REPORT
HLPF 2020 SIDE EVENT:
"Delivering on SDG 17: Going Further, Together"
16 July 2020

Opening

Orla Mc Breen welcomed all participants and recalled the rationale for this side event which is to discuss the crucial role CSOs have to play in the implementation of SDG 17, the forgotten SDG, and with that, all SDGs. Evidence will be presented showing a serious gap between what has been agreed internationally and what happens in practice. This side-event is hosted by the Government of Ireland, as Co-chair of the Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (Task Team) which is a unique multi-stakeholder coalition that works to advance these international commitments and calls upon the international community to uphold their shared responsibilities.

Opening Address

The opening address was given by **H.E. Minister Eamon Ryan, Minister for Climate Action, Communication Networks and Transport of Ireland**. Minister Ryan stated that the challenging times we are living in with the COVID-19 pandemic, is a reminder that the CSOs are development partners in their own right, helping us to overcome such global problems which need strong partnerships and global solutions. He welcomed this side event as a chance to galvanize support to ensure CSO participate fully in national processes to achieve the SDGs.

The Minister emphasized that the SDGs apply to all of us and that that achieving the promises made under the ambitious Agenda 2030 cannot be done without a diverse set of CSOs at the heart of that journey, working in partnership. He acknowledged the role of the OECD DAC members in supporting CSOs and noted that Ireland has been one of the top donor countries providing support to and through civil society as in Ireland, it is not just a foreign policy objective but it is also a domestic priority to ensure an enabling environment where CSOs can operate. He took the opportunity to congratulate the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association on the 10th anniversary of his mandate and noted the positive signal from the IAEG-SDG that there is an opportunity to consider an indicator on CSO engagement in the SDGs as measurement is essential part of policy formulation. Finally, he mentioned that Ireland is honored to have been elected part of the UN Security Council where it will continue to prioritize partnerships, especially those with civil society.

Keynote Address

The keynote address was given by **Mr. Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association.** Mr. Voule started his address by stating that unfortunately, around the world, we are witnessing a closing of civic space. In parallel, there are global process like the Agenda 2030, calling for a key role for civil society in the achievement of all SDGs, placing great emphasis on partnerships. He explained that civil society contributes to building partnerships in many ways like producing and analysing data, providing technical expertise and ensuring the voices of marginalised and vulnerable populations are considered. For civil society to be able to do this, they need to freely regulate their own governance, enjoy freedom of expression, and freedom to access information. He emphasized that civil society should be treated as equal partners, being able to jointly develop processes. He especially noted grassroots organisations led by women who are often the only ones able to work in the places hardest to reach while their expertise is hardly ever consulted in program design and implementation. The need to broaden types of civil society in partnerships is crucial.

He stressed that during the current COVID-19 pandemic, the world is witnessing a greater restriction of civic space. He noted the well-documented correlation between the violation of public freedoms, including association, assembly and expression, with the erosion of government credibility. Finally, he concluded by stating that the UN has an important role in this context, leading efforts to provide a human rights approach to development and the rights to peaceful assembly and association.

Country level evidence on CSO participation in the SDGs

The Principle Researchers **Professors Alan Fowler and Kees Biekart,** presented the main findings from the recently published study commissioned by the Task Team on the identification of factors that help and hinder the engagement of CSOs in the implementation of the SDGs.

The study provides empirical information on the relationship between the enabling environment and civil society engagement on their contribution to realise the SDGs. The study looked at six countries (Hungary, Ghana, Lao PDR, Costa Rica, Nepal and Tanzania) representing different categories of civic space as identified by CIVICUS, different regions in the world, income levels and different relationships with international donors. While considering the research question, the Principle Researchers recalled traditional roles played by CSOs in the SDGs processes which include giving information about purpose and diversity of SDGs, advocacy efforts supporting and encouraging governments to be committed to SDG implementation, realising their own service delivery projects and contributing to bottom up monitoring of SDG monitoring as part of a wider national process. In order to adequately contribute, CSO must be able to operate freely as society actors where the study found several limitations. The study was positioned within the Task Team's four-part framework.
The main findings can be summarized as follows:

1. The SDGs do work across different civic spaces: no legal prohibition was found stopping governments from working with CSOs.
2. The SDGs have not much altered how the aid system works with CSOs: no common pot of funding, no increased coordination, traditional competitive bidding remains the norm.
3. CSO engagement in the SDG related multi-stakeholder dialogues is mainly urban with weak diversity: this is partially because governments also have an active role in including or excluding CSOs in dialogues.
4. CSOs are more effective in open civic spaces which but this can weaken their solidarity: in more open spaces, CSOs are more likely to associate with a particular political party.
5. Closed civic spaces often reflect mistrust between (some) CSOs and regimes: every country has its own legacy on how a social contract gets negotiated between citizen and state which can lead to a situation of mistrust.
6. To constrain civic space, governments rely on common instruments: like stigmatization, delegitimization, restrictions on financing and limiting access to information.
7. CSO resourcing for SDG is increasingly privatizing: which is partially the intention of SDG 17, calling for mobilization of diverse funding sources.
8. The Task Team four-part framework merits updating: mainly because there is clearly a hierarchy between the different parts, no one part 'belongs' to a singular stakeholder and the SDGs are meant to be universal.

Practitioners views

Four different speakers were invited to provide their reactions to the findings of the study and insights from their perspective in the field.

Mr. Richard Ssewakiryanga, Director of the Uganda National NGO Forum, Task Team Co-chair & CPDE Co-chair.

