The Long Road to Development

How effectiveness gaps hinder progress in Agenda 2030

CSOPartnership
for **Development Effectiveness**

JULY 2021

Conducted by the global civil society platform CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness in time for the 2021 UN High Level Political Forum, this study presents the perspectives of 109 CSOs from 45 countries and territories on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Voluntary National Reviews, using the lens of effective development cooperation (EDC).

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

The CPDE gratefully acknowledges all individuals and their organisations whose valuable inputs to this year's VNR survey made this study possible.

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Executive
Summary

Executive Summary

This document presents the reflections and recommendations of civil society organisations (CSOs) on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the national level using the lens of effective development cooperation (EDC). This is based on the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) survey conducted from 27 March to 30 April 2021. A total of 109 CSOs participated in this survey from 45 countries – all but three are developing countries, and 11 are scheduled to present their Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) in 2021.

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

A seemingly positive sign for transparency and accountability is the high proportion of countries establishing a national SDG results framework and reporting process. However, this is made less meaningful because the SDG reporting process is not open to the public in nearly half of the countries covered by the survey. Moreover, SDG information is not proactively disseminated to the public. Even more alarming is the tendency of governments to be highly selective in their SDG reporting, highlighting their achievements while leaving out their shortcomings and failures, creating a misleading portrait of reality.

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

The survey respondents identified significant factors that hinder civil society

participation in SDG processes in their respective countries, including lack of resources devoted towards civil society participation and lack of information regarding SDG implementation. Political factors are also at play, with several CSOs reporting that the process of participation is neither inclusive nor transparent – indeed, critical voices are deliberately excluded.

In terms of results, the survey did not attempt to measure the attainment of SDGs per se. Instead, the survey merely probed "other positive impacts" of SDG implementation that are nevertheless important. While the list is not exhaustive, the survey confirms that there are notable contingent benefits from SDG

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

CSO respondents identified significant gaps in SDG implementation, including the misalignment of government budget allocations with SDG priorities and inadequate consultation/engagement of CSOs in SDG processes. CSOs report that SDG implementation has been delayed or disrupted by the pandemic and measures implemented to contain the pandemic such as lockdowns and social distancing. Some CSOs also report that CSO activities in their countries have been curtailed as part of pandemic-related restrictions.

Some of the major recommendations drawn from the survey results are:

1 Duty-bearers must cooperate with civil society in translating the 2030 Agenda into local plans, programmes and monitoring efforts and ensure that local priorities inform national plans and the VNR process.

2 Ensure that national SDG review processes are open to the public and information dissemination is conducted in a proactive manner that connects with citizens, not just technical experts.

3 Ensure civil society engagement in the 2030 Agenda implementation by formalising and institutionalising CSOs' participation in governance structures supported by enabling laws, mechanisms, resources and capacity development for civil society, especially those from marginalised groups and communities.

4 Respect and protect the rights of all citizens to conduct their independent monitoring and review of the 2030 Agenda, including those who may be critical of state policies and programmes.

5 Map out the links between specific policies, programmes and budget allocations with results when reporting progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Background

Background

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

This is based on the results of the survey conducted by the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) from 27 March to 30 April 2021, in countries whose governments have Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) or will be presenting theirs in the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). A total of 109 CSOs participated in this survey from 45 countries – all but three are developing countries, and 11 are scheduled to present their VNR in 2021.

Table 1
Countries covered by the CPDE 2021 survey

Countries and territories	No. of CSO respondents	No. of individual respondents	VNR Country (2021)
Argentina	2	2	
Azerbaijan	1	1	Y
Bangladesh	1	1	
Belarus	2	2	
Benin	2	3	
Bulgaria	1	1	
Burkina Faso	1	1	
Burundi	2	2	
Cameroon	2	2	
Central African Republic	1	1	
Chad	1	1	Y
Chile	2	2	
Costa Rica	1	1	
Democratic Republic of Congo	2	2	
El Salvador	3	3	

Countries and territories	No. of CSO respondents	No. of individual respondents	VNR Country (2021)
Gabon	1	1	
Guatemala	1	1	Y
Guinea	2	2	
India	2	2	
Indonesia	1	1	Y
Ivory Coast	1	1	
Japan	1	1	Y
Kenya	3	3	
Kyrgyzstan	1	1	
Lao PDR	1	1	Y
Lebanon	1	1	
México	1	1	Y
Myanmar	1	1	Y
Nepal	1	1	
New Zealand	1	1	
Nicaragua	2	2	Y
Niger	1	1	Y
Nigeria	45	45	
Palestine	1	1	
Papua New Guinea	1	1	
Paraguay	1	2	Y
Philippines	3	4	
Samoa	2	2	
Senegal	2	2	
Sri Lanka	2	2	
Taiwan	1	1	
Tanzania	1	1	
United States	1	1	
Togo	2	2	
Vietnam	1	1	
Total (45)	**109**	**112**	**11**

Table 1
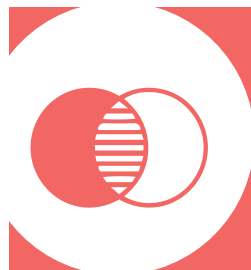**Countries covered by the CPDE 2021survey**

Background

What is Effective Development Cooperation?

