

PROGRESSING NATIONAL SDGS IMPLEMENTATION:

2022 Policy Brief

Civic Space

Key Findings

- The 2022 VNR reports presented to the UN’s HLPF by governments around the world continue to be largely silent on issues of shrinking civic space globally, and on the ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists.
- There has been a slight increase in the number of countries addressing developments linked to civic space at the national level. 12 of 44 VNR reports presented in 2022 included insights into the state of national civic spaces, mainly by describing constitutional, regulatory, or policy-based reforms that have been adopted in order to enhance freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, access to information, as well as general levels of democratic participation.
- In contrast, several civil society shadow or parallel reports produced in 2022 highlight how shrinking civic space remains a serious problem in their national contexts including by providing information on government actions that hinder freedom of expression, assembly, association, and access to information – which in some cases contradicts the information contained in the official VNRs.
- It is a matter of serious concern that much of the information linked to the increasing trend of shrinking civic space shared by civil society parallel and shadow reports is being ignored, or only partially dealt with by official VNR reports.

1. Introduction: Civic Space & the 2022 VNRs

“Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organizations are able to organize, 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.” CIVICUS [website](#).

The concept of civic space encompasses a range of different civil and political rights and freedoms (i.e. freedom of association, freedom of expression or speech¹, freedom to peacefully protest, right to participate, access to information etc). The realization of these important rights relies on correct regulatory approaches by the state². The extent to which these rights can be exercised determines the quality and scope of the public space for political expression, debate, and deliberation in any given country.

The level of openness of the public space constitutes a key determinant of the degree to which civil society -and non-state actors in general- will be able voice their views in the public sphere. In the context of sustainable development, the right to actively participate in development processes can be anchored in the “capabilities approach” theorized by Amartya Sen³ – a theoretical framework that conceives human freedom as the principal means and principal objective of development processes.

Despite the important role that open public debate and deliberation spaces play in enabling people to exercise their freedom to shape social, environmental, political, and economic contexts, VNR reports continue to largely ignore the issue of closing civic space, the active curtailment of the political rights and freedoms of ordinary people and of organized civil society, and the ongoing attacks on human rights defenders and environmentalists.

¹ Freedom of expression implies that people have the right to seek, obtain, receive and hold information about human rights and human rights violations. Unfortunately, many governments have tried to repress that freedom by carrying out extensive surveillance in the digital arena. Some governments have misused the process of developing Digital Security Acts to silence dissidents and any kind of criticisms.

² “The political, financial, legal and policy context that affects how CSOs carry out their work. It can include: 1) Laws, policies and practices respecting freedom of association, the right to operate without state interference, the right to pursue self-defined objectives, and the right to seek and secure funding from national & international sources; 2) Institutionalized, inclusive and transparent multi-stakeholder dialogue; 3) Effective support from development providers to empower CSOs.” Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC). September 2015. GPEDC’s Pilot Indicators: Refined methodologies for indicators 1, 2 and 3. Mexico

³ Sen, A. (1999) Development as Freedom, Oxford: Oxford University Press, cited by Gamage, Clair (2019).

In addition, policies put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic are still being applied in many countries and used as an excuse by some governments to further encroach on civic space. Authorities detained, prosecuted, attacked, and even killed critics, closed media outlets, broke up peaceful protests, and enacted vague laws in the name of protecting public health and security⁴. Other countries have engaged in enforced disappearances and the apprehension of opposition political figures, which has taken a serious toll on the fundamental human rights situation in those countries.

2. Civic space status of the 2022 VNR reporting countries

According to the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), which examines the status of civic space around the world, civic space for 64% of the countries that reported to the HLPF in 2022 is characterized as “obstructed,” “repressed” or “closed”, a higher percentage compared to 2020 (62%) and 2021 (62%). CIVICUS’s Monitor of civic space provides information for **all 44 countries that reported to the HLPF in 2022**.

