



## Civil Society Engagement in the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals 2030

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**Abstract.** This paper examines Civil Society Organisations Engagement in the context of SDGs. The concept of Civil Society is stressed as well as their role in attainment of SDGs CSOs effectiveness can improve the collective drive towards achieving the SDGs. The concept of SDGs is likewise defined as well as all the seventeen (17) goals with a view of how government can create enabling environment for active involvement of CSOs in attaining SDGs in Nigeria because the coordinated efforts and increased synergies between CSOs and Government will accelerate the progress towards the attainment of the SDGs. Therefore, it is essential to unravel the potential roles of CSOs in the effective implementation of the SDGs as well as to enhance their engagement, impact and effectiveness in global development processes.

**Keywords:** Civil Society Organisations, Engagement and SDGs

### 1. Introduction

In January 2016, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as the main international mechanism for guiding development in all United Nations member states until 2030. These global goals concern a wide range of targets, including poverty alleviation, economic growth and environmental objectives. National governments, however,

cannot realise these ambitious goals on their own. Collective and individual efforts at the local, national and international levels are necessary. Moreover, governments will need the broad involvement of other stakeholders, such as the private sector, the general public and civil society organisations (CSOs) towards attaining all the 17 Goals of SDGs.

The SDGs build and expand on the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by focusing on critical dimensions of sustainable development in both developing and developed countries, including human rights obligations, good governance, social justice, equity within countries, sustainability (particularly environmental sustainability), vulnerability and the exclusion of marginal populations and the poorest of the poor (Meyer-Ohlendorf et al., 2013; Simelane and Chiroro, 2013). Like the MDGs, the SDGs will not be legally binding; they represent a political commitment to development by all UN member states (Meyer-Ohlendorf et al., 2013).

Until now, the debates surrounding the SDGs have mainly concerned the setting of goals and indicators. Less attention has been paid to discussing the roles and responsibilities that different stakeholders should take in achieving these seventeen goals – in particular, how to best implement this universal framework through the engagement of CSOs.

Given the scope and ambition of the SDGs, it is clear that governments alone cannot achieve the agenda. They must also facilitate participation of all sectors of society, including civil society organisations (CSOs), the private sector and the general public to tailor the ambitious global-development agenda most especially the SDG 4- in which you and I are critical stakeholders.

## 2. The Concept of CSOs

The concept of civil society organisations goes back many centuries in Western thinking with its roots in Ancient Greece. The modern idea of civil society emerged in the 18th Century, influenced by political theorists from Thomas Paine to George Hegel, who developed the notion of civil society as a domain parallel to but separate from the states (Bissio, 2015).

In the 90s the trend towards democracy opened up space for civil society and the need to cover increasing gaps in social services created by structural adjustment and other reforms in developing countries hence Civil society becomes a sphere of social interaction between the household (family) and the state which is manifested in the norms of community cooperative, structures of voluntary association and networks of public communication. Norms are values of trust, reciprocity, tolerance and inclusions, which are critical to cooperation and community problem solving; structure of association refers to the full range of informal and formal organization through which citizens pursue common interests.

Civil society is an autonomous association which develop a dense, diverse and pluralistic network with range of local groups, specialized organizations and linkages between them to **amplify** the corrective voices as a partner in governance.

The key features of successful civil societies which emanate from various definitions include the following:

- separation from the state and the market;
- formed by people who have common needs, interests and values like

tolerance, inclusion, cooperation and equality; and

- development through a fundamentally endogenous and autonomous process which cannot easily be controlled from outside.

## 3. Difference between CSOs and NGOs

Civil society should not be equated to non-government organizations (NGOs). NGOs are part of civil society though they play an important and sometimes leading role in activating citizen participation in socio-economic development and politics and in shaping or influencing policy. Civil society is a broader concept, encompassing all organizations and associations that exist outside the state and the market.

## 4. The Role of Civil Society

According to the United Nations Development Group (UNDG, 2013), there are strong voices demanding the full participation of civil society in governance. Civil society must play a critical role in fostering advocacy and mediation in policy development, identifying crucial development priorities, proposing practical solutions and policy opportunities, and criticising impractical or problematic policies for SDGs (UNDP, 2014).