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

It embodies four shared principles:

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

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

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

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

Key Findings

Figures 1 to 5 summarise the survey results in terms of select indicators of effective development cooperation.
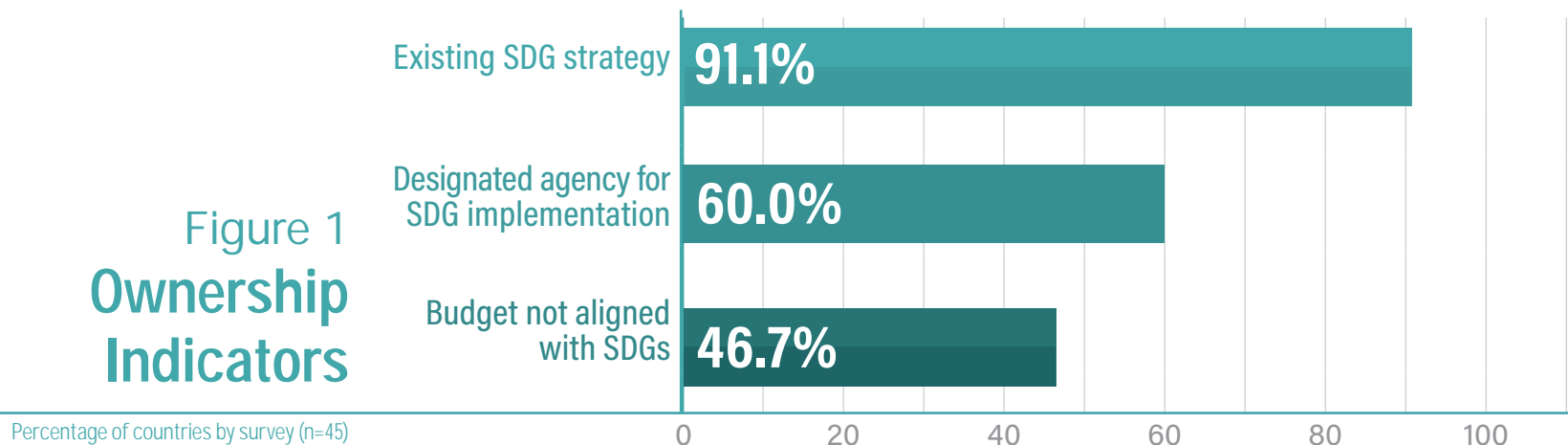
Country Ownership

Nearly all respondents (41 out of 45 countries) reported that their governments had integrated the SDGs into national development planning or development cooperation policy. Moreover, CSOs in six countries (Bangladesh, Guatemala, Lebanon, Mexico, Paraguay and Vietnam) reported that the SDG implementation is being coordinated from the Office of the President or the Prime Minister, indicating the high level of priority accorded to the SDGs in those countries. Interestingly, CSOs in a few countries report that international agencies – namely, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Azerbaijan and Chad and the European Union (EU) in Bulgaria – are involved in coordinating SDG implementation in their countries.

Only a handful of CSOs from four countries or territories – Bulgaria, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Taiwan – reported that their governments have not yet established a specific SDG strategy. However, the CSO respondents indicate that national budgets are not aligned with SDG priorities in over half of the countries covered by the survey. So, while most countries appear to have adopted the SDGs as integral to their national development plans, the survey results suggest that there is still a weak commitment to implement them in practice. This is also evident in the Results indicators in Figures 6 and 7.

Figure 1
Ownership Indicators

Percentage of countries by survey (n=45)