Only **nine (9)** of the countries that reported in 2022 were considered “open,” meaning the state enables and safeguards civic space.¹⁸ For **seven (7)** countries, civic space is considered “narrowed.”¹⁹ This means the rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly have been violated in one way or another.

Ten (10) reporting countries were classified as “obstructed.”²⁰ For a country to be considered obstructed, civil space must have a series of legal and practical constraints on the practice of fundamental rights. In these conditions, illegal surveillance and bureaucratic harassment occur. There is some space for non-state media, but journalists are subject to attack.

In 2022, **thirteen (13)** reporting countries were in the “repressed” category.²¹ The monitor ranks a country as “repressed” if civic space is severely restrained. Individuals who criticize a power holder may be subject to surveillance, harassment, intimidation, injury or death. The work of civil society organizations is often impeded and under threat of deregistration by authorities. Mass detentions may occur, and the media usually only portrays the position of the state. Websites and social media activities are heavily monitored.

⁴ “Economic growth has been deliberately and consistently used as an excuse to suppress the rights and voices of civil society and marginalised sectors. This has only been further reinforced in a COVID-19 world where increased militarism as a response to the health crisis has led to further infringement and violation of people’s rights.” - 2022 CPDE VNR Study (<https://csopartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ENG-2022-CPDE-VNR-Study.pdf>)

The last category in the CIVICUS scale is “closed.” In this category, there is a complete closure of the civic space. An atmosphere of fear and violence is prevalent. Powerful state and non-state actors routinely imprison people and cause injury and death to individuals who seek to peacefully assemble and express themselves. In such circumstances, criticizing authorities is severely punished. The internet is heavily censored and online criticisms of authorities are severely punished. In 2022, **five (5)** reporting countries were classified as “closed.”²²

3. Improvements to national civic space reported in the 2022 VNRs

The following countries reported some improvement in national civic space in their 2022 VNR reporting: *Ethiopia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Sao Tomé & Príncipe, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, The Gambia, The Netherlands and Aruba*. A few of these cases are examples of good practices.

In **Ethiopia**, the VNR asserts that laws restricting civic space have been replaced through a process of reforms – which include a proclamation that now guarantees the freedom of association of citizens, abolishing previously unwarranted restrictions, and places the administration of civil society organizations under the management of an independent board. According to Ethiopia’s VNR, as a result of this more amenable set of regulations, civil society organizations, especially those involved in the protection of human rights have flourished and are able to play a positive role in the community and the SDG implementation process. The Ethiopian VNR also states that restrictions on the media have also been lifted, to ensure freedom of expression. Despite this increasingly positive context for civic space depicted in the VNR, according to the CIVICUS monitor Ethiopia is still within the ‘Repressed’ category - and the ongoing war in the north of the country has implied the imposition of internet blackouts, widespread arbitrary detentions, as well as intimidation of human rights defenders, journalists and other media actors in the Tigray and Amhara regions.

In **Sao Tomé and Príncipe**, the VNR notes that the Constitution has provisions on Freedom of the press (Article 30), freedom of expression and information (Article 29) – which seems to be confirmed by reality on the ground, since the CIVICUS monitor categorizes the country as ‘open’.

In **Togo**, the VNR highlights that the country has undertaken reforms to strengthen cooperation with CSOs, by recently adopting a decree setting the conditions for cooperation between non-governmental organizations and the Government to improve the alignment between CSO interventions and national priorities.

In **Equatorial Guinea**, the VNR outlines that some progress has been made in opening the country civic space in the context of SDG implementation – although limited to environmental matters. The VNR asserts that after the Third National Economic Conference, the General Directorate from the Ministry of

Environment integrated the SDGs into strategies, policies, plans, and programs and organized meetings with CSOs to raise awareness and inform them about the need to accompany the Government in the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda implementation. This process fostered the legalization of several NGOs that work in the environmental sector - although the VNR doesn't specify whether the legalization process was open to every organization or there were political parameters involved.