Civil society has been widely recognized as an essential ‘third’ sector. Its strength can have a positive influence on the state and the market. Civil society is therefore seen as an increasingly important agent for promoting good governance like **transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness and accountability.**

## 5. How Civil Society Organisations Can Foster Good Governance

Civil society can further good governance by the following:

- by policy analysis and advocacy;
- by regulation and monitoring of state performance and the action and behaviour of public officials;

- by building social capital and enabling citizens to identify and articulate their values, beliefs, civic norms and democratic practices;
- by mobilizing particular constituencies, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized sections of masses, to participate more fully in politics and public affairs; and
- by development work to improve the wellbeing of their own and other communities.
- by giving voice to the concerns of primary and secondary stakeholders particularly poor and marginalized populations, and help ensure that their views are factored into policy and program decisions;
- by strengthening and leveraging impact of development programs by providing local knowledge, identifying potential risks, targeting assistance, and expanding reach, particularly at the community level;
- by bringing innovative ideas and solutions to development challenges at both the local and global levels;
- by providing professional expertise and increasing capacity for effective service delivery, especially in environments with weak public sector capacity or in post-conflict situations;
- by improving public transparency and accountability of development activities, and thus contributing to the enabling environment for good governance.

## 6. The Concept of SDGs

Sustainable development is a process for meeting human development goals while sustaining the ability of natural systems to continue to provide the natural resources and **ecosystem** services ( 4: provisioning; Regulating; Supporting and cultural) upon which the economy and society depends.

Sustainable development is the organizing principle for sustaining finite resources necessary to provide for the needs of future generations of life on the planet. It is a process that envisions a desirable future state for human

societies in which living conditions and resource-use continue to meet human needs without undermining the "integrity, stability and beauty" of natural **biotic systems...living components of a community / society. the SDG addresses both biotic and abiotic components to ensure sustainable development for mankind.**

The SDGs differ greatly from the MDGs: With a total of 17 different Goals and targets ranging from topics such as health to poverty, energy, infrastructure, sustainable consumption and peaceful societies.

### 6.1 CSOs and SDGs

The inclusion of CSOs in the SDGs processes is imperative, for they play crucial roles in the society as agents of accountability and service delivery. In the African context, the inclusion of CSOs is important because governance throughout the continent is described as being "bad" and of low quality (Owuye and Bissessar, 2012) hence the inclusion of CSOs will assist in advancing the SD goals by effectively articulating the needs and aspirations of the poor, fulfilling critical service-delivery gaps and promoting "good" governance practices (Motala et al., 2014).

The SD Goals are as follows:

SDG 1: End Poverty in all its form everywhere:

SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved Nutrition and promote sustainable Agriculture

SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

SDG 5 Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

SDG 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable and sustainable and modern energy for all

SDG 8: promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

SDG 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation.

SDG 10: reduce inequality within and among countries

SDG 11: make cities and human settlement inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production pattern

SDG 13: take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact

SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the ocean, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development

SDG 15: restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystem, sustainably manage forest, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

SDG 16: promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels

SDG 17: strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development

## **6.2 Engaging CSOs in SDGs: What should be done?**

The Role of CSOs will be promotion of public consensus and local ownership for reforms and for national poverty reduction and development strategies by creating knowledge-sharing networks, building common ground for understanding, encouraging public-private cooperation, and sometimes even diffusing tensions.

The civil societies should be allowed to participate in the design of strategies, as service providers through community organizations and national NGOs, and serves as watchdogs to ensure government fulfilment of commitments.

The insistence on a transparent process by the CSOs for the development of national strategies to achieve the SDGs by working side by side with government (state) and the market to gain a stronger foothold in policy-making and

implementation by undertaking these crucial roles:

Translate the voices of the poorest and most marginalised citizens into rational or strong arguments that are acknowledged and addressed by the local government. The CSOs as the Voice of the Poorest and Most Marginalised Citizens: “Leaving no one behind” is an underlying principle of the SDGs. The SDGs represent a globally legitimate frame of reference for CSOs, which can introduce issues into policy dialogues. Where possible, CSOs should identify integrated improvements or interventions that could make a significant difference for vulnerable people.

Develop relationships or partnerships with the local government, and in particular, identify the government departments, actors or institutions that need to respond in order to remedy problems. Moreover, they can ensure that action is taken by the responsible person or department, and if this is not the case, they should also follow up with the relevant government officials or departments by engaging them to do the needful.

Use human rights as a lens of analysis. Adopting a human rights approach will enable the identification of groups of people whose rights have been violated, neglected or overlooked in development processes (UNDP, 2007). This approach also calls for the need to understand why these particular groups of people have had their rights infringed – for example, as a result of discriminatory laws or social practices that perpetuate inequality (UNDP, 2007).

Identify, engage with and learn from other CSOs that interact with these groups. CSOs should use “claimed” or “invited” spaces to highlight the actions, pilot projects or remedies that are effective or ineffective. In such spaces, CSOs can introduce issues important for their constituencies to the policy agenda through research advocacy, the lobbying of governments, litigation, mobilisation of public opinion and other actions (Coalition on Civil Society Resource Mobilisation, 2012).