- Existing SDG strategy: **91.1%**
- Designated agency for SDG implementation: **60.0%**
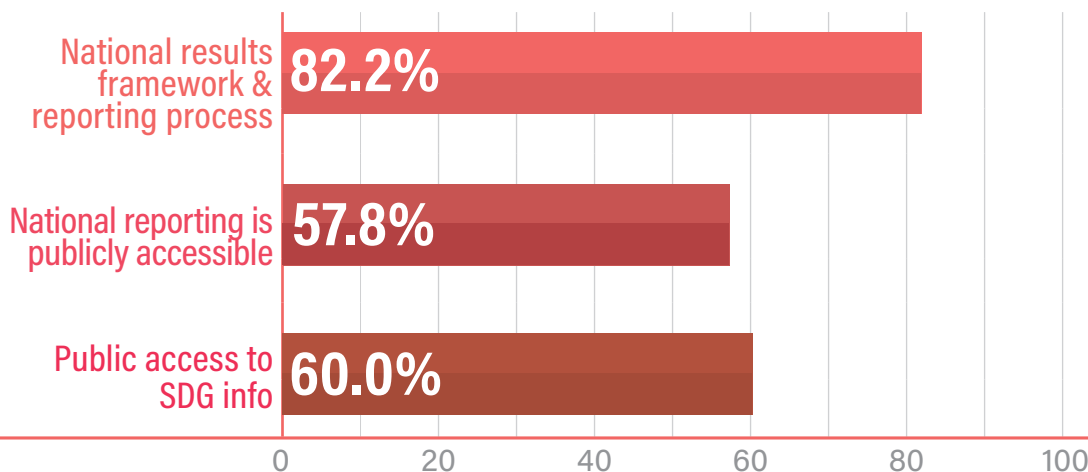- Budget not aligned with SDGs: **46.7%**

One encouraging sign is the high proportion (82.2 per cent) of countries that have established a national SDG results framework and reporting process. However, this is made less meaningful because the SDG reporting process is open to the public in only 26 out of 45 countries covered by the survey. Likewise, CSOs in 40 per cent of the countries report that SDG information is not readily accessible to the public.
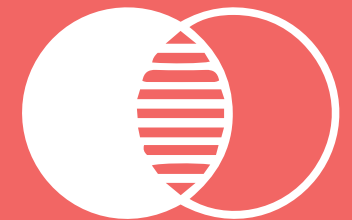
In many countries where SDG information is available, CSOs observe that the government is not proactive in disseminating this in a timely and accessible manner, especially at the local level. Instead, CSOs and other stakeholders must do their own research to obtain such information from the government. Moreover, according to many CSO respondents, the SDG reports of governments are often incomplete, fragmented, superficial or decontextualised. Perhaps most alarming is the noted tendency of governments to be highly selective in their SDG reporting – highlighting their achievements while leaving out their shortcomings and failures. This may be an even more significant threat to transparency and accountability than simply having weak reporting systems because they are intended to generate a misleading portrait of reality for the benefit of those in power.

Transparency and accountability

Figure 2
Transparency Indicators

Percentage of countries by survey (n=45)

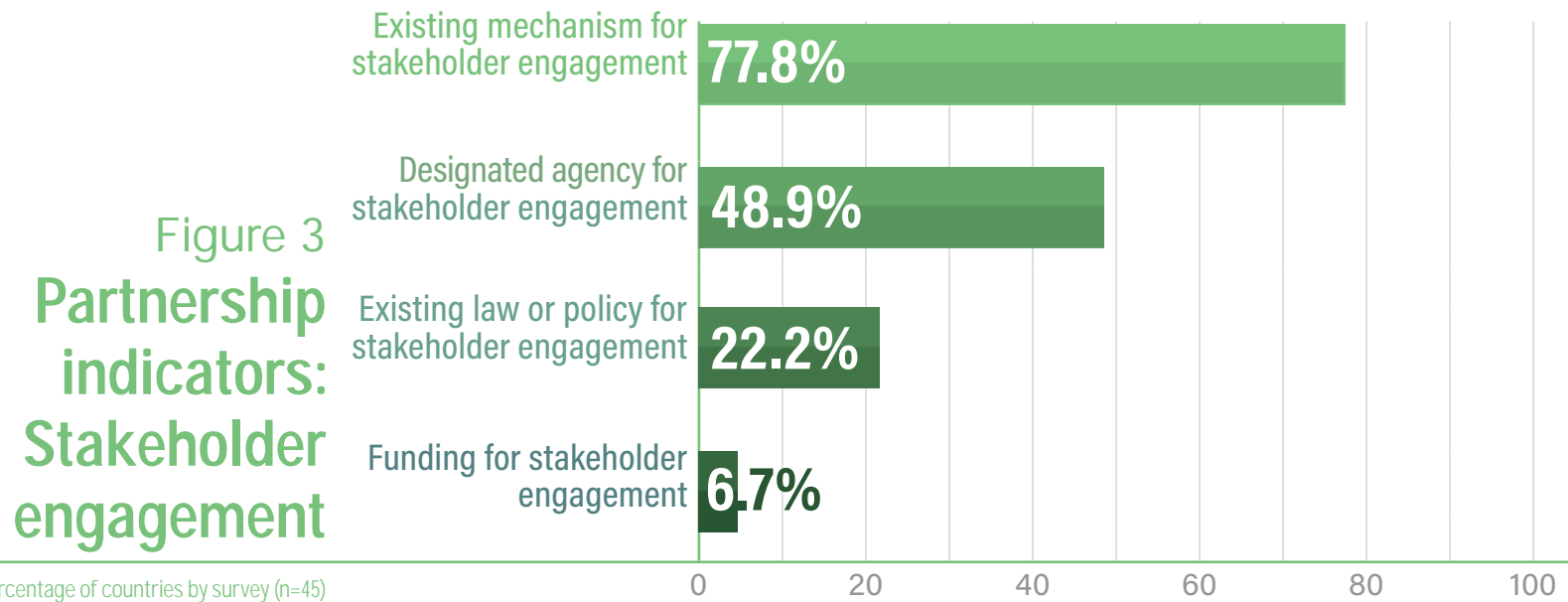| Indicator	Value
National results framework & reporting process	82.2%
National reporting is publicly accessible	57.8%
Public access to SDG info	60.0%

