



Enhancing accountability for peaceful, just and inclusive societies

Practical guidance for civil society reporting on SDG16+

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a comprehensive framework for global development, with peace at its heart.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires governments and other stakeholders to be accountable for the commitments agreed in 2015. Civil society reporting on national progress towards the SDGs is a crucial way of promoting accountability and provides an important complement to official accounts of progress.

This briefing provides practical guidance for civil society organisations (CSOs) – and those supporting them – to develop their own independent reports on progress towards the goal

of peaceful, just and inclusive societies, referred to as SDG16+. It draws on Saferworld's experience since 2015 of working with civil society and government actors to translate the SDGs into action.

The guidance is in two parts: the first outlines the *process* of developing a CSO report (pages 4–5), and the second proposes a *structure* for a report on SDG16+ (pages 6–8). Neither should be taken as a blueprint, but should instead be adapted to the particular country context.

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- Process for CSO reporting on SDG16+
- Framework for CSO reporting on SDG16+



Reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda and peace

The 2030 Agenda makes peaceful, just and inclusive societies one of five cross-cutting priorities for global development. The 17 SDGs include SDG16: 'To promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'. A number of targets under other SDGs are also critical for peaceful societies, including SDG5 on gender and SDG10 on equality. 'SDG16+' is used to describe these interconnected commitments across the 2030 Agenda.

How are SDGs reported on?

Each year, the United Nations convenes governments, multilateral institutions, the private sector and non-governmental organisations to come together at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York to review progress on delivering the SDGs. At the HLPF, governments report on their progress through a mechanism called a 'voluntary national review' (VNR). Each government is expected to report once every four years – although some have already reported more than once, while others have not reported at all. In VNRs, governments are expected to report progress made on every SDG through both a written report and an oral presentation to the HLPF.¹



The role of civil society organisations in SDG reporting

Reporting by CSOs on progress towards the SDGs is important for a number of reasons. The UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs has identified seven benefits of CSO reporting:²

- 1. Increased awareness of the SDGs:** CSO reporting helps raise the profile of the SDGs among wider civil society, government departments and the general public.
- 2. Alerting authorities to the role of CSOs as data providers:** Government departments may not be aware of the role CSOs can play in contributing data on SDG progress. This can encourage the inclusion of CSOs in formal reporting procedures.

- 3. Mutual accountability of states and CSOs:** While CSO reporting can prompt governments to take accountability processes more seriously, it also encourages CSOs to be accountable to their partners and those they represent.
- 4. Enhancing cooperation:** CSO reporting can make other stakeholders, both national and international, aware of how CSOs are contributing to achieving the SDGs.
- 5. Coordination of global partnerships:** By sharing information about organisations contributing to SDG implementation, CSO reporting can help identify who should be included in global SDG partnerships.
- 6. Internal reflection:** Reporting on SDG progress can encourage CSOs to reflect on their own contributions to achieving the SDGs.
- 7. Peer learning:** CSO reporting can provide a useful entry point for knowledge sharing across different contexts, in terms of good practices and problem solving.



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SDG reporting experience so far

Both the VNRs and the review of SDG progress at the HLPF are relatively new mechanisms, and the UN, governments and other stakeholders are still learning from each new iteration of the process. Assessments of successive HLPFs suggest that the process is gradually becoming more effective over time, but that stakeholder engagement needs further improvement.³ There remain significant concerns about the inclusivity of the process of developing VNRs. While a growing number of governments report that non-state actors were engaged in the development of VNRs, the reality is that these processes tend to be top-down, with little scope for non-state organisations to provide input proactively. In the case of one VNR submitted in 2018, CSOs were only 'consulted' after the report had been formally submitted to the UN.

