, detailed in Chapter 3. Differences in a country's civic space – from the *CIVICUS Monitor* - is the independent variable with CSO engagement in SDGs as the dependent variable. They are connected by helping and hindering factors experienced by the three primary stakeholders: which is the research focus of this study.

An ambiguity about the concept and nature of civic space noted above, means recognising tensions between the fundamental rights of citizens and the sovereign rights of states. These two types of rights may be reconcilable on paper but, as degrees of 'closure' shows, are not necessarily so in practice. CSO engagement in SDGs plays out in this dynamic force field, where SDG 16 (governance) and SDG 17 (multi-stakeholder collaboration) are most closely related to the research task. Recent studies show lack of progress in realising SDG

¹² Hellema, M. (2017) 'Taking the Battle for Civic Space Online', Open Democracy, 22 March, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openglobalrights-openpage/taking-battle-for-civic-space-online/>.

¹³ Hossain (2018) p. 17.

¹⁴ See Monga, C. (2009). *Uncivil Societies: A Theory of socio-political change*. Policy Research Working Paper, No. 4942, World Bank, Washington, D.C.

16 which can hamper progress in implementing SDG 17. This picture is irrespective of geography or level of incomes or of political system, showing varying effects across different SDGs.¹⁵

From the perspective of this research, relational tensions associated with the factors co-determining civic space must be taken into account in at least three ways. First, while the terrain of enquiry is political, sensitivity to researchers' risk requires approaching field work as a technical, apolitical exercise. Put another way, the study did not directly address the relationship between civic space and the type of regime governing a country. Second, the heterogeneity of civil society means that applying a uniform normative Task Team Four-Part Framework can exclude organisations that do not share or abide by its inherent norms and values. But this does not, *a priori*, make them illegitimate as actors in society. In other words, in terms of civil society, the research universe will be partial and, hence, biased. A third issue is ensuring a policy-oriented emphasis while maintaining academic standards. The following Chapter explains how this was realised.

¹⁵ Bhargava, V, Elmendorf, AE, Gray, S, Kafka, B, Ritchie, D, and Little, S. (2019) Expanding Civil Society Contributions to the Governance Agendas of the Sustainable Development Goals and International Financial Institutions. Partnership for Transparency (June 2019) <https://www.sdg16hub.org/system/files/2019-08/Expanding-Civil-Society-Contributions-to-Good-Governance.pdf> Jennett, V. (2019) Enabling the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through SDG 16+: Anchoring peace, justice and inclusion. Global Alliance for Reporting on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies. https://www.jips.org/uploads/2019/10/Global-Alliance_SDG16-GlobalReport-Oct2019.pdf

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The research focus and the methodology were developed over an extended period of almost 18 months. In particular, the definition of the central research question needed time as it was raised in three consecutive Task Team meetings before a final consensus was reached. This outcome was facilitated by the eventual focus on SDG implementation, in which all stakeholders are actively involved. This Chapter explains the focus selected, identification of the countries and cases to be studied as well as the data collection instruments relied on.

Research Objectives & Questions

The study was designed to achieve two main objectives:

- ➔ Providing sound empirical information on the relationship between an enabling environment and civil society engagement in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- ➔ Connecting the study outputs to inform policy outputs for the Task Team from 2020 onwards.

This concentration was based on the results of an inclusive survey by Task Team participants, which was discussed at the November 2018 Task Team Meeting in The Hague. On that basis it was decided that the studies should answer the following overarching research question: ***“What factors in a country’s environment help or hinder effective CSO participation in SDG-related processes and how is this practically felt/experienced?”***

The research question was founded on the belief that effective engagement of CSOs in development to achieve the SDGs is a shared responsibility: partner country governments, donors, as well as CSOs all have a role to play to help maximize CSOs’ contributions. The scale and ambition of Agenda 2030’s SDGs requires participation of all development actors, including CSOs, to ensure its implementation. Of particular interest, therefore, is the implementation of SDG 17 (‘Partnerships for the goals’).

Approach and methods

After the agreement on the key focus of the study, the two lead researchers elaborated a Terms of Reference for the study, in which roughly four research phases were identified, each with its own scope and deliverables:

- ➔ Phase I - January-March 2019: Preparations, identification and contracting of local researchers.
- ➔ Phase II - May-August 2019: Scoping and preliminary enquiry exercises, context studies, and methodology workshop to decide on case studies.
- ➔ Phase III – September 2019 – February 2020: Country field work and country reporting.
- ➔ Phase IV– March-May 2020: Synthesis, results workshop, preparation of report and providing inputs for policy discussions of primary stakeholder groups.

The actual research took place in phases II and III. In Phase II a scoping study was realized as a way of identifying potential research sites and cases against a set of agreed criteria derived from the research question(s) and context(s). As well as mapping the CSO-SDG participation landscape in each selected country, this exercise was meant to include a preliminary enquiry about critical factors helping and hindering CSO participation in SDGs. To ensure relevance and build on the Task Team's work, extended scoping was aligned with its Four-Part Framework. The categories to inform this exercise and specific points for data collection are:

- ➔ Multi-stakeholder Dialogue
- ➔ CSO Development Effectiveness, Transparency and Accountability
- ➔ Official Development Cooperation with CSOs
- ➔ Legal and Regulatory Environment

The study is not a comparison of existing models for 'calibrating' civic space. However, as a practical orientation, scoping took note of measures and indicators used by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) Project, those relied on for the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation's (GPEDC) [monitoring](#) and so on. Bearing in mind the components in each of the Task Team's Four-Part Framework, field researchers were expected to combine identification of cases with enquiry about helping and hindering factors as experienced by the stakeholders involved. A field guide was developed in order to orient the researchers in the identification of interviewees and interview protocols. Approaching resource persons from all three stakeholder groups was explicitly encouraged.

It was not the intention to pre-select the SDGs that would be the focus of Phases II and III for in-depth study. The target was to collect preliminary information about environment and effectiveness factors for CSO participation in SDG processes – with illustrative examples - to be analysed and taken forward in the next phase. Data collection was focused on country-specific statistics as well as the use of semi-structured interviews with key local resource persons. The results were discussed in a collective workshop held in July/August 2019 with four main objectives: (i) to reach a common understanding of tasks, terminology and definitions (ii); to establish a common approach to methods and protocols as well as on the choice of cases; (iii) to reach an agreement on reporting and communications; (iv) to collectively review scoping data to identify potential (policy) inputs for the Task Team.

Country-specific fieldwork was realized in Phase III between September 2019 and January 2020. Draft reports were reviewed and revised based on the feedback from the lead researchers, followed by the initiation of the format and content of a synthesis report. This work included (comparative) analysis looking for: (i) commonalities and differences of wider significance; (ii) pair contrasts of countries; (iii) patterns in responses, etc. Proposals for policy related materials also were reviewed. The final workshop in February 2020 discussed country reports as input for the draft synthesis report. This empirical material was critically reviewed and used as input for a preliminary discussion on policy materials.