Inclusive Partnership

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

CSOs from 35 countries reported existing mechanisms for engaging CSOs and other stakeholders in their country's SDG planning, implementation, and review processes. However, less than half (22) of the countries covered in this survey have institutionalised processes for stakeholder engagement, according to the CSO respondents. At the minimum, this means having a specific government body designated to reach out to stakeholders. In ten out of these 22 countries, a law or policy is in place for

Figure 3
Partnership indicators: Stakeholder engagement

- Existing mechanism for stakeholder engagement — **77.8%**
- Designated agency for stakeholder engagement — **48.9%**
- Existing law or policy for stakeholder engagement — **22.2%**
- Funding for stakeholder engagement — **6.7%**

Percentage of countries by survey (n=45)

0   20   40   60   80   100

stakeholder engagement. But only three of the 22 countries were reported to have funding available to support stakeholder engagement.

Focusing on partnerships with civil society, most CSO respondents report that they participated in SDG consultations in their respective countries. In 12 countries, the CSOs were asked to contribute to SDG-related documents, while in ten countries,

they were asked to provide inputs to already existing SDG-related documents. Only in nine countries were CSOs tapped as resource persons in SDG consultation sessions. More worrisome is that CSOs from 14 countries were not able to participate in SDG consultations in any form or manner.

Most CSOs that were able to participate in SDG discussions shared their feedback on implementation gaps and challenges
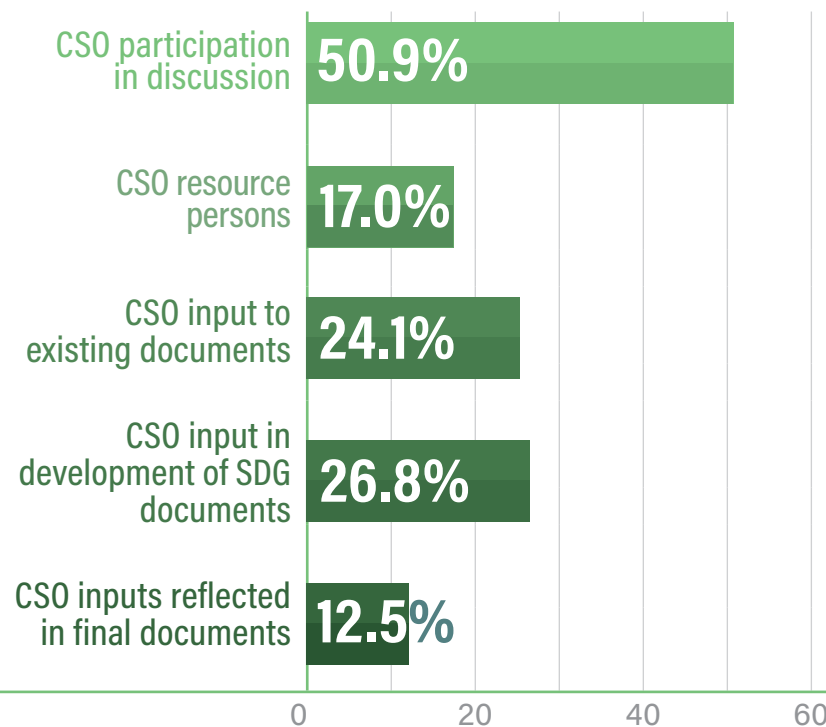
Figure 4
Partnership indicators: CSO participation

CSO participation in discussion — **50.9%**
CSO resource persons — **17.0%**
CSO input to existing documents — **24.1%**
CSO input in development of SDG documents — **26.8%**
CSO inputs reflected in final documents — **12.5%**