The VNR from **The Gambia** highlights a couple of interesting developments in its democratization process. Following decades of human rights abuses committed in the context of the country's former dictatorship, the democratically elected government is currently reinstating a fully functional National Human Rights Commission, whose roles and responsibilities conform to international standards, as well as the formulation and adoption of a new media law –which, according to the VNR '*received a boost from ongoing collaboration with [the NGO] Article 19 aimed at the adoption of international best practices in media regulation and the replacement of the draconian laws promulgated by the previous administration*'. The CIVICUS monitor would tend to confirm these positive developments, although the country still has a long way to go to build a fully open civic space⁵. The VNR also asserts that within the democratic transition, civil society has been able to expand its monitoring role, since '*the country has strengthened the coordination mechanism among civil society actors to ensure integrity of the electoral processes and the capacity of civil society to monitor elections and political reform processes*'.

The VNR from the **Netherlands** expresses in a more generic manner that the country is a vocal advocate of freedom of expression, both online and offline, and states that people should be able to express their opinions, take part in political and social debate, and access secure, uncensored information.

Although the review of the different mentions on civic space available in this year's VNRs shows some positive developments -given that more countries have addressed the issue than in previous years-, the information is still partial and not always commensurate with the reality of civic space on the ground. This apparent disconnect between the official view and the perception by practitioners in many countries may be due to the fact that the existence of constitutional provisions, laws and regulations, aren't enough to build a healthy civic space. In fact, it could be argued that the way in which power is exercised, the independence of the judiciary, and the degree to which political cultures shape processes also play a significant role. It may also be the case that some of the democracy-enhancing reforms conveyed in the reports are still too recent to yield positive results. However, the underlying concern is that this gap between the way legal rights are conceived and implemented has been observed for a number of years and is particularly concerning given the increasing trend of closing civic space around the world.

⁵ [The Gambia adopts Access to Information law](#)



4. Rating of Civic Space in 2022 VNR Reporting Countries by Civil Society Parallel Reports

The present policy brief contains analyses of **19 VNR-related civil society reports**. These civil society shadow/parallel reports provide complementary information, and aim to inform and influence decision-making processes. When read in parallel with VNR reports, these “shadow” and “spotlight” reports provide additional – and sometimes contradictory – information in relation to country-level SDG implementation. The perspectives and information shared by non-state stakeholders provide an independent view from practitioners and key community groups on the extent to which (and how effectively) national SDGs implementation is being carried out at different national and subnational levels.

Although the vast majority of VNR reports continue to ignore the process of shrinking civic space, a number civil society reports highlight this as an ongoing issue. With varying levels of detail, **many shadow, spotlight and/or parallel reports prepared by civil society organizations communicate how the closure of civic space is being enacted in their countries**, including information on government actions that hinder freedom of expression, assembly, association, access to information, and participation.

Such a body of knowledge serves to raise awareness of the issue of shrinking civic space and how civil society voices are either not being able to meaningfully contribute to public deliberation processes or are being actively silenced. **The fact that so much information around this topic is being shared through civil society reports but is mostly absent from VNR reports continues to be extremely worrying in the context of the stated ambition of open, inclusive implementation of the 2030 Agenda.** Box 4 shows some of the main topics identified by civil society organizations who are based in 2022 reporting countries with regards to their civic space.

5. Civic Space & participatory processes for stakeholder engagement in the SDGs

The reports and written inputs by civil society organizations with regards to the 2022 VNR reports point to a range of challenges including the need for improved coordination and integration, greater transparency and enhanced institutional mechanisms for monitoring and progress assessment, better spaces for policy dialogue between civil society organizations and governments, as well as increased capacity-building for all stakeholders. More generally, in most countries there is a clear demand for the protection and expansion of civic space so that civil society organizations can advocate and operate freely.

- **Botswana:** The civil society report from the national platform BOCONGO asserts that, although on paper the governance arrangement established in the country for SDG implementation

appears sound and comprehensive, nevertheless participation within this institutional system tends to be too generic and doesn't maximize the benefits of having clear mandates, methodologies and resources.

