

ESDN Policy Brief 7

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Recommendations for Engaging Civil Society and Citizens for the 2030 Agenda

Introduction

Civil society is a key partner for the government in implementing the 2030 Agenda with a whole-of-society approach. Civil society, and especially civil society organisations, can provide a number of resources to the government, for example access to, and knowledge about, marginalised groups, multiplier effects for awareness raising campaigns and representing diverse stakeholders, whose opinions have to be included in the implementation process. However, the extent of cooperation between governments and civil society varies in Europe. Recently, a study by the European Commission has found that engagement between the government and civil society is not sufficient in most European countries, even in environments that are very conducive to the work of CSOs¹.

This Policy Brief is based on presentations and discussions at the 6th ESDN Peer Learning Platform in Mariehamn, Åland Islands in August 2021.

The European Sustainable Development Network

The ESDN is a non-profit, pan-European peer-learning, networking, knowledge, and advocacy platform for sustainability professionals in the public sector working in collaboration with other organisations and institutions dealing with sustainable development issues. It is based on the transparent and trustful cooperation of these actors. It collects, compiles and shares information on sustainability policies, strategies and practises, and provides expertise to political decision-makers at European, national and sub-national levels. The ESDN also fosters sustainable development through active communication and continued cooperation with other stakeholders and civil society.

Policy Recommendations

- 1) **General Recommendations for involving civil society stakeholders**
- 2) **Working with civil society organisations**
- 3) **Engaging individual citizens**
- 4) **Involving civil society in writing Voluntary National Reviews**
- 5) **Youth Involvement**

1) General Recommendations for involving civil society stakeholders

There are a few general guidelines to follow in order to ensure that civil society engagement is successful and most effective.

¹ Sanz Corella, B., Nicolas, J., & Veldkamp, T. (2020). Civil Society and the 2030 Agenda—An Initial Study. European Commission.

- **Clear and transparent communication and setting the right expectations:** it is important that all actors involved know what their role is and to what extent the government will take into account or implement their inputs.
- **Putting in place the right administrative processes and budget:** administration should be prepared to host civil society participants and have administrative processes that can take into account the inputs given by civil society stakeholders.

2) Working with Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organisations can fulfil two roles. On the one hand, they serve as multipliers for the SDGs and the government's actions regarding sustainable development. On the other hand, they can represent the views and needs of citizens, especially the more marginalised ones, towards the government. These are recommendations to structure the engagement of the Governments with the CSOs in an effective way.

- **Work with umbrella organisations** and use them as multipliers.
- **Inform civil society organisations** about processes and plans, so they can decide when and where to become engaged.
- **Ensure that engagement is low effort for organisations** and reduce barriers, for example by sending out short briefing documents rather than whole reports or drafts in preparation for consultations.

Example: Swedish Civil Society Dialogues

The Swedish National Body for Dialogue and Consultation between the Government and Civil Society consists of 17 umbrella organisations with over 670 member organisations. A national dialogue series with the umbrella organisations will focus on the topics of 'Leaving no one behind', children and young people, and 'Build forward better' to gain a civil society perspective for all policy areas.

3) Engaging individual citizens

It is also important to engage non-organised citizens, as their views, needs and priorities may differ from those who have the resources to be organised. However, it is more challenging to reach individual citizens than organisations. Even if consultations are open to every citizen equally, certain demographic groups are more likely to engage than others are. Here are some ideas that were discussed during the Peer Learning Platform to raise awareness with, and engage, individual citizens:

- **Through schools:** Add sustainable development or the SDGs to the curriculum. Through the children you can also reach and educate the parents;
- **Media:** for example radio, TV or social media channels;
- **Sports:** popular sports teams can raise awareness about sustainable development;
- **Private sector:** peer-to-peer interaction has proven successful on many occasions; and
- **Labour unions:** in countries where labour unions are strong, a green movement within labour unions can strengthen actions and engage with a big part of the population.

Example: Romanian Education on the SDGs

Romania has several programmes to raise awareness about the SDGs among children and youth, for example through canoe building or flying drones. A Gala for Sustainable Development rewards those who are active for bringing the SDGs into schools.

4) Involving civil society in the process for the Voluntary National Review

One key role of civil society is to hold the government to account. When involved in the writing of the Voluntary National Review (VNR), civil society actors can express their perspectives on the government's work directly. There are several ways, in which government officials can facilitate the process.

- **Clear communication** about the extent to which civil society actors will be involved in the process; and
- **Give individual chapters to stakeholders** so that they are empowered to express their own assessment (e.g. the chapter on youth can be written by youth stakeholders).

Example: SDG Watch Austria's Involvement in the VNR

SDG Watch Austria was involved in the drafting of the Austrian VNR. There was constant and transparent dialogue with the government, which facilitated the work for SDG Austria. Informal conversations were an important part of the process.

5) Engaging with Youth

As a major principle of sustainable development is intergenerational equity, youth should have an especially empowered voice at the policy-making table. When engaging with youth, certain guidelines may be helpful:

- **Treat Youth as an equal partner.** Treat youth representatives the same way as you would any other stakeholder and take their voices and opinions just as seriously.
- **Inform youth about the processes that concern them:** youth representatives need to know when decisions are being made that concern them, so that they know when to become involved.
- **Avoid tokenism:** when engaging with youth, their voices should be heard and considered before all decisions have been made

Example: The Netherland's Generational Test

This test, which is still being developed, should be applied to any law before it is passed. It tests the implications of laws for future generations.

These recommendations are based on the presentations and discussions at the 6th ESDN Peer Learning Platform in Åland in August 2021. If you would like to gain further insights about the recommendations and the examples, read the report [here](#).