Percentage of CSO respondents (n=109)
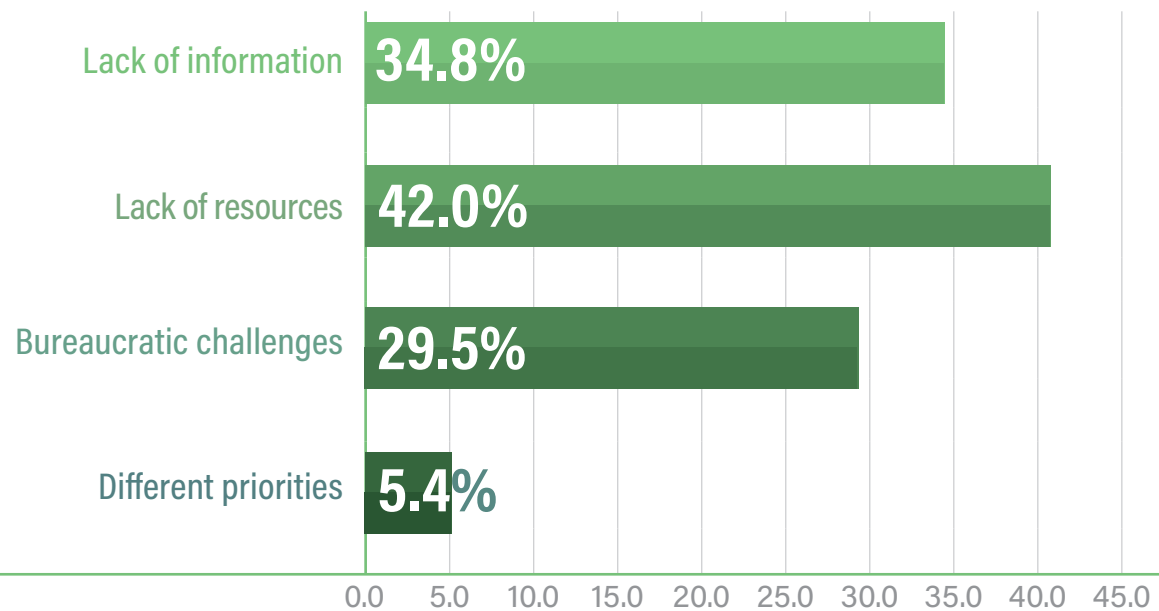
0   20   40   60

Inclusive Partnership

at the local level, especially in genuinely benefiting marginalised groups such as women, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities. Many also shared suggestions and good practices for more rights-based and inclusive strategies: SDG localisation; awareness-raising; community mobilisation; and better targets and indicators. Some also reported participation in training and capacity-building workshops, implementation of specific goals, and monitoring and evaluation.

But only 14 CSOs from seven countries reported that their inputs were integrated into the final version of SDG policy documents. The evidence, therefore, suggests that there is still limited space for civil society participation in SDG processes in many countries. Moreover, even where there is an opportunity for civil society participation, their inputs are often ignored or glossed over.

Figure 5
Partnership indicators: Barriers to CSO participation

Percentage of CSO respondents (n=109)

Barrier	Percentage
Lack of information	34.8%
Lack of resources	42.0%
Bureaucratic challenges	29.5%
Different priorities	5.4%

The survey respondents identified significant factors that hinder civil society participation in SDG processes in their respective countries. The most common barrier to CSO participation cited was lack of resources followed by lack of information. Almost one-third of CSO respondents also cited bureaucratic challenges as a hindrance.

Several CSO respondents also complain that the process of participation is not inclusive or transparent. In a few countries (e.g., Belarus, India, and the Philippines), the government reportedly selects which CSOs are allowed to participate, excluding and even intimidating those with a critical stance vis-a-vis the government's policies and programmes. In the Central African Republic, CSOs end up competing with one another to avail themselves of the limited slots and resources for CSO participation. Others cite the low level of trust and value accorded by the government to CSO inputs and participation, while others point to the low level of technical capacity among CSOs as another impediment.
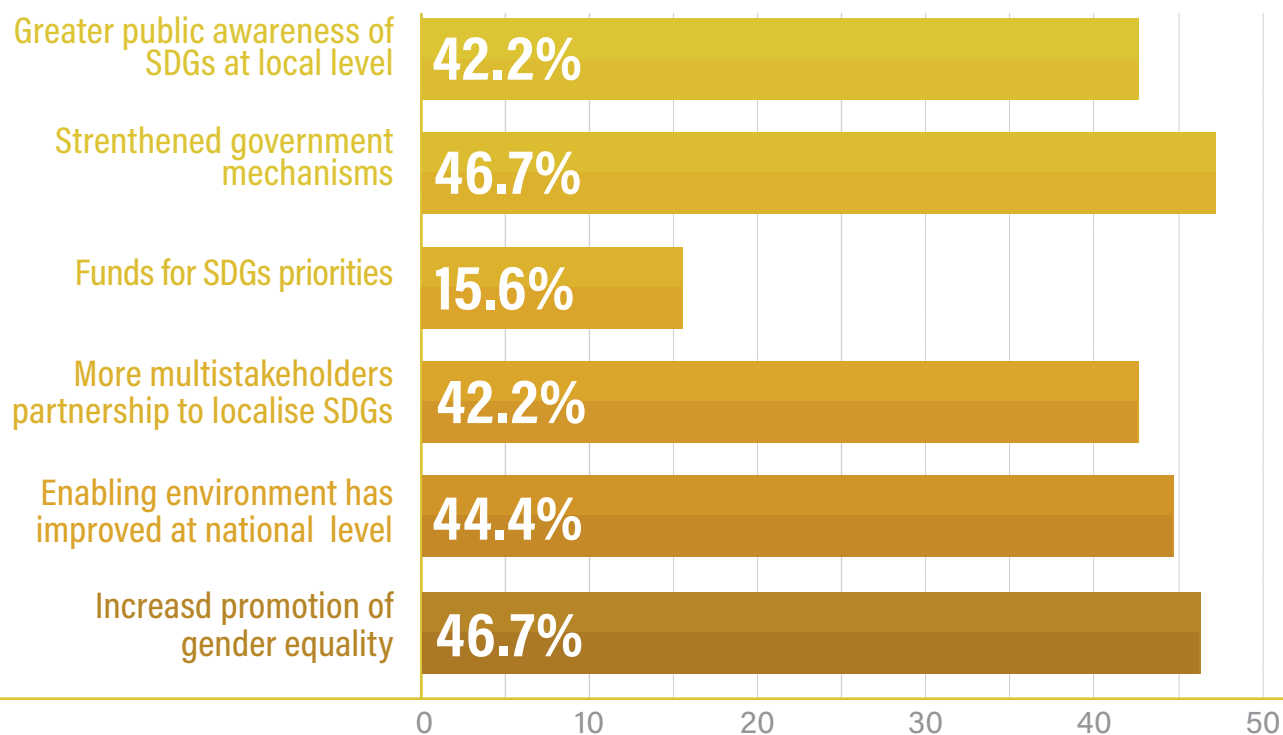
Inclusive Partnership