Play a critical role as transformers in society by being involved in training and advocacy processes, which build the capacities and knowledge of the general populace towards achieving the SDGs. This will ensure that people become the focus of the SDGs and that the most vulnerable in society are not left behind when these global development goals are localised.

## **7. Civil Society Organisations as Agents of Accountability**

Another critical role of civil society is to ensure that governments are held accountable (Bissio, 2015). Accountability is typically based on three elements: responsibility, answerability and enforceability (OHCHR, CESR, 2013).

Responsibility entails that those in positions of authority have clearly defined duties and performance standards, which enable a transparent and objective assessment of their behaviour (OHCHR, CESR, 2013).

Answerability demands that public officials and institutions present logical and articulate justifications for their actions and decisions to those affected, such as the general public, voters and other institutions (OHCHR, CESR, 2013).

Enforceability requires public institutions to implement mechanisms that measure the degree to which government officials and institutions abide by established standards, and that enforce sanctions on officials who do not comply and, when needed, ensure that the proper corrective and remedial action is carried out (OHCHR, CESR, 2013).

The three elements of accountability are not mutually exclusive, but interlinked. It is thus paramount that the roles and responsibilities of governments are clearly defined, particularly in terms of the answerability and enforceability dimensions of these development goals.

### **7.1 Responsibility**

A starting point to better understanding responsibility in the context of these global goals is the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” which is anchored in the

SDGs. This principle emphasizes that the responses of different UN member states to the SDGs will be context-specific and that their priorities will also be weighted differently. Consequently, countries will need to mobilise or redirect resources to certain goals that address issues that are most pressing to their local context (Osborn et al., 2015).

In South Africa, for example, high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality are identified as the core context-specific problems. In the past, the agenda of the South African MDGs prioritised these core issues, and it is likely that the SDG agenda will continue to have a similar context-specific, weighted focus. Nigeria is doing same, the CSOs are assisting government in crafting these context specific problems.

### **7.2 Accountability**

As an agent of accountability, CSOs need to participate and be integrated into development and planning processes at the national and local levels. One of the failures of the MDGs was the exclusion of civil society from the planning and formulation of goal-setting processes and development strategies in the beginning (UN Millennium Project, 2005; Sachs, 2012; Simelane and Chiroro, 2013; Motala et al., 2014). Given the lesson learned from this experience, SDGs should feature broader stakeholder involvement from the onset (ACSC meeting, 2015; DDP roundtable talk, 2015). The creation of institutional spaces that facilitate meaningful CSO participation is critical in this regard, with the goal of ensuring that SDG-related decisions can be proactively shaped starting from an early stage.

In this context, governments should endorse the use of various CSO-driven initiatives to promote accountability and scrutiny of operations: participatory budgeting and expenditure tracking, public expenditure tracking surveys and citizen report cards (UNCDF, 2010).

### **7.3 Answerability**

CSOs are able to promote transparency through the dissemination of information. For example,

to highlight what has and has not been achieved by the government, CSOs can disseminate publications on legal provisions, public expenditure allocations, governance, accountability mechanisms and other matters that the government may not want to share (Motala et al., 2014).

The formation of partnerships or coalitions with other CSOs is an opportunity to strengthen the power of arguments in these institutional spaces and to approach development in an integrated manner. CSOs can act as a watch dog, critically examining government policies to ensure that government actions align with global development goals (Environmental Monitoring Group, 2005).

#### **7.4 Enforceability**

Enforceability is not only centred on punishing those who do not comply with established standards. It is also concerned with ensuring the availability of adequate and systematic mechanisms for measuring compliance according to stipulated responsibilities (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). Enforceability is also associated with the need to ensure that the appropriate corrective action is carried out (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). Although the SDGs are not legally binding, the localisation of these goals into domestic legal systems does provide some form of legal accountability and opportunities for enforcement by all countries (DDP roundtable talk, 2015).

Judicial enforcement at the court level is a possible route for CSOs. Litigations, however, are often very expensive and take a long time (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). Despite the costs of litigation, there are a number of success stories. For example, human rights-based social mobilisation resulted in the court-ordered dispensation of antiretroviral treatment in South Africa, which is argued to have saved over a million people (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). The judicial route can often identify systematic policy failures, and courts can be used to promote structural and institutional change (OHCHR, CESR, 2013) through the shout of CSOs.

#### **8. CSOs as Service Delivery Agents**

The CSOs play a key role in delivery procedures particularly in situations where governments lack capacity, capability or the will to provide essential services for their citizens (UNCDF, 2010; Save the Children, 2012). As a result, these actors must be collectively involved in shaping demand, developing state policies and delivering services (UNCDF, 2010). This is particularly relevant in areas affected by conflict and characterised by high levels of poverty and a lack of access to basic services (Save the Children, 2012).