- **Cameroon:** While engagement was noted on the VNRs by a number of civil society groups including Sightsavers, at the same time, the civil society report from the women's platform REFACOF states that only few spaces for participation were made available within the VNR process, and that these were solely for the validation of government reports. Moreover, participation tends not to be fully representative of the diversity of Cameroonian civil society and the wider citizenry – with very little participation from women, children, youth, and marginalized populations.
- **Gabon:** The Civil society report from the national CSO platform ROPAGA asserts that there are weaknesses regarding the scope of participation in the context of the VNR and limited opportunities for civil society groups to engage with multi stakeholder partnerships. There were also challenges around data availability (databases only being updated every 10 years) and related to this, issues around transparency.
- **Ghana:** The civil society report from the CSO Platform on the SDGs states that here is still a significant gap between policy making and actual implementation, as planning documents are seldom used as tools to effectively guide policymaking and government actions on the ground. CSOs also point out gaps in the participation of young people within sustainable development processes.
- **Greece:** The civil society report from the Hellenic Platform for Development asserts that some key modifications to the institutional system for SDG implementation coordination and oversight are needed to enable more effective participation. These improvements would include the appointment of a Permanent General Secretary in order to provide continuity in the coordination of the implementation process within administration structures between different political cycles, as well as the establishment of a multi stakeholder platform that would foster collective action around policymaking and participatory monitoring.
- **Italy:** The civil society report from GCAP-Italia acknowledges that there have been efforts made in order to improve participation. These improvements have been developed through the updating process of the National Sustainable Development Strategy and the National Action Plan on Policy Coherence. However, there are still further improvements to be made in order to make this participation truly substantive, so that collective deliberation has an influence on policy decisions. There is also a need to improve the articulation and coherence between the NSDS/SDGs

frameworks and policy packages, particularly the EU-funded National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

- **Kazakhstan:** The civil society report from the CSO platform ARGO notes that the SDGs have provided a venue for the government to open participation channels, like the Coordination Council for Sustainable Development and its related working groups arranged following the 5Ps concept. The report also asserts that there is still room for growth regarding meaningful participation, as well as the development of accountability and transparency mechanisms within the SDG implementation process.
- **Mali:** The joint civil society report from Conseil National de la Société Civile Malienne and Forum de la Société Civile du Mali states that although there is some level of satisfaction with participatory processes, mainly stemming from VNR-related consultations, it would be key for the government to open more permanent channels for policy dialogue and cooperation. A specific recommendation from Malian civil society would be the establishment of a Joint Committee, to be constituted by government ministries and agencies, civil society, development partners and the private sector. This would provide a backbone for collective action around policymaking and monitoring and would produce a joint roadmap for SDG implementation.
- **Philippines:** The civil society report from Social Watch-Philippines asserts that there are gaps in participation – with no permanent channels for policy dialogue and selectivity from the government when engaging with civil society. Other gaps in the implementation process include the prevalence of siloed approaches within government, weaknesses in the decentralization process and corruption.
- **Uruguay:** The civil society report from the national CSO platform ANONG notes a series of weaknesses in the implementation process in the country – relating to the fact that the SDGs have only led to new policy announcements from the administration, but not the establishment of new open and inclusive institutions. The report also suggests that there have been no new channels for participation created, while the few sectoral spaces for policy dialogue which were available have been progressively -and silently- dismantled.
- **Jordan:** The civil society report from Phenix Center states that the country still faces challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The reasons for this are manifold and stem from internal structural factors preventing progress with regards to many of the SDGs, such as economic imbalances, lack of fairness of policies, as well as weak coordination and implementation of governmental policies. This is exacerbated by the lack of participatory decision-making processes and accountability mechanisms.

- **Latvia:** The civil society report from the national CSO platform LAPAS asserts that there isn't an overarching multistakeholder coordination platform for SDG implementation in the country, instead the process for implementation and monitoring (connected to the National Development Plan) are under the purview of a Cross-Sectoral Coordination Council and the Prime Minister. The report notes that there are channels for policy dialogue with sectoral ministries and, increasingly, at the local level – but it also asserts that civil society's voices tend to have limited influence within decision-making processes.
- **Malawi:** The civil society report from the national CSO platform CONGOMA states that the SDG mainstreaming and integration process into the long-term development plan MW2063 and its 10-year implementation plan MIP-1 has been relatively participatory, with most of the technical work being carried out in a multistakeholder way within sector working groups (now Pillar and Enabling Coordination Groups). That said, the decentralized structure for implementation, although positive on paper, hasn't been meaningfully inclusive of the views of civil society and the wider citizenry on local priorities.
- **Montenegro:** The civil society report from the NGO Green Home notes that the revamped National Council on Sustainable Development is an interesting opportunity for joint implementation and monitoring of the National Strategy on Sustainable Development – in which the SDGs have been mainstreamed through a participatory process. However, the report also notes that there are still significant gaps, especially around a balanced approach to the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic and social dimensions tend to take precedence over the environment), coordination and data availability, among others.
- **Pakistan:** The civil society report from the Pakistan Development Alliance asserts that civil society and the wider citizenry have very little influence on development processes in the country – with information flows and decision-making being mostly government-driven and government-centered. There are significant gaps remaining in access to justice and decentralization. Nevertheless, they note a positive point in the process is the opportunity to leverage multistakeholder partnerships.
- **Sri Lanka:** The civil society report from the SL Stakeholder Platform on SDGs asserts that the country is in a full-blown crisis including major challenges in terms of governance, economic, social and environmental indicators. The lack of progress on the SDGs is a result of the deterioration of good governance, the rise of corruption, lack of accountability, low transparency, marginalization of subnational governments, and non-inclusion of stakeholders in the transformation process.

- **Sudan:** The civil society report from NIDAA states that an implementation body was established in 2018 to coordinate and monitor SDG implementation. However, since the October 2019 military coup, there isn't a governmental mechanism, nor a specialized implementation agency established to engage with the implementation body, which demonstrates a gap in Sudan's commitment to achieving the SDGs. The implementation body has limited personnel and powers and does not live up to the level of institutional commitment to achieving the SDGs. The report also notes a gap in terms of the lack of a national vision for sustainable development that would inform strategies and policies.
- **Switzerland:** The civil society report from the 2030 Agenda Platform states that although there is a National Sustainable Development Strategy, it is a document that was drafted and approved without any meaningful input from the multistakeholder 2030 Agenda Advisory Group (as was the case also of the VNR) – and is mostly a summary of existing policies and actions. Civil society hence calls for the updating process of the NSDS and its related action plan to be fully participatory and transformative.

6. Conclusion & Recommendations

The level of openness of civic space/ the public space in any country is a key determinant of the degree to which civil society -and non-state actors in general- are able to voice their views in the public sphere. In practice, this determines the extent to which civil society and other actors can exert influence within policy-making processes and political processes in general – programmes, policies, laws, procedures, budgets, political party platforms, and, in the context of sustainable development, the right to actively participate in development processes and to exercise influence over their outcomes.

As political authoritarianism, illiberalism and the weakening of democracy become more evident in countries across the world, there are growing trends towards the shrinkage and closure of civic space in many countries. Agenda 2030, including its SDG 16 commitments to promoting good governance, strong institutions, transparency & accountability, civic participation and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms (civic space), is a very appropriate framework within which to harness collective efforts, and to push back against undemocratic forces which seek to undermine civic space.

The international community should:

- **Agree on an annual review of SDG 16 by the HLPF.** The international community should take advantage of the next official UN HLPF review this year (2023) to agree that SDG 16 (*Peace, justice*



and strong institutions) which includes a focus on fundamental rights and civic space, should be reviewed every year in the same way as SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals).

- **Adopt new structural and process-oriented civic space indicators linked to SDG 16 implementation.** New structural and process-oriented civic space indicators should be developed and adopted by UN Member States to support the international peer review process of SDG 16, Target 16.10 (*Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements*)
- **Establish a new global Civic Space Observatory** International donors (public or private) should fund a new independent global Civic Space Observatory with regional hubs to monitor and collect data on the status of civic space in countries around the world, and link closing civic space to developments in the digital realm. This data should be made publicly available and should inform discussions on civic space within key forums such as the HLPF, UN Human Rights Council, among others. The work of this observatory could build on and expand the work of the existing CIVICUS Monitor.
- **Provide flexible funding to support the operation of CSOs in contexts of closed or closing civic space** Major international donors, including progressive international and regional organisations, governments, and private or philanthropic organisations should consider establishing specific global and regional level funding mechanisms to support CSOs to continue operating in contexts of closed or closing civic space.
- **Resource the capacity development of organized civil society everywhere** to increase its ability to prepare high quality CSO shadow and parallel reports and to advocate more effectively for the strengthening of civic space at multiple levels – local, national, regional and global.
- **Include assessments of civic space in investor risk-assessment approaches:** an assessment of civic space should be included as a key element of mainstream investor risk-assessment instruments and associated rating scales aimed at countries in which private companies or financial institutions are considering investment. International donors should also consider integrating such civic space ratings into their decision-making processes on whether to provide financial assistance to countries.

National Governments should:

- **Establish an enabling environment for organized civil society** through the creation of appropriate legal regulatory and policy frameworks which support non-state actors to contribute to sustainable development, and which set out clearly how multi-stakeholder SDG engagement and partnership can be structured and fostered.

11



- **Ensure open, regular and structured dialogue with civil society at the national level** so that key policy-related and civic space issues can be discussed. They should also include non-state actors in SDG-related institutional mechanisms, and in the official VNR process including in the drafting of the reports.
- **Report on national civic space trends in the VNRs they submit to the UN HLPF process**, including challenges faced, and any constitutional, regulatory, or policy-based reforms which have been adopted to enhance freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, access to information, as well as levels of democratic participation.
- **Support civil society reports being given recognition and status in the UN HLPF process:** Civil society reports (e.g. spotlight, shadow, parallel reports) continue to lack status in official UN HLPF and its related processes. It is recommended that national governments partner with civil society to advocate for independent CSO reports to be acknowledged and given status within the HLPF review process.
- **Engage in peer exchange with other governments to share good practice on civic space issues:** Governments should try to learn from other governments who have engaged in good practice or made notable progress on creating a more open civic space in their countries. This kind of learning could be facilitated through UN-hosted SDG Learning Labs focusing on SDG 16 and on civic space issues.
- **Be able to access specific international funding linked to SDG 16+ to support implementation of key actions linked to civic space in their countries**, including academic research, dialogue with civil society organizations, and capacity building for government officials and members of parliament.

Organized Civil Society Organizations should:

- **Join wider national SDG civil society alliances of CSOs representing different thematic and policy areas in their country (eg Coalition 2030 in Ireland, SDGs Kenya Forum, the Agenda 2030 Working Group in Brazil etc), to pool knowledge and expertise and collaborate on the production of comprehensive CSO Shadow or Parallel reports.** The development of these Parallel/Shadow Reports can provide CSOs with opportunities to complement and augment the information provided in official VNRs, and to address issues that have been overlooked by the VNRs, such as issues of shrinking civic space.

- **Ensure better collaboration between Human Rights and Development CSOs on issues of civic space & SDG 16.** This would also ensure that development CSOs engage with and leverage relevant international human rights treaties, treaty bodies (*OHCHR, Treaty Body secretariats*) and other human rights institutions (*UN Human Rights Council including UPR processes, Offices of UN Special Rapporteurs, National Human Rights Institutions*), and HR regional review mechanisms (*eg ECHR, IAHCR, ACHPR, ASEAN, Venice Commission*) as well as regional human rights networks to increase the effectiveness of their advocacy on civic space.
- **Advocate strongly for CSO Shadow/Parallel reports to be made available for public inspection on the UN’s website,** and for discussion during VNR Labs organized during the HLPF and in other relevant forums where VNRs are being discussed and analyzed.
- **Engage in capacity development aimed at developing the necessary skills to produce & disseminate high quality CSO parallel or shadow reports** including data gathering & analysis, report-writing, political advocacy etc.