Focus on Results

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

Despite the many challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda, CSOs from 29 out of 45 countries surveyed believe that SDG implementation has yielded "other positive impacts" on national development. The promotion of gender equality was among the most commonly mentioned positive impact among these 29 countries. Other significant contingent

Figure 6
Results indicators: Positive impacts

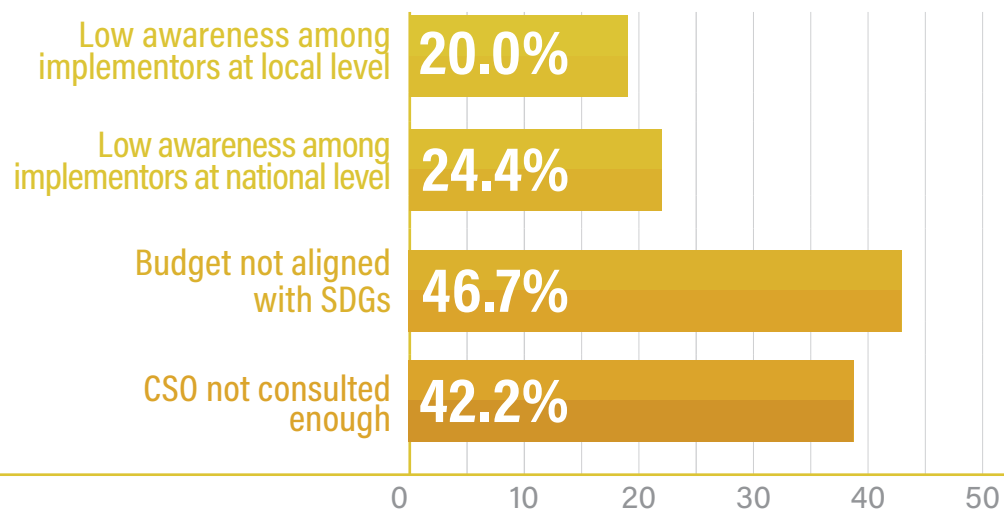| Indicator	Percentage
Greater public awareness of SDGs at local level	42.2%
Strenthened government mechanisms	46.7%
Funds for SDGs priorities	15.6%
More multistakeholders partnership to localise SDGs	42.2%
Enabling environment has improved at national level	44.4%
Increasd promotion of gender equality	46.7%

Percentage of countries covered by survey (n=45)

benefits of SDG implementation are strengthening state capacity, improved enabling environment for CSOs, and the formation of multistakeholder partnerships for SDG implementation. Notably, CSOs in only seven countries saw an improvement in budgetary allocations for SDG priorities, as likewise indicated in Figures 1, 6 and 7.

On the other hand, CSOs from a sizable 16 out of the 45 countries saw no "other positive impacts on national development." Indeed, CSO respondents identified significant gaps in SDG implementation. Budget allocations not being aligned with SDG priorities are cited as a problem by CSOs in 21 countries, and inadequate consultations with CSOs are mentioned in 19 countries.