SDG reporting isn't – and shouldn't be – just a government process. The UN General Assembly resolution *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* calls on all sectors of society to report on their contribution to implementing the SDGs.⁴ This has led to a range of reporting roles for civil society. In some cases, CSO reporting has fed into official government VNRs; in others, CSO reports have been presented separately as 'shadow reports' or 'parallel reports'. Each of these approaches comes with both benefits and potential challenges, and the choice of the most appropriate approach will depend on the context. What's key is that civil society contributions are independent and representative – which is why a clear and transparent process is so important.

Why report on SDG16+?

As well as underpinning the 2030 Agenda commitment to 'leave no one behind', inclusion is a crucial element of SDG16+, alongside peace and justice. It is particularly prominent in target 16.7 regarding 'inclusive and participatory decision-making' and target 16.6 on developing 'effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels'. This means that the very process by which governments report on SDG progress – and particularly how inclusive it is – is indicative of their commitment to a key tenet of the 2030 Agenda.

The exclusion of non-state voices and perspectives from the VNR process is especially significant in conflict-affected areas and other contexts where the legitimacy of the state is contested. In such cases, reporting on SDG progress can become highly politicised. So it is important to include more than just state perspectives to provide as balanced a view as possible.

When it comes to reporting on SDG16+ targets, governments may be sensitive about including perspectives that appear to contradict or undermine their account of progress towards a more peaceful, just and inclusive society. For these reasons, a properly accountable SDG review mechanism requires the input of CSOs and other non-state actors, especially in the case of SDG16+.

Notes

- ¹ For more information, see United Nations Development Programme (2017), 'Guidance Note: Data for Implementation and Monitoring of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', September (<http://www.2030agenda.undp.org/content/2030agenda/en/home/more/workstreams/data-for-development/guidance-note/the-2030-agenda-follow-up-and-review-architecture.html>)
- ² Division for Sustainable Development, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018), 'How should civil society stakeholders report their contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?', May (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/18445CSOreporting_paper_revisions_4May.pdf)
- ³ Canadian Council for International Co-operation (2018), 'Progressing national SDGs implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2017' (<https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/progressing-national-sdgs-implementation>)
- ⁴ United Nations General Assembly (2015), 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)', 21 October (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>)

A. Process for CSO reporting on SDG16+

Developed in collaboration with national civil society partners in East Africa, this *Process for CSO reporting on SDG16+* outlines a series of steps to develop a CSO report that is inclusive and comprehensive, and which complements existing initiatives.

PHASE I: PREPARATION	
Step	Guidance
1. Form core group or coalition to lead report writing and production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A coalition/network helps ensure wider representation, increased capacity and solidarity. If no appropriate CSO structure already exists, form a coalition or similar light-touch structure to organise report production.
2. Agree aims and framework of report – including which SDG16+ targets to focus on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decide who the report is aimed at: for example, government departments or ministries, the UN or international partners. Identify priority SDG16+ targets in the national context. Agree report structure (Saferworld's <i>Framework for CSO reporting on SDG16+</i> provides guidance).
3. Agree roles and responsibilities of core group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decide on the report's lead author(s), reviewers, and other roles and who will be responsible for government and other CSO outreach and organising meetings or consultations.
4. Develop work plan and timeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that target completion date for report is at least six weeks before HLPF (mid-July).

PHASE II: ADAPTING TO CONTEXT	
Step	Guidance
5. Identify previous reports to refer to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refer to previous VNRs or national civil society reports on SDG16+ as a baseline.
6. Decide which indicators are most useful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are existing Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal indicators (IAEG-SDG) appropriate for targets and context? Are complementary global indicators appropriate? Are additional context-specific indicators necessary? Do national development plans already have relevant indicators?
7. Identify existing data sets and any additional data sources needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can you work with government national statistic offices to access correct data? Have previous reports presented data sets? Do the core group or partners have access to their own informal data?