Selection of countries

The Task Team provided the following considerations when identifying and selecting potential countries for study:

- ➔ To include a range of different civic spaces (based on the *CIVICUS Monitor*).
- ➔ The 'quality' of CSOs – legitimacy / representativeness / capacity, for which there is no generally accepted measure or information source. Consequently, the USAID Sustainability Index was used as one recent point of reference (for Africa and Asia).
- ➔ The degree of institutionalization of SDGs (e.g., UN SDG Index and Dashboard Report 2018).
- ➔ SDG implementation status, particularly SDG 1 (poverty reduction), SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (partnerships).
- ➔ To include different geographic regions.

In addition, these criteria were used to select countries:

- ➔ To avoid any potential conflicts of interest, it was decided not to include any of the Task Team partner countries.
- ➔ Practicality of establishing a research initiative: availability of suitable individuals, their risk in closed environments.
- ➔ Time and budget constraints.

Including all possible combinations of criteria was not practical. Therefore, the approach was to establish a preferred list by scanning sources to identify interesting combinations of selection criteria. A starting point was geography across a range of different civic spaces in categories (from green to red) used by the *CIVICUS Monitor*. Thereafter, SDG Index and Dashboard Report 2018 was used to gather information about their position with respect to SDGs – Ranking, status of institutions (SDG 16) as partnerships (SDG 17) as well as trends in SDG 1 (poverty). The percentage of population living on less than US\$1.9 PPP - which varies significantly between continents and less so within them - suggests what CSO engagement is likely to be dealing with. In order to increase the potential applicability of results to other settings, after consulting the Reference Group of the Task Team, a maximum of six countries (aimed at including a diversity of contextual and CSO conditions) were eventually selected.

Table 1. Country selection

Region	Country	Civic Space ¹⁶	CSO 'Quality'	SDG ¹⁷ Rank
Africa	Ghana	Narrowed	Evolving	101
	Tanzania	Repressed	Evolving	123
South & East Asia	Nepal	Obstructed	Evolving	102
	Lao PDR	Closed	Nascent	108
Latin America	Costa Rica	Open	Developed	33
Central Europe	Hungary	Obstructed	Evolving	26

¹⁶ Civicus Monitor <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/innovate/civicus-monitor>

¹⁷ SDG Index and Dashboards Report, 2018, Part 2, United Nations, New York, July 2018.

Identification of local researchers

From the beginning we wanted to involve experienced local researchers with practical knowledge of SDG implementation, and preferably also a wide knowledge of the various stakeholder groups. An academic background (at least an MA degree) was required, as well as proficiency in English, and demonstrated involvement in research with civil society groups, as well as governments and international donors. A search was done via channels and alumni of the International Institute of Social Studies as well as local country networks, eventually leading to a shortlist of two researchers per country. Together with the Task Team this list was reduced to the six researchers who we involved in the study. As noted in Chapter 2, for reasons of confidentiality as well as security, it was decided not to publish the names of these researchers, in order to prevent them from getting into a harmful situation.

Deliverables

Four deliverables were agreed to be produced after each phase:

- ➔ Phase I: Terms of Reference, a Field Work Guide and a Work Plan;
- ➔ Phase II: Six country reports containing: (i) The context for CSO engagement with the SDGs, (ii) Indicative (dis)enabling factors for CSO engagement; (iii) Strategy and potential cases for phase III.
- ➔ Phase III: Six country reports with detailed case study reports and suggestions for policy recommendations, including helping & hindering factors in relation to the 4-part framework.
- ➔ Phase IV: Synthesis Report of around 25 pages, written for a non-academic audience as a resource for Task Team reflections on enhancing relevance.

The work was undertaken more or less on schedule. There were multiple reviews of draft country reports which had an adequate consistency in terms of content. It was also agreed that only the final report of the last phase would be published. As findings, the following Chapter provides a synthesis of the information gathered in terms of factors helping and hindering CSO engagement in SDGs.

Chapter 4. helping and hindering factors in CSO SDG engagement

This Chapter contains a synthesis of information gathered from studies of twenty-one cases in six countries. Its focus is on: (i) CSO engagement only with respect to sustainable development goals; (ii) where data gathering and analysis use the Task Team's Four-Part Framework. Many of the helping and hindering factors identified are common to the aid system – examples are calls for more donor reliability in CSO funding; increasing CSO legitimacy through greater accountability to their constituencies; and government recognition of CSOs' value and autonomy. The synthesis applied here relates solely to stakeholders' SDG experience as the lens to observe the effects of civic space described in Chapter 2. An overall objective is to provide evidence which can enhance the Task Team's relevance in a rapidly changing world.

Drawing on the perspectives set out in Chapter 2 above, we begin with general observations about different contexts or 'spaces' for CSO engagement as experienced and felt by those interviewed. This is followed by sub-sections devoted to each part of the Task Team Four-Part framework, generally divided into helping and hindering factors.

General observations

The universalism of the SDGs

Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with its focus on aid-recipient countries, the SDGs are intended to have universal application. In other words, they are not aid-based, and therefore apply to all countries signing up at the UN conference where they were approved. Task Team membership and the Four-Part Framework did not have this principle and implications in mind. The study in Hungary offers pointers for looking at this dimension of relevance.

The SDGs in daily life of citizens

The situation of a (richer) country can render the SDGs to be of marginal relevance for the population at large.

“For the average person, the sustainable development goals do not exist (...) For those that know about the agenda, it is highly likely that it is seen as something distant, something they do not relate with. Most of average people are worried about their immediate circumstances, having a decent income, a decent job, and security. Under the current economic situation of the country, political priorities are also focused on economic recovery and creating jobs” (Interview in Costa Rica).

“The public has little knowledge about the Sustainable Development Goals. This is despite the fact that the Hungarian Ambassador to the UN was the Co-Chair of the Open Working Group that drew up the SDG goal and target set. This fact was not used to leverage attention and interest in the Agenda 2030” (Hungary Country Report).

An implication is that variations in the 'weight' a country applies to UN commitments within its overall priorities need to be taken into account when considering, for example, investment in CSO capacity for SDG engagement.

The SDGs and CSO priorities

It is not safe to assume that countries that signed up to the SDGs will necessarily treat them from a perspective of prioritizing CSO engagement. For example, after an earthquake Nepal prioritized infrastructure goals and investment where CSOs are not irrelevant but peripheral. In Lao PDR trade and economic development goals have the upper hand. Assessing CSOs' contribution to achieving the SDGs merits taking the factor of a country's SDG prioritization and sequencing into account.

Box 1. Prioritizing the SDGs

While discussing implementation of SDGs, it is important to take note of the year 2015 in the history of Nepal. It is the period when Nepal launched its new federal constitution and faced a mega 7.8 earthquake.