Figure 7
Results indicators: Implimentation challenges

Percentage of countries by survey (n=45)

Category	Value
Low awareness among implementors at local level	20.0%
Low awareness among implementors at national level	24.4%
Budget not aligned with SDGs	46.7%
CSO not consulted enough	42.2%

0   10   20   30   40   50

The COVID-19 Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to inflict wave upon wave of destruction across the world. According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), it has pushed an estimated 114.4 million people into extreme poverty, of which 57.8 million are women and girls. Over 250 million jobs were lost in 2020, and more than 1.6 billion informal workers are facing deprivation without any social protection to fall back on.[1] While the world economy is cautiously heading towards a recovery, the pandemic is far from over for most countries. With the stark disparity in vaccination coverage between countries and regions, the world's most vulnerable countries face the grave prospect of a prolonged pandemic and another lost decade.

Thus, the pandemic has dealt a severe blow to efforts to reduce poverty, inequality, and virtually all the SDGs.
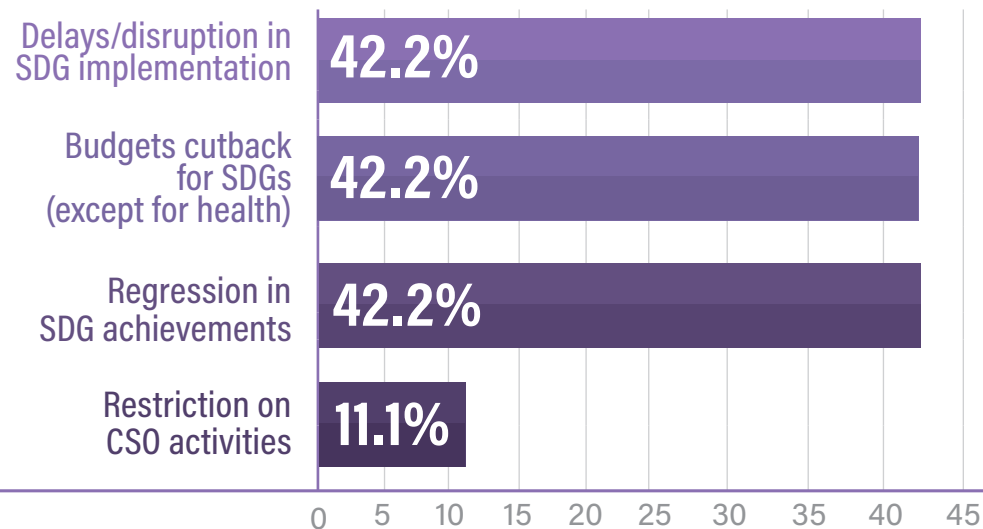
Aside from the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on people's health and wellbeing, the CSO respondents in the survey identified other adverse implications of the COVID-19 crisis on attaining the SDGs. CSOs in nearly half of the countries surveyed report that SDG implementation has been delayed or disrupted by the pandemic and measures implemented to contain the pandemic such as lockdowns and social distancing. Likewise, budget allocations for SDG-related programmes are reported to have declined or realigned to pandemic response or social amelioration measures. Not surprisingly, many CSO report that social and economic indicators of people's wellbeing have deteriorated, and inequalities have worsened during the pandemic. But almost all CSOs respondents are unaware of how COVID-19 impacts are incorporated into the VNRs of their respective countries.

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1 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA] (2021). World Economic Situation and as of mid-2021. New York. 11 May.

Some CSOs also report that CSO activities in their countries have been curtailed as part of health-related restrictions. Indeed, some states may also be taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to crack down on growing dissent over governments' failed or inadequate response to the pandemic, as well as long-standing inequities and injustices that are compounded by this unprecedented crisis.

Figure 8
Impacts of COVID-19 on SDG implementation

Percentage of countries by survey (n=45)

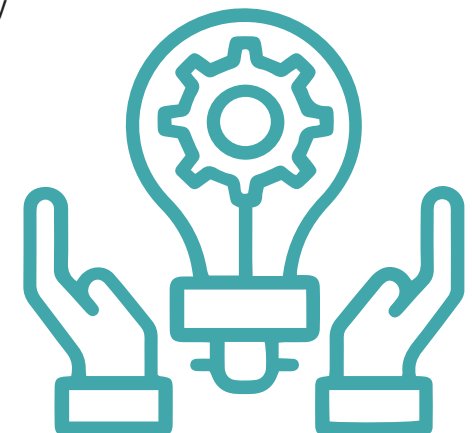| Category	Percentage
Delays/disruption in SDG implementation	42.2%
Budgets cutback for SDGs (except for health)	42.2%
Regression in SDG achievements	42.2%
Restriction on CSO activities	11.1%

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45

Recommendations

Strengthen ownership of development priorities by developing

Raise awareness of the national SDG strategy among implementors from the national to the local level.