This policy brief was prepared by Deirdre de Burca (Forus International) and Josefina Villegas (CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness) and draws on information compiled by Nicolas Sautejeau and Oli Henman (Action for Sustainable Development) for the 2023 Progressing National SDGs Implementation report (7th edition), an independent assessment of the Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) 2022.

The report was produced with financial or in-kind support from the following organizations:

Action for Sustainable Development (A4SD), Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), BOND, Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional (CEPEI), Cooperation Canada, CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE), Forus International, Global Focus, International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), Save the Children (UK), Sightsavers, Together 2030 and World Vision International.



Annex: Civic Space & overall Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in 2022 VNR countries

Civil society reports and CSO written inputs as part of VNR reports provide useful insights on the challenges civil society organizations face in contributing to the 2030 Agenda. Ranging from 2017 to 2020, civil society reports noted a range of challenges that prevent civil society delivery of the 2030 Agenda, including low levels of awareness of the agenda by the public, civil society and government, limited engagement and coordination with government, poor institutional preparedness to implement the 2030 Agenda by national and local governments, lack of an enabling environment, limited finance, issues related to data availability and monitoring capacities, and structural factors such as deeply rooted behaviors and changes in government.

The box below provides an overview of the challenges noted in civil society reports for 2022, which are consistent with the challenges highlighted in previous years. Such consistency is worrying, as it points to a global trend towards closing civic space and a decline in the enabling environment for civil society. Furthermore, it suggests that the issues hindering civil society's action towards 2030 Agenda implementation are not being properly addressed in many countries.

Box 4. Issues surrounding civic space as identified by civil society organizations in their parallel reports

Criminalization of civic dissent / curtailment of freedoms

- **Sri Lanka:** Civil society reports that shrinking civic space in the country in the context of the socio-political upheaval is characterized by criminalization processes and curtailment of the right to peaceful assembly: *'The open shooting of protestors in Rambukkana, the 09th of May attack on 'Gota-Go-Gama', arbitrary arrests and detention of frontliners of the civic struggle, alleged torture of protestors at the start of the Galle Face unrest, are proof that the protection of the Article 14 fundamental right to protest and access to civic spaces are at the discretion of the political administration of Sri Lanka'*, as well as by the 'militarization' of the governance of the right of association, as CSOs are now under the oversight of the Ministry of Defense under the pretext of National Security.
- **Greece:** Civil society asserts that there have been cases of curtailment of freedom of the press and freedom of expression, given that journalists that have conducted investigations into corruption cases have been prosecuted.
- **Kazakhstan:** Civil society reports the curtailment of freedom of speech – especially freedom of the press-, as well as freedom to peaceful assembly and association. The adopted law on

peaceful assembly does not meet the international standards, and the civic space for civil society to freely associate has narrowed significantly. Currently, there are discriminatory norms regarding the creation of non-profit organizations, which include fee-based registration, difficult liquidation process, funding and taxation issues, additional reporting on foreign funding – all of which creates barriers for civil society development.