Marrying the people-centred SDGs and governmental processes

The SDGs have an important ambition: *to leave no one behind*. This people-centred principle must, however, be married to the SDGs as a top-down state-centred development model with associated performance measures. Consequently, how a government interprets and 'domesticates' its responsibilities as the SDG duty-bearer towards citizens is a pre-condition for understanding both CSO space as well as potential for and processes of involvement.

Box 2. Institutionalising the SDGs.

Lao PDR embeds the SDGs in its National Social and Economic Development Plan, while Tanzania Integrates the SDGs into its 5-year plan. Nepal establishes SDG Focal Points in the central administration as well as integration with national budgets.

All countries studied have institutionalised systems for SDG implementation. Most are a responsibility of overarching ministries, such as finance and planning. However, in and of itself, institutionalisation is not a reliable indicator of positive conditions for CSO engagement, where mistrust between the government of the day and CSOs (Nepal, Tanzania, Lao PDR) is a critical, space-limiting factor.

The Four-Part Framework: connections and decision-rights

The Task Team Four-Part framework stems from experiences of and interactions between three major stakeholder groups: a segment of civil society; bilateral donors; and recipient partner governments. From an SDG perspective the behaviour of government is particularly significant. It is ultimately responsible for a country's SDG performance, including enabling CSO contributions. Through legislation, regulation, budget and policy a government sets the relational rules between all stakeholders as well as determining if and how CSOs are formed, how donors may or may not interface with them and the rules of the game for multi-stakeholder dialogues.

While CSOs may not have legal SDG-related decision-rights, their well-designed participation in SDG initiatives – experienced in Costa Rica and Ghana - can tilt this situation into CSOs' favour. Nevertheless, be civic space open or constrained, government pre-dispositions and discretion significantly determine if, how and when CSO inputs gain SDG traction.

Consequently, from the perspective of CSO engagement with SDG implementation, the parts and elements of the Task Team's Four-Part Framework are best treated as an inter-connected whole. Put another way, while there may

be higher degrees of relevance between them, no one stakeholder 'owns' a particular part of the framework. The issue of 'space' – in terms of the 'rules of the game' determining what any SDG stakeholder can and cannot do - permeates them all.

The primacy of information

Across the four parts, the timely availability of reliable information is a common pre-condition for meaningful CSO engagement in the SDGs. This condition appears to be a significant factor in controlling and constraining civic space in overt (Tanzania) and more covert ways (Nepal).

Ghana and Costa Rica show that the freedom and pluralism of media can be both a critical helping and hindering factor. (See below)

Double edged swords

Across the Four-Part Framework it is not unusual to find that a hindering factor for one stakeholder can be a helping factor for another. Laws limiting the use of SDG-related statistics to those only generated by the government hinder CSOs playing a watchdog role or validating data in, for example, Voluntary National Reports (VNRs). At the same time such laws help a government to control data on its performance in SDG implementation.

As observed in Hungary and Tanzania, the helping factor of foreign donor financing of CSOs engaging in SDG processes (Task Team Framework Part 3) can be a hindering factor in their claim for legitimacy (Task Team Framework Parts 1, 3 and 4). Typically, leaders justifying constraint judgmentally equate CSO reliance on foreign finance as a sign of inadequate local embeddedness as well as serving foreign agendas.

Part 1. Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues (MSDs)

None of the countries studied have ignored their commitment to the SDGs. A common helping factor is that, in ways suited to their pre-existing conditions, governments interweave the SDGs with administrative structures as well as policy, planning and budgeting systems. In parallel, CSOs often establish SDG-platforms to share information and coordinate action found in Ghana and Costa Rica or, as in Hungary, adapt available arrangements such as the National Council for Sustainable Development. Networks of international and national CSO are the primary format for their interacting with the Lao government. Sector-oriented networks and working groups appear to be an effective vehicle for CSO-SDG engagement.

“You can't build a partnership if you don't establish rules of engagement first. (...) In the development process, many actors have to agree in what is it that we want to achieve and who is going to be involved, and how (...) We needed to construct a shared vision around the SDGs, this is not an easy process, especially if you understand how ambitious the agenda is. (...) We needed business, local governments, civil society, we needed communities on board” (UN respondent, Costa Rica Country Report).

Box 3. The role of legislation in constraining information

Recent laws such as the Media Law, Cyber Crime Act and the Statistics Act restrict the vibrancy of CSOs in holding the government accountable. In particular, the Statistics Act prohibits production and dissemination of data by CSOs unless such endeavour endorsed by government. (Tanzania Country Report)

Reduction in civic space tends to weaken commitment to SDG 17.17's call for multi-stakeholder partnerships. Two particular hindering factors stand out.

Selective inclusion

This is the likelihood of government selecting / approving / inhibiting (certain) CSOs to be part of SDG MSDs. Selectivity grows as civic space shrinks, diminishing inclusiveness. The CSO self-determined MSD participation experienced in Costa Rica and Ghana, is not matched in Nepal or Lao PDR. Conversely, in Hungary and Tanzania, rather than control CSO participation, government is prone to ignore or marginalise CSO inputs in SDG MSD processes.

A complimentary factor in selective inclusion is that CSOs may not be interested in what the SDGs have to offer them. Big charities in Hungary have space to provide services envisaged by SDGs, but they do not see an added value of SDGs as such to frame or understand what they have been doing for society over many decades. Consequently, they abstain from engagement in SDG forums and planning.

“Development on many goals would be unthinkable without charities. However, only few charities are seen at multi-stakeholder discussions on the SDGs and there is no visibility to the goals in their work. Therefore, the larger charities offer a curious case: a sphere of non-governmental organizations whose work is vital both for the country and the goals, yet these organizations show little interest in the framework itself” (Hungary, Country Report).

A finding is that the heterogeneity of CSOs needs to be factored into expectations about participation in multi-stakeholder dialogues where two circumstances stand out. One is where CSOs are already substantial providers of social services, often, as in much of Europe and middle-income countries, relying on state subsidy as well as voluntary contributions. The other is where societal polarisation in open space settings can make CSO diversity a hindering rather than a helping factor across SDGs.

“Truly speaking, the legal regime in Ghana is very friendly to freedom of expression and association but as you know the politics in this country is highly polarized. Because we mostly operate on the Platform and comments can easily be screenshot, some of the members are sometimes afraid to give harsh criticisms to government for the fear of the message been screenshot to government” (Ghana Country Report, Interviewee, August, 2019, Accra).

The Ghana situation suggests that civic space selectively opens and closes for CSOs as democratic processes replace one political regime with another. Again, Hungary is an example related to polarisation within civil society with respect to their alignment or otherwise with the government's agenda, while Nepal shows CSO polarisation in responding to the implementation of a federal system of governance.

Urban bias

A further constraining factor is that information about and understanding of the SDGs tends to be located in capital and provincial cities. The acuteness of this problem is associated with decentralisation of public administration and the costs of getting knowledge out to and through multiple layers of local government, where leaders can also set their own SDG priorities.

“Kathmandu centric CSOs might have knowledge on government plans and policies on SDGs but outside Kathmandu, CSOs have no or limited information on SDGs...” (Nepal Country Report, SDG discussion in Pokhara Kaski, Nepal).

An outcome is that SDG planning and implementation can remain in an enclave of aided organisations. This six-country study sees not only an urban bias in CSOs pursuing the SDGs, but also an intellectual class bias that is globally connected. This tendency is reinforced by external funders’ presence in capital cities, further compounded by little in the way of domestic resources available to be directed at SDG goals. In other words, there is often a problem of diffusing SDG knowledge not just at different levels of public administration but across CSOs as well.

This finding raises the question of the extent to which the current Task Team Four-Part Framework exhibits capital-centric and urban bias in its elements and illustrative examples.

Part 2. CSO Development Effectiveness, Transparency and Accountability

The SDGs provide a structured opportunity for CSOs to deploy their commitment to people, draw on voluntarism and find common ground for cooperation. The combination of enabling conditions and the internal capacities and dynamics of CSO communities seem to co-determine what they can achieve in contributing to SDG goals. Self-managed mechanisms for SDG engagement by CSOs are to be found in all countries studied, either incorporated in pre-existing set ups, (Nepal, Hungary) or created specifically for this purpose (Costa Rica, Ghana, Tanzania, Lao PDR). However, their efficacy varies depending on conditions external and internal to them, where international standards are seldom brought into play.

Box 5. Hungary CSO effectiveness.

Those CSOs that have found the right constituency (or at least support base), who are able to provide services and show direct benefits of their work, can more easily weather out storms than those who are stuck in the “hamster wheel” of grant applications or focus too heavily on policy advocacy. However, such service provisions are often the most difficult to sustain especially in case of changes in the fundraising landscape. (Hungary Country Report)

As seen in many countries studied, uneven and inconsistent (financing of) CSO participation in SDG platforms and similar arrangements works against achieving mutual accountability for outcomes and delivering on commitments.

Box 4. CSO influencing

In Costa Rica, CSOs were critical in establishing FONASEBAR, a fund to support sustainable marine conservation; while in Ghana CSOs were actively involved with community mobilization for rolling out a telemedicine innovation.

Operating condition constraints

Where operating conditions enable, the diversity of CSO skills, interests and concerns are assets being realised in practice. Such conditions in more open space countries demonstrate the significant contributions CSOs can make. Ghana finds active CSO presence in national SDG platforms, collaborating with business in the introduction of telemedicine as well as collaboration to introduce information and communication technologies in schools. This being said, the multi-party democracy these countries enjoy can create associations between certain CSOs and political parties. This perceived affinity can prejudice public interpretations of CSO advocacy about government SDG policy and performance, with mixed impacts on effectiveness.

The picture changes as the environment for CSO work becomes more constrained. In the open cases above, the legitimacy of CSOs and rights to exist are part and parcel of the socio-political fabric. The situation in other countries do not necessarily correspond in this way. Hungary, has a negative portrayal of CSOs that do not align themselves with the elected government, prejudicing public appreciation of their efforts.

"In Hungary, a political-philosophical attitude is becoming widespread in the public discourse, especially around the government: a concept of democracy that treats legitimacy, mandate as a question of cardinality, i.e. sheer numbers: the greater the number the greater the legitimacy" (Hungary, Phase II report).

In Nepal, a new Constitution has brought many former CSO leaders into government at multiple levels. They are personally aware of the oppositional role that CSOs can play, with some acting to constrain their effectiveness. Conversely, leaderships' historical connections with today's CSOs can offer trusted connections and pathways for influence, enhancing effectiveness when SDG initiatives are put forward.

Internal self-constraints

The CSO community within a country can be the source of its own constraints with SDG engagement. One hindering factor is the policy positions adopted by and capacity differences between international and local CSOs. Lao PDR offered a positive example of how governments can stimulate partnerships between them, requiring the former to build the capacity of local counterparts when undertaking SDG related initiatives. As noted previously, this country also illustrates the ways in which international non-governmental organization (INGO) behaviours and utterances can have negative effects on space for all CSOs.

Box 6. Government - CSO Relations in Lao PDR

Tense, mistrusted relationships between CSOs and the government of Lao PDR are partly attributed to comments made in 2012 by an ICSO leader critical about the country's political system. The individual concerned was required to leave the country. Subsequent legislation was designed to ensure peace and stability by enforcing CSO compliance with state policy and priorities (Lao PDR Country Report)

Box 7. Donors' non-financial roles

The modality that the EU applies, a joint project between the Lao CSO and INGO supported by the EU, has made an impact in the community, particularly in changing attitudes and behaviours in the community toward gender-based violence and women's rights. This joint project also increases the Lao CSO's staffs' technical capacity on gender-based violence, financial management, human resource management, and organizational management. (Lao PDR Country Report)

Additionally, it cannot be assumed that CSOs are in one mind when it comes to any particular SDG. CSO interpretations on the 'what-and-how' of SDGs may (not) align with each other or with the government of the day. Debates at SDG-related CSO forums observed in Costa Rica, Hungary and Tanzania show that, across different SDGs, reaching a common (policy) ground towards a government position can be problematic. In more autocratic settings, the potential gain of bringing in multiple CSO perspectives for expanding dialogue and improving effectiveness can be undermined by stimulating a division between regime-aligned (SDG invited) and (non-invited) non-aligned CSOs. In the case of Lao PDR, the former may often be led by ex-civil servants, with associated leadership styles.

An observation from Tanzania is that platforms and networks set up by CSOs to collectively engage in SDG processes can eventually lack steam. This is partly due to differences in abilities to participate, but also because resource uncertainty and limitations work against necessary continuity (see Task Team Framework, Part 3). CSO engagement is episodic, decreasing effectiveness.

Ghana shows that a vibrant media can keep both government and CSOs on their toes. Exposures of inefficient and corrupt practices by either are readily exposed to the light of day. Hence, public accountability benefits.

Part 3. Official Development Cooperation with CSOs

If one does not have official development aid in the picture at all (Hungary does not receive ODA but EU grants), or only minimally as in Ghana and Costa Rica, the SDG experience changes in many respects discussed below, but one remains consistent. This is the importance of facilitation that aid-related agencies, particularly UN agencies and multilateral donors, such as the European Union (EU) can provide.¹⁸

This function is observed in how the EU helps in the interface between International and local CSOs and the government of Lao PDR in promoting women's rights noted above; in marine sector dialogues in Costa Rica; and mediating CSO policy and legislative challenges in Tanzania. Donors' non-monetary helping factor should not be underestimated for its value, particularly with respect to the promoting of SDG 17.17 in principle and CSO (sector) engagement in practice. But nor should donors' limitations due to the 'sovereignty constraint' in international relations be underestimated. In addition, the downside effects on CSO identity and autonomy associated with dependence on donors should not be overlooked.

