



# Engaging parliaments on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: representation, accountability and implementation

A handbook for civil society  
– *abbreviated*



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# 1. Introduction

Adopted in 2015, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the 2030 Agenda) is a global framework that will guide development policy and practice at national, regional and global levels to 2030. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), an integral part of the 2030 Agenda, are a collection of 17 global goals that constitute a global call to action to end poverty worldwide, protect the planet, and promote peace and prosperity for everyone, everywhere. The principles of the 2030 Agenda highlight the important role that civil society plays alongside other partners in realising the agenda and its goals.

The SDGs are not solely a government agenda and cannot be delivered by governments alone. Civil society actors can position themselves within the 2030 Agenda umbrella as partners of governments and all other stakeholders to jointly make the SDGs a reality. Most, if not all, civil society actors working on social and environmental protection are already carrying out work that supports the SDGs. Positioning this work within the world's most comprehensive global framework on sustainable development can

strengthen and support the achievement of their goals. There are numerous strategies that civil society can take to support the realisation of the 2030 Agenda. One key way is to work with parliament, which plays an influential role in ensuring the effective implementation of global commitments through their work to enact legislation, adopt budgets and ensure accountability.

This abbreviated handbook aims to provide guidance to civil society organisations on engaging with parliaments and parliamentarians to promote, support and track the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It briefly lays out why, where and how to engage before providing guidance on overcoming common challenges. A list of resources is included at the end for further reading. This resource is a shortened version of *Engaging parliaments on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: representation, accountability and implementation* – a handbook for civil society, which is available in full in English on the [Together 2030 website](#).

## 2. Why engage with parliaments on the 2030 Agenda?

Engaging parliament can be a valuable strategy in your efforts to influence and support the realisation of the 2030 Agenda. Through its work to enact legislation, adopt budgets and ensure accountability, parliament plays an influential role in ensuring governments effectively implement the global commitments at the national level:

**1. Law-making** – depending on the country's legal system, approaches to implementation can take formal shape as laws, statutes or directives as part of a range of policy and programme approaches. Regardless of who creates and submits a draft bill, parliament will review it before it becomes a law and often has the power to amend. It can also reject a bill entirely. Some parliaments are more active in developing draft bills through the right of initiative, while others rely on the government to develop, draft and introduce the law for debate. While legislation is rarely the complete policy response necessary to tackle the objectives affirmed in the SDGs, it is often a critical first step or component of action. Civil society actors can push for the initiate laws, amend or withdraw proposals by campaigning to build public pressure or directly lobbying parliamentarians. They can also feed in knowledge and skills on issues relating to the given piece of legislation to expert groups which are set up to support decision makers to translate the 2030 Agenda into actionable legislative proposals.

**2. Budget accountability** – the ambition of the 2030 Agenda demands that countries place a very explicit focus on financing for development. If the

SDGs are to be a success and truly leave no one behind, it will be critical that their implementation is adequately funded and that financing is targeted at actions that reach the most marginalised communities. Undertaking budget analysis and influencing parliament around its review of the budget is a powerful way to support the realisation of the SDGs.

**3. Oversight** – while the 2030 Agenda will require action from all parts of society, national governments bear the largest responsibility for its success. Putting SDGs into practice will require governments to work across policy areas, set priorities and make difficult choices in the face of tough trade-offs. Parliament's oversight function is a vehicle for holding the government to account on how effectively it implements SDG commitments and a key area in that civil society can support and work to influence.

Engaging with civil society is a key part of parliament's remit. As an assembly of elected representatives, it has a responsibility to reflect the concerns of civil society and provides a political bridge between citizens and all areas government. This means that a parliament committed to the SDGs can be a receptive forum for debating civil inputs. Thus partnership is mutually beneficial; CSOs gain opportunities to influence government processes, while MPs can get access to expertise, inputs and support from civil society. Well-targeted interventions by civil society actors can raise the quality of debates and scrutiny in parliament and improve SDG policy outcomes.

# 3. Before you get started

Before you set out to engage with your national parliament or its members, consider the following questions: *What do you want to change and why? How do you want to achieve it? How can you connect the reality that you are aiming to change with the commitments presented in the SDGs? What are your concrete proposals in terms of legislation and policy change?*

It is important to be realistic in your expectations. The relationship between parliament and civil society is complex. Civil society actors can be numerous and represent sometimes radically different values, principles and approaches. The relationship between civil society actors and one parliamentarian or party might be very different to a relationship to that of another so strategies that work in one situation will not necessarily work in the other. Moreover, the social and political context makes all the difference to the nature of, and scope for, the CSO-parliamentary relationship.