CSOs are often better suited to meeting the needs of the poor, as they can be more flexible than the government and can identify creative and innovative alternatives to development (Coalition on Civil Society Resource Mobilisation, 2012).

#### **9. CSOs as Data Collectors, Reporters and Monitoring Officers**

It is clear that data gaps, the insufficient use of data and differences in indicator values between national and international sources hampered the MDG process (Easterly, 2007; Sanga, 2011; Sachs, 2012). Moreover, “traditional” forms of large-scale data collection take a number of years to complete and analyse, which ultimately delays action for those in need (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015).

In an effort to remedy this, the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Agenda called for a “data revolution”: data collection systems should be low-cost and reliable, and they should ultimately ensure that data are accurate, timely and immediately available to policymakers. The data revolution needs to be an inclusive and transparent process that includes statistical experts, CSOs, national human rights institutions, service providers and marginalised populations (UN, 2013).

The CSOs should be involved in the development of adaptable tools for data collection, monitoring and evaluation of processes related to the implementation of the SDGs. Recent improvements in information

technology, such as the innovative use of mobile technology in collecting data, create an opportunity to enhance statistics for accountability and decision-making purposes and to create new forms of participatory monitoring (UN, 2013). This could be used by CSOs to enhance government and service-provider accountability (UN, 2013). Citizen information is then forwarded to the relevant policymakers and development planners. While the use of such online and mobile technology can facilitate the real-time monitoring of development results, this innovation is currently disconnected from traditional statistical communities throughout the world (UN, 2013) and will need to change.

The CSOs have an important role to play in this new form of data collection by encouraging people to use these new platforms. CSOs can also use the data from such platforms to highlight ineffective or problematic areas with the overall aim of ensuring that domestic resources are mobilised to address issues.

In addition, CSOs can thus create their own set of indicators to help identify, and bring attention to, the issues that are most pressing in the local context. These indicators need to focus on the local people who should benefit from the realisation of the SDGs. This means that civil society can perform a watchdog function by ensuring that governments are delivering on these commitments. It is envisaged that this will aid the mobilisation and redirection of resources.

#### **10. An Enabling Environment for CSOs Engagement on SDGs**

“An enabling environment is a set of interrelated conditions—such as legal, bureaucratic, fiscal, informational, political, and cultural—that impact on the capacity of ...development actors to engage in development processes in a sustained and effective manner”.

Fox et al (2002) in Brinkenhoff (2004) identified five roles for government which could contribute to an enabling environment being fostered for civil society organisations to participate effectively namely: mandating, facilitating, resourcing, partnering and

endorsing. Each of these is elaborated on briefly below:

- Mandating refers to the legal and regulatory environment within which CSOs operate.
- Facilitating role is where government incentivises CSOs as service providers or provides information easily and in an acceptable format.
- Resourcing refers to the direct funding of CSO work.
- Partnering is where both parties gain mutual benefit through collaboration etc. An example of this is the South African National Aids Council which includes strong civil society membership and which collectively developed the national five year Strategic Plan for HIV, AIDS, TB and Malaria for the period 2012 to 2016.
- Endorsing refers to actions by government which recognise the contribution of CSOs, one such example is the work of the NDA in supporting CSO through grant funding, training and capacity building.

#### **11. Tips for Active Engagement of CSOs in attaining SDGs**

CSOs can best contribute to achieving the SDGs by taking the following necessary steps”:

Firstly, CSOs stand to benefit from aligning the framework of their programming to that of the SDGs. By adopting the framing associated with the SDGs, CSOs will be able to participate in debates on global development, which have local level impacts, and can effectively create an argument for.

Secondly, CSOs need to forge new partnerships with other CSOs as well as with governments, the private sector and other international bodies. Within these partnerships, best practices and other information should be shared and translated into meaningful vehicles for the implementation of the SDGs.

Thirdly, CSOs need to work in a coordinated fashion with each other – for example, by

forming a coalition of CSOs to organise civil society engagement with the SDGs and to enhance their interactions with governments. Such a model of collaboration is essential for promoting deliberative governance, identifying gaps, facilitating inclusivity and generating collaborative solutions to challenges related to the SDGs. A coalition is likely to have greater power and presence in governance processes than CSOs attempting to engage with the SDGs on their own.

## 12. Conclusion

From the paper, it is obvious that CSOs function as catalysts in the achievement of SDG goals in both developed, emerging and developing countries. Their role in forming partnerships with government no doubt will facilitate effective implementation of the SDGs as well as on monitoring activities related to this process.

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