Mr. Ssewakiryanga drew several parallels from the findings presented with the recently published study from the CPDE where 42 partner countries were surveyed on how CSOs are engaging with the SDGs at the country level. One of the key findings from the CPDE study is that ownership needs to be strengthened, specifically regarding more domestication of the SDG agenda including raising awareness, localising processes, and ensuring governments align their budgets. The study also pointed to the need to formalise CSO engagement through inclusive partnerships: while there is a lot happening around the SDGs, as confirmed by the Task Team study, it is often irregular and informal. It was also found that there is a need for transparency and accountability and for enhancing a result based way of working, so that the results framework used to monitor SDG are localised. Finally, the situation around the COVID-19 pandemic was also surveyed where it became clear that there is a need to include CSOs in order to strengthen public health systems and harness their knowledge and experience especially with the most vulnerable and marginalised.

Ms. Monica Asuna, Chief Economist and Head of the Development Effectiveness Secretariat at the National Treasury and Planning of Kenya.

Ms. Asuna remarked that at the country level, Kenya has already started including civil society in national dialogues supporting the development agenda. For example, one of the key outcome following the multi-stakeholder Task Team workshop was the recognition of the need to have a framework for engagement so a partnership framework for CSO was developed and agreed to. She acknowledged that we cannot monitor and measure what we do if we do not work together. The current COVID-19 pandemic has brought about great financial stress, so there is a need for adequate coordination among all development actors. Regarding the need to have an indicator measuring and monitoring CSO engagement, she stressed that for it to work, all stakeholders must be willing to be transparent regarding the collection and sharing of data used. Finally, she remarked that there is a need to engage CSO more on policy when important actions like drafting of budgets take place.

Ms. Ana Fernandes, Head of the Foresight, Outreach and Policy Reform Unit of the Development Co-operation Directorate at the OECD.

Ms. Fernandes shared that the OECD, which includes the development assistance committee (DAC), established in 2018 a formal framework for dialogue between the DAC and CSOs. She summarized the findings of a recently published study which includes all DAC donors, and which findings are quite in line with the findings from the Task Team study. For example, a main finding in the OECD DAC report points to insufficient funding going to partner country CSOs (only 7%). The study also found that there is a need to increase diversification of support to CSOs and a need to ensure a change in the practices of funding in order to embrace the reality of new partnerships while at same time, respecting the independence of CSOs. Besides collecting evidence, the OECD also analysed scenarios of impact of the digital environment on civic space, where a shrinking space for CSOs was found. Guidance is currently being developed to support engagement with civil society, to create incentives for CSO accountability, and to protect civic space. Finally, she recognised the need to have an indicator for CSO inclusion in the SDGs and noted that the GPEDC is preparing a reflection on this topic and that the OECD guidance mentioned may also support this process.

Ms. Cara Williams, Chief Advisor of International Relations at Statistics Canada & Participant in the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs).

Ms. Williams acknowledged that agreeing on a measurement for CSO engagement in the SDGs is a real challenge as finding high quality data at global data is very difficult. She pointed to the fact that

CSOs are specifically mentioned only twice in the SDGs: once in 17.17: *encourage and promote effective public, public- private, and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships*; and under 11.3.2: *Proportion of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management that operate regularly and democratically*. Under SDG 17.17 there was a tier 3 indicator measuring the amount of USD committed to CSO partnerships, however, as no data was found and agreed for, this indicator was dropped during the last IAEG-SDG comprehensive review in March 2020. It is important to be clear about what is it exactly that needs to be measured: is it the monetary support, is it participation, or something else? She made a plea to involve statisticians at an early stage to avoid that proposals are not rejected because it does not pass the validation process. She suggested that there are many ways countries can include civil society in their reports without it having to be comparable at the global level and without it having to be within the official indicators. She reminded the participants that the next opportunity for indicator proposals is at the 2025 comprehensive review when the proposed indicator should already have been piloted and tested in different regions of the world.

Discussion and Q&A

There were many questions received through the zoom chat; however, due to limitation of time, Ms. Mc Breen consolidated and asked three questions:

1. How can local women community-based organisations in conflict zones be better included in dialogue and policy?

Mr. Voule responded that inclusion of their work around the SDG is difficult especially for those working at the grassroots level in term of providing their input and assessment. This can be a responsibility of regional and UN bodies to assist these CSO to provide quality information. Capacity of such CSOs needs to be developed and this is where international CSOs can play a crucial role.

2. Were there any indicators found from the human rights perspective as to the nature and quality of meaningful participation of civil society?

Ana Fernandes responded that on the paper the OECD published on the impact of the digital environment on civic space, some indicators were included which relate to international covenants on human rights; these can be shared for information. She agreed that the human rights dimension should be strengthened across all SDGs and emphasized that shrinking civic space is an issue also of great concern to the donors.

3. Can partnerships between academia and CSO be encouraged to enable evidence based advocacy and try to bring in contributions from local CSO?

Kees Biekart and Alan Fowler responded that they did involve local researchers in the study process and confirmed that there is a lot of research being done at the local level although there is a clear lack of resources there. CSOs that are not framed within the aided discourse are not visible. The work of large urban aided CSOs is visible but they represent a minority of what is going on in any country.

Closing

Ms. McBreen thanked all participants and speakers for the stimulating event where it is clear that CSOs have an instrumental role in the realization of SDGs but evidence shows a need for better and more diverse inclusion and for an indicator measuring and monitoring civil society engagement in the SDGs. For anyone who would like to support the work of the Task Team and particularly the initiative towards better monitoring and measurement of CSO engagement in the SDGs, should consult the Task Team website: https://taskteamcso.com/