Working through national CSO coalitions can improve your chances of success. It is easier for

parliamentarians to interact with a limited number of forums than to maintain direct relationships with many individual civil society actors. Horizontal coalitions that bring civil society together and speak with a unified voice carry more political weight and have a higher chance of successfully influencing change. Parliamentarians will also be more inclined to see civil society actors as credible if they demonstrate a nuanced and in-depth understanding of complex matters, including an appreciation of associated trade-offs

Above all, it is desirable and realistic to develop a practice of mutual respect and dialogue. The 2030 Agenda, including its principles and the SDGs, offers much opportunity for dialogue and reflection about the routes towards sustainable development. Through a constructive working relationship, both parliaments and civil society can work together to play effective roles in realising the 2030 Agenda's ambition to protect the planet and promote peace and prosperity for everyone, everywhere.

## 4. Avenues for engagement

The following list identifies the main entry points for civil society to feed into parliamentary processes:

**1. Public hearings** – public hearings are formal meetings in which civil society actors are asked to testify before a committee and respond to questions. The hearing offers an opportunity for civil society to highlight on a formal record how those impacted by a draft law or subject are affected and make recommendations for change.

**2. Public meetings** – committees can organize informal public meetings in which civil society is invited to provide comments on draft laws or investigations. These could take place through parliament or through specific constituencies. They are usually less formal than hearings and allow for freer exchange between committee members and other participants. They can provide an opportunity for civil society to ask MPs about their stance on the SDGs and engagement with civil society. It is not uncommon for such meetings to be organised with prospective political candidates during electoral campaigns.

**3. Private meetings** – MPs and political groups can hold private meetings with select groups and individuals affected by issues under consideration by a committee. This can be an opportunity to provide MPs with a more detailed and nuanced level of knowledge on the SDGs that can enhance what has been gained from more official engagements. For civil society, private meetings are often an opportunity to ask MPs for support or to act as SDG champions in parliament. Once a strong working relationship has been established, civil society actors can use private meetings with MPs and staff to regularly exchange information.

**4. Parliamentary cross-party groups or caucuses** – run by and for MPs, cross-party groups or caucuses may sometimes allow the

participation of individuals and organisations from outside parliament. These informal structures typically involve members from various political groups and are important for forging a parliamentary consensus on issues. Having discussed a matter within an informal group, members can carry out advocacy within their own party, in committees and in parliament. If your SDG message receives the support of any of the group's members, it may travel beyond the caucus to reach the various party groups and committees.

**5. Crowdlaw or crowdsourced law-making** – is a technology-enabled approach to drafting legislation or constitutions, that offers a more direct public engagement avenue than the traditional method of policymaking. While development strategy is not currently an area of legislation which is being crowdsourced, this approach open doors for citizens and civil society to contribute to legislation related to the various aspects of the SDGs in the most direct way.

### 6. Other avenues of engagement

- **Research:** civil society can provide inputs to research commissioned by committees that seeks an understanding of public opinion on a specific subject. Surveys are particularly helpful for gathering quantitative data to inform committee deliberations.
- **Web-based consultations:** a growing means of consultation is to use the internet to seek comments on draft laws or specific topics. This can be done through online surveys or a broader request for comments. This type of consultation can result in a large number of submissions. Civil society can support the process by making submissions which consolidate the inputs of a broader community.
- **Field visits:** in order to get a first-hand look at the impact of a draft law or government activity,

committee members sometimes travel to visit specific communities or groups. As many CSOs work in far-flung areas, field visits provide a good opportunity for advocates outside the capital to interact with MPs.

- **Social media:** communication technology has become important for many MPs and political parties, who increasingly interact with the public during debates via social media and other web-based tools. In some countries, live-tweeting by MPs during committee, plenary and electoral debates has become a new form of public discussion that CSOs can engage in.

- **Constituency office hours:** civil society representatives and concerned citizens can

access their MPs during their constituency sessions to communicate their concerns. Depending on the local context, this might take place in a local party office, community centre, door-to-door or on a local street corner.

- **Town halls:** in some parliaments, MPs host regular town hall meetings in their constituencies giving citizens the chance to meet and discuss issues with them. Some of these events are organized around specific themes or topics. Others serve as reporting sessions in which an MP provides an update on recent parliamentary activities.