Translate the 2030 Agenda into local plans, programmes, and monitoring efforts together with civil society, and ensure that local priorities inform national plans and the VNR process.

Localise the implementation strategies for Agenda 2030 adapted to local people's concerns, institutional structures, capacities, and resources.

Review and align national and local budgets according to the country's SDG strategy and priorities, implementing participatory budget processes to reflect the needs of local communities.
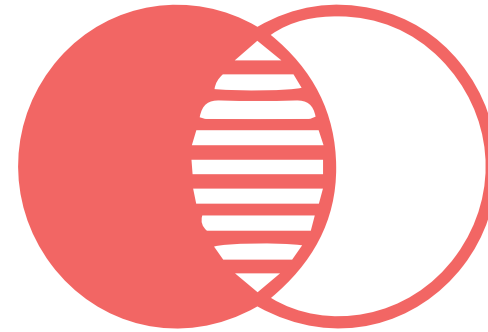
Improve transparency and accountability

Spell out plans to review and report progress on implementing the 2030 Agenda at the national level – not just at the HLPF – to bolster accountability to citizens. This should include consulting with civil society to identify gaps in implementation and the necessary measures for course correction.

Involve CSOs from the outset in developing and providing inputs to VNRs. Draw on civil society expertise and citizen-generated data. Provide space for CSOs to review the VNRs before publication.

Ensure that national SDG review processes are open to the public and information dissemination is conducted proactively to connect with citizens, not just technical experts (e.g., use of national languages/ vernacular).

Provide information on data collection status or plans to improve data availability, especially on efforts to address inequalities and "leave no one behind."

Recommendations

Strengthen inclusive partnerships for development

Ensure civil society engagement in the 2030 Agenda implementation by formalising and institutionalising CSOs' participation in governance structures.

Support and strengthen civil society participation through enabling laws, mechanisms, resources, and capacity development for civil society, especially those from marginalised groups.

Conduct regular consultations and dialogue with civil society using a range of opportunities for multistakeholder engagement, including through online and in-person means; soliciting inputs to and feedback on draft reports; and inclusion of CSOs as partners in implementation and monitoring.

Set clear guidelines on multistakeholder engagement in the 2030 Agenda to ensure that inputs from CSOs and other stakeholders are not disregarded or rendered irrelevant in formulating policies and strategies and in the VNR process.

Respect and protect the rights of all citizens to conduct their independent monitoring and review of the 2030 Agenda, including those who may be critical of state policies and programmes.

Enhance focus on results

Develop the national SDG results frameworks and civil society and ensure that the VNR presents progress and achievements for specific marginalised groups communities.

In reporting progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda, the links between specific policies and programmes, budget allocations and results must be explicitly and clearly mapped out.

Review existing development policies, programmes, projects and budget allocations regarding their implications on the achievement of SDGs, including large energy, agri-business, and infrastructure projects.

Review systemic barriers to the SDGs at the international level, such as unjust trade and investment treaties, tax competition, financial deregulation, etc.

Recommendations

Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis

Implement a COVID-19 response based on global solidarity and ensure that COVID-19 vaccines and medical products are available to everyone worldwide. Intellectual property rights (IPR) must be temporarily suspended, and production technology and know-how must be shared widely.

Social and economic recovery efforts must consider the highly uneven impact of the pandemic on different sectors and actors in the economy. Social amelioration should prioritise women and all sectors that do not have social protection. Economic stimulus must prioritise micro, small and medium enterprises rather than big business.
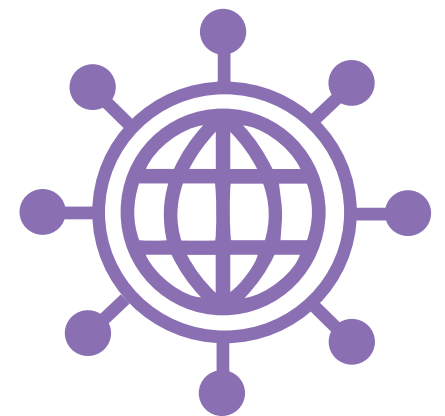
Ensure transparency and accountability in Covid-19-related actions of governments and donors.

Strengthen public health systems at the community level as the frontline of defence against the pandemic.

Harness civil society knowledge, expertise, and initiative in addressing the pandemic.

Focus efforts on ameliorating the impacts of COVID-19 on the vulnerable, impoverished, and marginalised sectors.

Stop using pandemic containment as a pretext for monitoring and suppressing political dissent.

CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness

Regional Constituencies

AFRICA

ASIA

EUROPE

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARRIBEAN

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

PACIFIC

Sectoral Constituencies

FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS

FEMINIST GROUP

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

INTERNATIONAL CSOs

MIGRANTS AND DIASPORA

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

LABOUR

YOUTH

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

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

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