SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

'ACTIVATING CIVIC SPACE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: HELPING AND HINDERING FACTORS FOR EFFECTIVE CSO PARTICIPATION IN THE SDGs'

TASKteam
CSO Development Effectiveness
& Enabling Environment

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

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

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

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

PART 1. MULTI-STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE (MSD)

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

PART 2. CSO DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS, ACCOUNTABILITY & TRANSPARENCY

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

PART 3. OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION WITH CSOs

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

PART 4. LEGAL AND REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

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