# 5. Strategies for engagement

The following section outlines a number of ways that civil society actors can engage their parliament on the SDGs. These approaches include those that engage the core functions of law making, budget planning, oversight and representation, as well as those that engage more informal political influence and access to the executive that individual MPs benefit from. Further reading around these approaches can be found at the end of this publication.

**1. Assess whether laws are fit-for-purpose** – to align with the SDGs and the principles of indivisibility and universality, the cross-cutting themes of the 2030 Agenda will need to be systematically reflected across sectors in national legislation. Parliament and civil society actors can support this process by calling for the Executive branch to formally consider whether legislation coherent in how it puts the SDGs into practice.

**2. Undertake budget advocacy** – SDG advocacy has most impact when coupled with advocacy to ensure adequate budget allocations and to defend valuable social and environmental programmes from cuts.

**3. Call for more transparency and accountability** – this could consist of calling on governments or statistical bodies to release data and models underlying SDG targets and indicators. Or it could involve pressuring responsible ministries to share key documents publicly and in a timely manner, giving the parliament and the public sufficient time for scrutiny. Advocating for parliaments to hold public hearings and debates on the SDGs is another example.

**4. Develop expert knowledge** – examine how the government is planning to implement the SDGs and develop actionable and well-argued proposals to highlight issues which may not otherwise receive enough political attention. Your policy arguments should be backed up with solid evidence.

**5. Collect, analyse and interpret data** – high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by factors – including income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant to national contexts – provide critical evidence to inform decision making.

**6. Share qualitative data and traditional forms of knowledge** – grassroots testimonies and local knowledge can serve compelling

## **INFLUENCE YOUR COUNTRY'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

Several countries have a national development plan (NDP), which is a piece of legislation that sets out a multi-year strategic roadmap, outlining key priorities and indicators for measuring success. Many of these countries have identified their NDPs as the primary tool for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and alignment of the SDGs. Civil society input in reviewing and, where necessary, amending a national development plan in line with the 2030 Agenda can help to ensure a coherent blueprint for a country's development.

## **PROMOTE PARLIAMENTARY ENGAGEMENT IN VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS**

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are the main global mechanism through which national governments report on their implementation progress. The main objective of the VNRs is to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. CSOs have several roles to play in pushing for inclusive and participatory VNR processes, including to promote the participation of parliament. They can call for VNR reports to be presented to the parliament before they are shared at the UN High Level Political Forum and advocate for debriefings to take place afterwards.

policy arguments. By adding a human face to an issue that is difficult to ignore, personal stories may be remembered and valued more than data and numbers.

**7. Run public campaigns** – awareness-raising and action campaigns, cyberactivism and other forms of mobilisation create opportunities for the broader public to be engaged in supporting the SDGs. Mobilising constituents to contact their MPs on SDG issues can be very effective as parliamentarians take interest in matters their constituents feel strongly about and are often less likely to ignore their demands than those of organised advocacy groups. Being a face of a popular SDG campaign can add visibility to an MP's profile and electoral agenda.

**8. Raise awareness and understanding of the 2030 Agenda through training programs** – training MPs and other civil society actors on the SDGs can go a long way in raising awareness. This can result in better interventions and oversight of the 2030 Agenda. Identifying local and international best practices on how the SDGs are being implemented can assist the legislature in making better choices. Collaboration amongst CSOs to ensure a single approach to training led by parliament would be beneficial to avoid the risk of uncoordinated demands on MPs' time and resources.

**9. Translate complex policy and budget information into accessible language** – the inherently technical nature of certain laws and national budgets and the use of inaccessible and highly specialised language are a major barrier to the participation of civil society in the law-making process and budget planning cycle. Communication and awareness-raising initiatives work best when they complement and reinforce parliamentary concerns.

**10. Highlight cases of negligence and corruption** – civil society actors can help to identify and bring to light cases of negligence or corruption that undermine progress towards the SDGs.

**STRENGTHEN  
ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH  
NATIONAL AUDITS**

Countries are beginning to explore the use of audits for reviewing the implementation of the SDGs. In some countries, parliaments and the Supreme Audit Institution have been reaching out to CSOs to request them to contribute to the national audit process. In other countries, CSOs have been proactively scrutinising the legitimacy and quality of government spending. In various parts of the world, CSOs have been involved in audit planning by providing data and research, as well as communicating audit results.

# 6. Overcoming challenges

Some common challenges and actions you can take to overcome them include:

## 1. Competition for access

Working in silos, civil society actors can end up competing for access to MPs, influence and limited funding which may leave larger players monopolising the space.