¹⁸ UN and multi-lateral agencies do not feature in current Task Team membership, inviting a query about this factor in the composition of Part 3 of Task Team framework.

External funding and accountability

Depending on the setting, when it comes to financing CSO-SDG efforts, helping and hindering factors can both be in play. With respect to accountability, CSO compliance with the reporting requirements of individual donors can work against efforts to establish common standards. Competitive bidding for SDG-related aid contracts also hinders collaboration within the CSO community. External funding can lead to political ‘tagging’ by the regime in power, experienced in Ghana. As noted in Part 1., macro-economic conditionalities imposed by multilateral banks can distract people’s attention to or interest in SDGs (Ghana, Costa Rica) and Hungary (EU transfers).

Box 8. The SDGs and CSO implementation

Costa Rica’s marine assets (SDG 14) are more likely to be sustainable due to CSO engagement; public involvement with SDG processes is reaching the community level due to CSO outreach; and joint policy positions towards SDG implementation are being hammered out by CSOs within a national pact. (Costa Rica Country Report)

There is little evidence that the SDGs have led to any significant increase in collaboration between funders, for example in terms of establishing a common SDG funding ‘basket’ (Costa Rica, Ghana, Tanzania). Nor have SDGs stimulated the creation of effective national fora for donors’ dialogue with CSOs. CSO experience suggests that the SDGs have been located within each donor’s pre-existing allocation mechanisms, such as providing a matching grant. This approach does not ease SDG proposal submission or reporting burdens, particularly for smaller and local CSOs, while benefitting bigger international counterparts. Donors’ calls for proposals can make local CSOs invisible (Tanzania). For some governments (Hungary, Tanzania) receiving foreign aid is a hindering factor for CSO legitimacy. In the case of Hungary, CSOs receiving external finance can face accusations of serving foreign interests, in Tanzania they are tainted with ‘serving foreign masters.’ Conversely, foreign aid can add to the legitimacy of CSOs as an SDG actor if they ‘bring money’ (Nepal).

Mobilization of domestic resources

An as yet emergent, but growing factor as countries transfer to lower middle-income status and aid declines, is CSO mobilization of domestic resources, including Diaspora flows (Ghana, Costa Rica). Amongst other trends, the establishment of SDG Philanthropy Platforms (in other countries) signals the pluralism of financing sources now becoming unevenly available for CSO SDG efforts.

This is crucial because for a “middle-income country like Ghana, the role of philanthropy is likely to become crucial in promoting inclusiveness and the implementation of a transformative agenda aimed at achieving the SDGs” (Kumi, 2019).¹⁹ “While this is laudable, a potential challenge in the promotion of philanthropic and private sector funding of CSOs would be the suspicion of political actors and government on whether or not the funding is not coming from individuals and firms that are just interested in financing some CSOs to pursue an agenda against the regime” (Ghana Country Report).

¹⁹ Kumi., E. (2019) "Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals: An Analysis of the Potential Role of Philanthropy in Ghana", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, p. 1-21.

Hungary shows that business associations can provide a valuable function in educating their members about SDGs as well as facilitating involvement beyond allocating corporate social investment funds.

There are significant differences in aid-flows and levels of GDP and per capita dependency between the countries studied. Nevertheless, in general terms, with respect to other sources, the relative contribution of official aid to CSOs for SDG engagement is diminishing. We return to this point in Chapter 5.

Box 9. Business Council for Sustainable Development Hungary (BCSDH)

The BCSDH is a business association founded in 2007, with 90 corporate members that represent 30% of the Hungary's GDP. With an analysis of their role, room for action and experiences, the BCSDH offers a case of business cooperation for the SDGs, how it takes on board companies that do not necessarily pursue environment- or social issue-oriented business missions but who nevertheless seek a forum for exchange of information, joint projects and legal/regulatory progress towards sustainability. (Hungary Country Report)

Part 4. Legal and Regulatory Framework

To varying degrees, but consistently, there are helping legal frameworks that give legal recognition to the associational life of citizens, normally with provisions against anti-social purposes that are contextually defined. In other words, as a prescribed fundamental right, associational life can be constrained for the public good. Commonly at issue is the extent to which such constraint arises from a popular mandated process. Also differently defined are entities recognised as constituent elements of civil society as well as the roles they are expected/required to play in society. Laws in more constrained spaces, such as Lao PDR are likely to prescribe CSOs work to that of solely supporting the government's policies and priorities.

Laws and regulations in the countries studied do not inhibit government ministries, departments and agencies from collaborating with CSOs. The extent to which this occurs is more determined by the attitudes of government staff and application of policies than by legislation as such.

Normative frameworks

It is beyond the scope of this study to make detailed legal and regulatory comparisons. Suffice it to say that, because civil society is a political concept, it is prudent to assume that each country's history creates a normative framework – encoded in laws – which sets out relationships between citizens and states. In practice such framework may deviate from that set out in the ICCPR to which states are signatories. In this sense, the SDGs offer a litmus test for how laws and regulations connecting those governed and those who govern translate into practice.

Internationally agreed rights notwithstanding, a government's tolerance for pluralism in responsibility for financing and implementing SDGs across and between state and non-state actors is embedded in multiple statutes. As the Task Team's [Guidance and Good Practice on CSO Development Effectiveness & Enabling Environment](#) indicates (p. 53), non-CSO specific laws can have far reaching effects on their functioning. Again, examining SDG processes offers a practical way of identifying 'spill over' effects of legislation.

Stigmatizing or criminalizing CSOs

From an SDG-CSO engagement perspective, the helping or hindering nature of laws and regulations – which effect all parts of the Task Team Framework – stem from their real-life application by governments. As can be expected, the SDG picture covers a ‘constraint’ spectrum. Legal provisions do not automatically entitle CSOs to undertake any SDG-related activity of their choosing in their own way. Lao PDR goes furthest in this regard by criminalising any CSO activity that is considered inconsistent with the National Social and Economic Development Plan which embeds the SDGs. At the other extreme, Costa Rica and Ghana have little restraint on which SDGs CSOs can engage with and contribute to. In between, constraints stemming from legal provisions vary. In Nepal, confusion about registration nationally and/or locally as well hampers CSO formation, with ‘who you know’ as a way of navigating processes. The Hungarian government stigmatizes CSOs receiving external aid as well as introduces new taxes for activities they do not appreciate, such as support to migrants. Tanzania’s legal set up for CSOs is being tightened.