- **Jordan:** Civil society asserts that since the government invoked the Defense Law during the pandemic, the country has seen increased restrictions to civic space – either by curtailing freedom of the press, of speech, or freedom of association or peaceful assembly. The Defense Law is still in place, and it has implied *‘limiting gatherings and therefore protests and demonstrations – [setting] a precedent over the two past years. It has meant crackdowns of protests or even intention of protest activists. A further indication of a decline in good governance is the fact that Freedom House now classifies Jordan as “not free”, as opposed to “partly free” in the years before, exposing restrictions in the work of civil society, problems with elections and the tightening of controls on individuals and certain societal groups. Additionally, Jordan’s democracy rating according to the Economist’s indicators has declined, as has its rating according to the CIVICUS civil society monitor [...]. There is also more than one law used to prosecute the public and journalists for freedom of expression, including: the Penal Code, the Anti-Terrorism Law, but most commonly the Cybercrime Law, especially Article 11 which allows for arrest and imprisonment for what is considered a criminal offence’.*
- **Pakistan:** Civil society reports that *‘space for CSOs is shrinking and their interventions are being limited or hampered by the government through cumbersome procedural and regulatory interference’.* This hinderance on the freedom of association has taken the form of mandatory registration with State authorities *‘[a CSO] could be suspended or dissolved if the government feels their activities were inadequate or ‘suspicious’.* Based on a survey conducted by AwazCDS-Pakistan Development Alliance, only 45% of respondents agree that they enjoy freedom of assembly and association. 72% perceived that the laws and policies governing CSOs have tightened.
- **Sudan:** Civil society asserts that within the transitional period from August 2019 to October 2021, participation of citizens and their grassroots organizations grew immensely as spaces opened for civil society. However, it also points out that *‘with the current situation following the October 25, 2021 coup, these spaces became fewer, and citizens’ participation decreased. [...] The legal environment faced a setback, civic space was narrowed, and more control was imposed on activities by the Humanitarian Aid Commission and the Security and Intelligence Service’.*

Procedural democracy – lack of substantive participation:

- **Botswana:** The civil society report from Botswana argues that based on perception-based surveys (Afrobarometer 2018), although most Batswanans perceive their country as a formal democracy, at the same time underlying elements of a democratic society like the quality and scope of participation processes and freedom of speech are seen as declining. This has led to a growing disinterest in politics - dropping from 85% in 2003 to 67% in 2014 - and an increasing disengagement from the public sphere of the citizenry at large (except at the community level). Available participation spaces at the national level -particularly those linked to SDG implementation - are perceived as too generic and the capacity for these spaces to provide a venue for more substantial policy dialogue are often viewed with scepticism.
- **Senegal:** Senegal is also recognized as a formal democracy, and civil society recognizes the availability of participation spaces at different territorial levels. However, here again there is a view that the quality of spaces for dialogue is hindered by the fact that the level of participation is perceived as minimal and unsubstantial, for example civil society groups were only able to provide inputs when reports were presented by public authorities.
- **Sri Lanka:** Civil society reports that participation spaces are very limited, for example there are some opportunities for a physical presence in consultations, but with no real possibility to contribute, or these exist only on paper. One example of a space for limited engagement is the Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka – which has never been effectively implemented as a multi-stakeholder council.
- **Greece:** Civil society reports that policy dialogue between government mechanisms and CSOs still remains minimal and superficial. Either within SDG implementation processes at large or regarding the formulation of National Action Plans, consultations are limited and there is no permanent mechanism to connect government bodies and CSOs and promote dialogue; so communications are rather fragmented and take place on an *ad hoc* basis.
- **Italy:** Civil society acknowledges the fact that some key inroads have been made in terms of more substantial participation – such as within the re-formulation process for the National Strategy on Sustainable Development under the previous administration. That said, the approach to participation is still fragmented and inconsistent, as key policy packages like the National Recovery and Resilience Plan have been conceived without proper participation. Participation in other processes at different territorial levels is also fragmented and there is a lack of collaborative planning.

- **Philippines:** Civil society reports that there has been a growing trend of superficial participation since the pandemic, as well as government engaging only with CSOs selected under unspecified criteria.
- **Switzerland:** Civil society points to a lack of substantial participation in policy-formulation processes, as well as mounting political pressures when civil society is critical of entrenched vested interests from the private sector.
- **Uruguay:** Civil society asserts that participation spaces have been progressively -and implicitly- dismantled, as the government convenes civil society less and less regularly. That said, civil society also points out that these spaces were very weakly linked to actual policy-making processes to begin with, and therefore had limited impact.