### ACTION POINTS:

- Take a coalition approach to parliamentary work to help overcome the challenge of competition between partners. Work with organisations that can complement your expertise, bring additional value to your campaigns, or share valuable experience.
- Harness collaborations beyond your country where partners will be less prone to competition and can share valuable experiences and approaches.

## 2. Parliament reluctant to engage

While some parliaments are increasingly open to citizen participation, others continue to offer limited or no real opportunities for intervention and advocacy.

### ACTION POINTS:

- Build public pressure. Work with the media and run public campaigns to attract attention and encourage parliamentarians to engage.
- Join the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative that brings together governments and civil society to secure concrete commitments to promote open government, empower citizens, fight corruption, and make use of new technologies to strengthen governance.
- Approach prospective parliamentary candidates. Writing to, and meeting with,

prospective parliamentary candidates and political groups during electoral campaigns can be an effective medium or longer-term strategy. These approaches should be solely linked to promoting the SDGs and 2030 Agenda issues to avoid being perceived as partisan.

## 3. Technical constraints

For organisations new to parliamentary engagement, generating strong evidence, developing technical policy arguments, carrying out strategic advocacy and communicating tailored messages will require new capacities and skills. You may also need to re-evaluate your organisational strategy to fully map out how your parliamentary work contributes to your organisation's mission.

### ACTION POINTS:

- Train staff on how to develop and adapt evidence to influence political and policy processes.
- Evaluate and review organisation strategy.

## 4. Financial constraints

Funding constraints may impair your ability to engage with parliaments. Lack of sufficient resourcing can limit your ability to invest in staff and volunteers, develop the necessary research and technical skills and maintain engagement with MPs. In addition, many CSOs rely on short-term funding, which may lead to a short-term vision and a less strategic approach to change.

### ACTION POINTS:

- Look to broaden the donor base (avoiding reliance on a single donor) and funding options.
- Investigate new funding pools and fundraising opportunities brought about by the SDGs.

# 7. Further reading

An up to date list of useful resources can be found on the Together 2030 website:  
[www.together2030.org/parliamentaryreading](http://www.together2030.org/parliamentaryreading)

## Publications

[A guide to budget work for NGOs](#) - International Budget Project (2001)

[A guide to tax work for NGOs](#) - International Budget Partnership (2006)

[Changing the law: a practical guide to law reform](#) - Commonwealth Office of Civil and Criminal Justice (2017)

[Crowdlaw and open data policy: A perfect match?](#) blog by Stefaan Verhulst, [thegovlab.org](http://thegovlab.org)

[Developing and sustaining an effective lobbying campaign](#) - Irish Haemophilia Society (2006)

[11 ways NGOs can work with politicians](#) - The Guardian (2015)

[Evaluating progress on the SDGs](#) - Globescan, SustainAbility (2017)

[Get your voice heard: a guide to campaigning at Westminster](#) - UK House of Commons

[Global parliamentary report 2017](#) - Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017)

[Global state of democracy: exploring democracy's resilience](#), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (2017)

[Guidelines for lobbying parliament](#) - University of Cape Town

[Parliament's role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: a parliamentary handbook](#) - UNDP, Global Organisation of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, Islamic Development Bank (2017)

[La participación de la sociedad civil en el proceso legislativo chileno](#) - UNDP Chile (2017)

[Lobbying Parliament: a guide for NGOs](#) - National Democratic Institute (NDI)

[Mutual accountability: a guidance note for national policy-makers and practitioners](#) - ECOSOC, BMZ  
State of civil society report, CIVICUS, 2018

[The Goal 16 advocacy toolkit: a practical guide for stakeholders for national-level advocacy around peaceful, just and inclusive societies](#) - TAP Network

[Using aid and budget analysis for advocacy](#) - Development Initiatives

## E-learning courses

[Parliaments, Supreme Audit Institutions and the oversight of extractive industries  
SDGs, budgets and parliaments](#)

## Websites

[Open budgets for Sustainable Development Goals \(International Budget Partnership\)](#)

[Open Government Partnership](#)

[Legal & Economic Empowerment Global Network](#)

[OpeningParliament.org](http://OpeningParliament.org)

[SDGfunders.org](http://SDGfunders.org)



## Together 2030 – from policy to action

Together 2030 is a civil society initiative that promotes national implementation and track progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Initiative, set up in December 2015, aims at generating knowledge and project voices from different civil society and stakeholders around the world on the challenges and opportunities for the 2030 Agenda. Together 2030 brings together actors to discuss the way to formulate and implement roadmaps at the national level and hold governments to account at all levels.

[together2030.org](http://together2030.org)