PHASE III: OUTREACH AND CONSULTATIONS	
Step	Guidance
8. Organise consultations with a wider group of CSOs and local authorities for a more inclusive process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold consultations with other civil society actors working on SDG16+ issues to encourage their input and contributions. Consult local authorities where appropriate. If resources allow, make sure consultations are not just held in capital cities but in smaller towns and rural areas. If resources allow, create an online tool to collect further data (online surveys, WhatsApp outreach). Ensure outreach to minority groups, women, youth and other less-represented groups.
9. Reach out to government and UN regarding report process (if feasible)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If politically viable, engage government and UN offices to provide information about the forthcoming report. If possible, ask government and UN offices to provide any data or evidence of implementation efforts.

PHASE IV: REPORT DEVELOPMENT	
Step	Guidance
10. Draft progress report and share with core group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide an early draft to members of the core group and ensure space and opportunities to feedback and provide comments.
11. Organise validation with CSOs consulted earlier in the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Once a draft has been edited and is close to being finalised, host a validation session with CSOs who attended earlier consultations.
12. Present advance findings to government (if feasible)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where appropriate and feasible, share report findings with the government and engage them in discussion about how to address report findings.
13. Finalise report text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure core group and all partners approve final report.

PHASE V: PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION	
Step	Guidance
14. Enable other CSOs to endorse report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help boost legitimacy of the report by sharing it for wider sign-on and endorsement from other CSOs.
15. Publication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow plenty of time for report editing, copy-editing, design and printing.
16. Organise national and global launch of report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organise a national launch to share the report with national CSOs, government, the UN and donors. Organise a global launch (if possible) to share the report with the wider UN community and feed into the official SDG review process.

B. Framework for CSO reporting on SDG16+

Guidance for producing official government VNRs has helped to improve them and to streamline reporting at the HLPF. Saferworld's framework is intended to provide a useful template for structuring reports by civil society. Like VNRs, civil society reporting should focus on assessing progress in delivering specific SDG targets; but importantly it should also analyse the process around setting, and delivering on, sustainable development priorities at a national level. In contexts where data for SDG16+ indicators is missing or hard to access, or where SDG16+ implementation efforts are lagging, analysis of the national processes relating to SDG priority-setting, implementation, monitoring and reporting represent in themselves an important contribution to accountability efforts. Hence this *Framework for CSO reporting on SDG16+* is divided into two main sections: the first on the process and the second on the content – what actual progress has been made towards achieving the identified targets.

INTRODUCTION		
Section	Subsection	Guidance
Executive summary		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary of most important findings and recommendations. Include brief summary of purpose, scope and methodology of report.
1. Introduction		<p>Explain the report, referring to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> purpose scope methodology authors (depending upon context and risk assessment) coalition or CSOs putting their name to the report (depending upon context and risk assessment)

PART A: PROCESS		
Section	Subsection	Guidance
2. Track record on reporting		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has country X previously submitted a VNR, and if so, when? Did the VNR make reference to SDG16+ and its targets, and if so, how?
3. Shared ownership	a) Who was/is engaged in the VNR process?	<p>Assess level of engagement and inclusion of the following groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government departments and ministries Parliament Civil society, including women's organisations and youth groups Business Other groups as appropriate to the context <p>Did the UN support an inclusive process? How?</p>
	b) How were they engaged?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through which mechanism? For example, consultations, online platforms, focus groups. At what stage in the process? For example, at the outset or when the VNR was virtually completed? Were CSOs engaged in a proactive and timely manner?
	c) Was this engagement effective? What was the result of this engagement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the VNR include input from parliament, civil society and business? Is there evidence that this input influenced changes to the final version of the VNR? Were CSOs engaged in a proactive and timely manner?

PART A: PROCESS		
Section	Subsection	Guidance
4. Alignment	a) Incorporation of SDG16+ and its targets into national planning processes	<p>Has SDG16+ been incorporated into:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> vision documents, national development plans, policies, legislation, programmes and budgets? <p>These issues should be looked at from the following perspectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sectoral National Sub-national
5. Official strategy, structures and capacities for SDG16+	a) Coordination b) Implementation c) Data gathering and analysis d) Reporting	Summarise official strategy, structures and capacities in country X for work on SDG16+. This should include analysis of mechanisms for coordination, efforts on implementation, approaches or bodies responsible for data gathering and analysis, and a summary of reporting procedures followed so far.
6. Civil society strategy, structures and capacities for SDG16+	a) Coordination b) Implementation c) Data gathering and analysis d) Reporting	Summarise civil society strategy, structures and capacities in country X for work on SDG16+. This should include analysis of mechanisms for coordination, efforts on implementation, capacities for data gathering and analysis, and a summary of reporting procedures followed so far.