Box 10. CSO space in Tanzania

The Miscellaneous Amendments Act of 2012 introduced a narrowed definition of NGOs by excluding all entities not registered under the NGOs Act. For example, the Act gives the Registrar the power to suspend the operation of an NGO pending the decision of an allegation that they have violated the provisions of the Act. (Tanzania Country Report)

Both laws and policies shape the extent to which and how donors can interact with and finance CSOs for SDG engagement. Bilateral agreements negotiated between donors and governments are typically where these factors play out, seldom with CSO involvement. As long as the issues involved are not politically sensitive, Tanzania encourages CSO-SDG initiatives that rely on donor financing. Costa Rica and Ghana have openness towards CSO financing from whatever (legitimate) source is available, with aid playing a minor role. Nepal’s federal intention to ‘empower the local’ is currently marred by contestation over CSO categorization, where malpractices by some are not helping to create a less restrictive approach. Nor is a perception of competition for aid between the Nepali government and CSOs helping to resolve the situation.

CHAPTER 5. MAIN LESSONS LEARNED

The series of studies and this synthesis report are designed to shine an SDG-specific light on a wider tapestry of developmental relations between the Task Team's primary stakeholder groups (CSOs, donors, partner country governments) in realizing their shared agenda of:

“... promoting the effective engagement of CSOs development processes focusing on creation of an enabling environment for CSOs and the effectiveness, accountability and transparency of CSOs (CSO development effectiveness)” (Four-Part Framework in the Task Team's Guidance and Good Practice, p. 2).

This Chapter does not offer recommendations about applying findings. Rather, it provides a set of lessons and comments based on the studies that can serve as a resource which the Task Team can use to reflect on adding to its demonstrated value in a fast-changing world order. Essentially, it can help add to, contextualise and prioritize elements within each Part of the Task Team Framework, as well as making connections between them.

Overarching lessons

A lesson is that a multitude of instruments exist to assess the status of and progress towards countries achieving an enabling environment for CSOs, an important condition for their development effectiveness. Those instruments are not always complementary, let alone compatible. Examples of instruments are the *CIVICUS Monitor* and the *Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC) monitoring of Indicator 2²⁰*. While their respective methods vary, each rely on constructing a scalar normative assessment framework to allow for country comparisons and tracking change over time.

The *CIVICUS Monitor* tracks civic space in relation to three fundamental freedoms. It offers an implicit link to the CSO engagement with the SDGs, which is conditioned, inter alia, by the degree to which fundamental rights are respected. The GPEDC creates scores from questions about the 'quality' of SDG-related processes: Indicator Two. The Task Team's Four-Part Framework elements are generic, not scalar and are not ranked or prioritised. Consequently, elements can be selected and applied as conditions allow and users require, which can be both a strength and a weakness. The value of this flexibility depends on commitment and alignment between the capacities, interests, motivations and incentives of the stakeholders involved.

Four-Part Framework Analysis

Implicit in the Task Team Four-Part Framework is a normative understanding of a preferred condition to be achieved by stakeholders. Implementing desired good practices takes a society towards openness for and autonomy of civic agency. This

²⁰ <https://monitor.CIVICUS.org/> CIVICUS, 2018, *Monitor: Tracking Civic Space - Monitor Methodology Paper*, CIVICUS Johannesburg.
<https://www.CIVICUS.org/documents/CIVICUS-monitor-methodology-paper.pdf>; CPDE, 2019, *Civil Society Reflections in Achieving Development Effectiveness; Inclusion, Accountability and Transparency*, Quezon City.

latter term is understood as the why and how, both individually and collectively, people act to maintain or change the world they live in.

Our study suggests that there is probably a hierarchy in the Task Team’s Four-Part Framework, which was not identified earlier. Therefore, the Task Team may want to think about refining the Framework and its application, for example by prioritizing some elements over others. The study outcomes may be helpful to think this through by commenting on the SDG-related findings in the context of steppingstones associated with each part, as is established in the Framework. To repeat from Chapter 2, this study and type of analysis was not primarily intended to ‘test’ the Task Team Framework as such, nor to systematically compare with (other) assessment methods. The research design applies a ‘space’ lens using the SDGs as the empirical way to find out about CSO experiences when facing different degrees of constraint. Although each of the six country studies had its own mix of CSO-SDG sensitivities, only those aspects of each part that have arisen across the countries and cases are commented on below.

Part 1. Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue



This study, as well as the recent literature (Chapter 2) demonstrate that from an “SDG plus” space perspective, the institutionalisation of multi-stakeholder dialogues (MSDs) is not showing much progress in advancing SDGs 16 and 17. It is not that formal mechanisms are not in place, as our studies show they are indeed present. However, the nature of civic

space seems to co-determine accessibility - particularly to critical information - which is poor outside of capital cities or for aid ‘outsiders.’ Space also co-determines the quality of inclusiveness. This factor relates to CSOs being a generic ‘side of a coin’ in a nation state’s political system, rather than one of their (technical) competencies. This observation has many implications.

Many lessons can be drawn from multi-stakeholder dialogues engaged in the SDGs and their implementation. We would like to highlight the following:

- ➔ Only a fraction of the CSO spectrum is actually present in multi-stakeholder dialogues. The heterogeneity of civil society is not adequately present in terms of types engaged²¹ – where relative aid dependency plays a role.

²¹ “CSOs can be defined to include all non-market and non-state organisations outside of the family in which people organise themselves to pursue shared interest in the public domain. Examples include community-based organisations and village associations, environmental groups, women’s rights groups, farmers’ associations faith-based organisations, labour unions, co-

- ➔ Notable is that, whether civic space is open or closed, the composition of civil society can translate into more or less state and/or party-aligned CSOs, which acts as a selective filter for inclusion. However, the tendency of open spaces to foster diversity of CSOs adds to the pluralism of the political processes involved. This being said, the part of the CSO spectrum occupied by non-aligned, autonomous and more independent civic associations is more likely to be excluded from (or co-opted onto) SDG processes.
- ➔ Over the whole range, there is a firm urban bias in MSD settings and processes. Such SDG dialogues are less visible and/or present in rural areas.
- ➔ There is a consistent lack of presence and involvement of business in the SDG-related multi-stakeholder dialogues. And there seems to be generally a resistance of CSOs to include private sector organizations as key actors.
- ➔ Linked to the previous lesson, an undifferentiated approach to CSO heterogeneity in the Task Team’s Four-Part Framework, weakens attention to inclusion as ‘pluralisation’. This situation is facilitating the emergence an (aided) elite ‘enclave’ rather than broadening the base of CSO participation in MSDs.

The cases show that constrained civic space and limits to effective CSO participation are associated with active state control of information. Deficits in trust between (some) CSOs and the regime in power exacerbate this tendency. It is probably correct to say that, in terms of the four parts of the Task Team Framework, purposeful limitations to both information access and pluralism of sources are very significant in terms of constraints to effective CSO engagement with the SDGs. In terms of a hierarchy, this ranks near or at the top. In more open spaces, with greater transparency of information exchange and vibrant media, we see elevated CSO involvement with potentially more impact on successful SDG implementation.

Part 2. CSO Development Effectiveness, Transparency & Accountability



These are the key lessons from a CSO performance perspective:

- ➔ For a particular segment of CSOs, the SDGs appear to carry forward the advantages of a shared language and agendas for action associated with

operatives, professional associations, chambers of commerce, independent research institutes and not-for-profit media.” (Task Team Abstract, April 2019, p. 4)

the MDGs. But, as was argued earlier in Chapter 2, this shared agenda may have been perceived unconsciously. Put another way, taking on board a common agenda had insufficient appreciation of the inherent diversity for different types of actors, making practical cooperation more problematic than anticipated.

- ➔ While SDGs stimulate forms of (selective) CSO collaboration, a lack of consistent resources generally results only in episodic engagement: continuity and efficacy suffer.
- ➔ It is clear that civic space co-determines the extent to which CSO self-regulation is politically tolerated and practically viable. Even when conditions permit, there are few indications that SDG targets and measures are being used as reference points for evaluating CSO effectiveness and accountability in terms of making agreed contributions to multi-stakeholder processes.
- ➔ CSO learning, and the lack of it, appears a common issue. From the standpoint of the *Task Team's Guidance and Good Practice*, one can surmise that competition for funding may be why the common framework offered by the SDGs is not providing an adequate mechanism for CSOs to learn from each other. Examples are ways of navigating constraints, negotiating with funders and improving implementation. A critical review of its repertoire of learning assistance to stakeholders may be an issue for the Task Team to tackle.

Part 3. Official Development Cooperation with CSOs



In relation to Official Development Assistance (ODA) support to civil society, the following main lessons appear:

- ➔ There are very few indications that the SDGs have led to any significant increase in collaboration between and coordination amongst donors.
- ➔ Across all steppingstones, the SDGs do not appear to very much alter funders' conditions and modalities for CSO support, where asymmetric effects continue to favour large (inter)national entities. At lower (local) levels where much work is needed in terms of information and mobilization, too little activity was detected.

- Though uneven in geography and pace, opening of civic space appears to be associated with a reduction in the relative contribution of official aid to CSOs for SDG engagement.
- As a result, the Task Team’s Four-Part Framework seems to gain little traction in terms of altering donor behaviour in relation to CSOs.
- It is not apparent that experiences of donor countries which are themselves prioritizing domestication of the SDGs is feeding through into their aid and CSO policies.

The [Addis Ababa](#) meeting on finance for development in 2015 departed from a premise that ODA cannot be a major factor in SDG implementation: there is simply insufficient public money available. Identifying where SDG funding commitments would come from, is being mirrored by trends towards alternative CSO resourcing both international and national. From a civic space point of view, the Task Team may want to reconsider the structure and content of this part of the Framework.²²

A main lesson has been that the openness of civic space and a country’s socio-economic conditions co-enable diversification of CSO financing for SDGs, which is broader than anticipated. This may have implications for MSD processes, including the Task Team’s composition. For example, a case can be made to consider expanding membership to include a wider range of donors. Options could include multilateral aid agencies; chambers of commerce, or their sustainability inspired equivalents; as well as philanthropic institutions such as venture philanthropy associations (Africa, Asia and Europe). In relation to the universal nature of the SDGs, including donors’ Ministries of Finance could be considered. The Task Team’s multi-stakeholder experience and guidance would be a valuable input to how domestic mobilization and pluralisation of CSO resourcing can be made effective additions anticipated in SDG 17.

Part 4. Legal and Regulatory Environment



As noted previously, legal and regulatory conditions are both directly and indirectly relevant to CSO engagement in SDGs as well as applying to all parts of the Four-Part Framework. These are major lessons:

²² ARIADNE, 2016, *Challenging the Closing Space for Civil Society: A practical starting point for funders*, European funders for Social Change and Human Rights, Brussels. <http://files.ctctcdn.com/34889ab5001/1be8cda6-a9e3-40e0-8720-f06630907f50.pdf>

- ➔ Laws and regulations in the countries studied are very important contextual factors, but seldom formally inhibit government ministries, departments and agencies from collaborating with CSOs. It seems that the extent to which CSO inclusion occurs is more determined by regime/government (officials') attitude and policies than by the legislation as such.
- ➔ Except perhaps in civic spaces that are very open - representing an international minority - legal provisions do not automatically entitle CSOs to undertake any SDG-related activity of their choosing in their own way. Which does not mean that CSOs are not making a relevant contribution anyway. The point is that sovereign governments retain both discretionary power and SDG design-rights.
- ➔ The influence of the legal and regulatory environment appears to be crucial for all elements in the Four-Part framework. In that sense, it is probably also at the top of a Four-Part hierarchy with 'trickle down' effects elsewhere (and could be placed as Part 1 rather than Part 4).
- ➔ The SDG studies indicate that legislation to constrain CSOs is often a space-limiting 'stick behind the door' to encourage their self-censorship and policy compliance than serve as an instrument for day by day control. From a recipient governments' point of view, this approach is more cost-effective in reducing unwelcome CSO positions or criticisms.
- ➔ There remains a general government interest in the additional resources that CSOs can bring to the table, but within narrowing rules of the game curtailing their autonomy as 'independent' development actors.

The lessons and observations set out above should provide food for thought and discussion in ensuring that the Task Team's proven value is carried forward by responding to the realities of increasing autocratic forms of governing across the world and resistances to them (Chapter 2).

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS

To advance the Task Team's distinctive contribution to realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this independent study provides empirical information on the relationship between a range of (dis)enabling environments and civil society effectiveness. An extensive consultation process with the Task Team's constituencies arrived at the research question: ***“What factors in a country's environment help or hinder effective CSO participation in SDG-related processes and how is this practically felt/experienced?”*** Six countries - selected on the basis of their degree of openness for autonomous action by citizens - were identified. Collectively, researchers in each country investigated a total of 21 cases.

Using their engagement with SDGs as the empirical point of entry, the core of the work was to understand what facilitated and hampered CSO effectiveness. The Task Team's Four-Part Framework on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment served as the analytic framework with chapters four and five setting out findings and lessons from the studies undertaken.

The study shows a variety of mechanisms available to and used by governments to enable or constrain CSO presence and functioning. The contextual picture is one of greater deployment of constraints, challenging the letter and spirit of SDG 16 and, by implication, SDG 17. An overarching conclusion is that a government's UN commitment to SDGs cannot be relied on to moderate the dynamics of relationships between citizen agency and states in favour of the former. Further, SDGs have not brought structural alteration in how the aid system operates. An expectation that implementation of SDGs can, as such, serve as an effective, institutionalized mechanism to 'open' civic space, would not be well founded.

Across the countries studied, the positions adopted by many donors with respect to tensions between the fundamental rights of citizens and the sovereign rights of states stem more from a pragmatic approach to the roles of their ODA in bilateral relations than from a consistent adherence to the norms, values and principles embedded in SDGs. The SDG agenda offers opportunities for dialogues with recipient governments about civic space where, in 'tighter' circumstances, multi-lateral donors may have a comparative advantage with respect to their bilateral counterparts.

A further conclusion is that there is inadequate attention to the diversity of what constitutes civil society in a country. This deficiency obscures a full understanding of what their SDG engagement is all about in terms of 'informalized inclusion', for example as a response to space closure. In many countries, the borders between civil society and the bureaucracy are highly permeable. CSOs find and build innovative ways to influence what is going on in SDGs which merits greater appreciation.

Akin to their MDG predecessor, a value of the SDGs is in providing a legitimate scaffolding for conversations with any government about their operating environment from the perspective of civic agency and energy. From this point of view, the results of this study can provide pointers to advance the Task Team's goals and relevance in rapidly changing and increasingly undemocratic conditions.

Using the Task Team's Four-Part Framework, and at the risk of excessive generalisation from six national settings, what can CSO-SDG engagement say about the relationship between civic space and development processes?

- MSDs are a pivotal point where the multiple conditions that determine 'space' appear in an integrated way. The rules of the 'relational game' between citizen's and state's sovereign rights play out in practice for all to see. Corresponding to the earlier Task Team study, MSDs show the relative distribution of (types of) power between stakeholders. These set-ups mediate the forces defining inclusion which co-determine the breadth and depth of the ownership of development processes. This study suggests that the seventeen SDGs offer a nuanced and fine-grained understanding of how a society functions relationally within and across its institutions.
- With a country's political history and socio-economic circumstances as important variables, in terms of CSO effectiveness, the SDGs shine a critical light on the composition of civil society under different 'space' conditions. Referring back to Chapter 2, the CSO side of the 'space' coin cannot be understood without the state side. Closed spaces invite more informalism in the way CSOs exert themselves, with formal sets ups attracting 'professionalized' CSOs, often relying on external finance. Across CSO heterogeneity, defensive solidarity can be in play, but with international NGOs usually gaining the upper hand. Open settings can both allow and stimulate less solidarity, showing up greater competitive CSO positioning and behaviors. Connections across the faces of the state-civil society coin become more politically mediated and tolerated.
- In addition to financing for CSO SDG-engagement, the valuable role donors play in facilitating dialogues between CSOs and governments does not depend on the condition of civic space. It is a question of how, rather than if, their non-financial roles are brought to bear, context by context. It is not that financing CSOs may matter less. It is more the case that money is too narrow a lens to appreciate what donors can bring to any 'size' of civic space. This being said, within the wider repertoire of international relations the application of official aid to CSOs can have – as we have seen - negative effects on civic space and agency that a shared SDG agenda cannot effectively counter. As socio-economic conditions and civic space improves, CSOs sources of financing become more diverse through greater attention to local resource mobilization and expansion of private sources. This future scenario is not to be underestimated, in part because SDG implementation invites, and is even premised, on the expansion of non-state resources.
- As noted repeatedly, while many factors co-determine civic space, the legal and regulatory framework is the first amongst equals. The capacity of a government to actually ensure compliance with its CSO rules and policies may be less of a factor than the ambiance of (in)tolerance that they communicate– its messaging more than practical enforcement. Closed spaces appear to make the fear of actual enforcement translate into CSO self-censorship and restraint in exerting a watchdog role in favour of delivery of social services. It is probably important not to underestimate the

extent to which closed spaces lead to schisms within civil society while, paradoxically, open spaces lead to something similar, but in different ways.

Finally, and by way of reminder and closure, analysis of the findings and conclusions are not directed at generating prescriptions but are offered as a potentially useful input to Task Team deliberations where constraints to civic space are viewed as a central, but not the only, concern.

ANNEX I. Summary of Country Cases

Country (Space)	Case Name	Brief Description
Costa Rica (Open)	Platform for Compliance with the SDGs	A UN-stimulated diffusion of the 2030 agenda involving the building of CSO commitment 'from the inside-out'. A study of the process and its effects.
	National Pact for the Advance of SDGs	A multi-stakeholders initiative to formulate joint commitments to collaborate on MIDEPLAN as the common framework for SDG implementation.
	Multi-Level Governance Structure to Implement SDGs	A study of the initiation and functioning of a consultative committee facilitating information sharing accountability and collaboration at different levels of government.
	National Oceanic Consultation to Fund Marine Conservation	Study of a multi-stakeholder initiative establishing FONASEBAR - a funding model for marine conservation.
	National Platform of Sustainable Large Pelagic Fisheries	The CSO involvement in the functioning of a dialogue platform associated with implementing SDG 14.
Ghana (Narrowed)	Telemedicine	A multi-stakeholder initiative making innovative use of ICT connecting Community Health Workers to medical specialists 24/7. Includes private sector involvement.
	CSO Platform on SDGs	Study of the creation and functioning of an umbrella organisation to plan, strategize and co-ordinate initiatives for realizing the SDGs by 2030.
	Information Communication and Education (ICE) on SDGs	Investigation of a collaborative effort of government and CSOs to activate youth contribution to SDG achievement using ICE.
Hungary (Obstructed)	National Council for Sustainable Development (NFFT)	A multi-stakeholder institution advancing principles of sustainable governance for the legislative branch. Investigation of member discourse and reasons for lack of influence and effectiveness.
	Roundtable of Hungarian CSOs for the SDGs (CKFFC)	Promotes the 2030 agenda through structured cross-sector dialogue. Examination of coordination CSO efforts and negotiating with government officials.
	Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSDH)	A platform enabling businesses engagement in SDG processes. Investigation of incentives, motivations and methods businesses deploy.
	Hungary's Big Charities	Hungarian charities play a big role in providing social services which predates SDGs. A study on how they see and accommodate, or not, the SDGs in their work.
Nepal	Localization of SDGs	Process of bringing internationally agreed SDGs to the level of reality for Nepal's CSOs, communities and households as partners.

(Obstructed)	CSO registration and shrinking space	The effects of different tiers of government in CSO existence and engagement with SDGs.
	Donor engagement with CSOs	The behaviour of donors in the Nepal CSO landscape – collaboration and resource access.
Tanzania (Repressed)	CSO participation in Voluntary National Reviews (VNR)	A study of the practical experiences of CSOs in the Tanzania Sustainable Development Platform's contribution to VNR's.
	Funding modalities for CSOs and SDGs	A study of how CSOs navigate funding modalities enabling their participation on SGD processes.
	Legislation and civic space	A critical appraisal of the legislative instruments impacting on CSOs, particularly in relation to SDG engagement.
Lao PDR (Closed)	INGO Network	A study examining the role of the network in delivering SDG related services related to the National Socio-Economic Development Plan.
	Lao CSO Network	A review of Lao NGO participation and government responses in national dialogues.
	EU joint project	Study of 'space creating' collaboration between the INGO network and Lao NGO network supported by the European Union.