PART B: CONTENT		
Section	Subsection	Guidance
1. Priority SDG16+ targets	a) List priority targets for country/context	This should cover a minimum of three SDG16+ targets and a maximum of ten. Link these to national development documents (where available).
	b) What was the process for identifying priority targets?	Explain the process, including meetings, consultations, workshops and internal assessments.
	c) Why were these targets prioritised?	
2. Indicators for selected SDG16+ targets	a) What indicators were used?	Refer to Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDG) where possible.
	b) Were global or national indicators used – and why?	<p>Explain the rationale for the selection of indicators. Where appropriate, identify quantitative and qualitative data – but ensure that data was collected using rigorous and professional methods.</p> <p>Acknowledge data gaps and challenges if appropriate.</p>
3. Review of progress	a) Specify targets and indicators	For each target, follow steps 3a to 3f.
	b) Define timeframe of review and geographic area	
	c) Specify data source	Refer precisely to sources of data – whether official or third-party data.
	d) Define baseline	Define any available baselines, or acknowledge lack of accurate baseline if none exists.
	e) Data presentation	Visually present data in an accessible form. Annexes can be used if visual presentation needs to be extensive.
	f) Data analysis	Ensure data analysis focuses on improvements or shortcomings from previous reporting (official VNRs or UN reports on development progress).

PART C: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Section	Subsection	Guidance
1. Conclusions	a) Process	Focus on: a) achievements b) challenges c) gaps d) critical factors for success
	b) Content	
2. Recommendations	a) Process	Recommendations should be clearly targeted to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ national government ■ national civil society ■ UN (in-country and at headquarters) ■ international partners
	b) Content	They should acknowledge resource constraints and institutional mandates but offer constructive and practical ways to: a) build on achievements b) address challenges c) fill gaps d) strengthen success factors

ANNEXES

Section	Subsection	Guidance
1. List of organisations consulted		Naming CSOs will depend on context and risk assessment.
2. Data sets	a) Data sets	Present data sets used (if appropriate).
	b) Additional data analysis	Present additional data sets used (if appropriate).
3. National development plans or frameworks		Include most relevant subsections of national development plans (if appropriate).

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace.
www.saferworld.org.uk

We are indebted to many partners and allies whose collaboration and advice has informed this guide. In particular, we are grateful for input from the United Nations Development Programme's Global Alliance for Reporting on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies. For more information see:

<https://www.un-globalalliance.org/> and
<https://www.sdg16hub.org/global-alliance>.

This publication was made possible with support from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Additional resources for SDG reporting

United Nations General Assembly (2015), 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)'

UN Sustainable Development (2018), 'Updated voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF)'

Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (2019), 'Inputs to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development'

SWP Berlin (2018), 'UN Reforms for the 2030 Agenda'

Together 2030, CAFOD, Uniting to Combat NTDs (2018), 'Voluntary National Reviews – Engaging in national implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals – a civil society quick guide'

Division for Sustainable Development, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018), 'How should civil society stakeholders report their contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?'

Transparency, Accountability & Participation Network (2017), 'Beyond Voluntary National Reviews: Approaches and Methodologies for [Civil Society/Parallel/Shadow/Spotlight Reporting] on SDG16'

Forus (2018), 'Guidelines for CSO Shadow Reports – Monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at national level'

World Bank (2018), 'Atlas of Sustainable Development Goals 2018'

Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies (2017), 'List of Resources: Monitoring and Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies'