



# CIVIL SOCIETY AND CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT FOR THE 2030 AGENDA

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Discussion Paper

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## Introduction

Civil society is a key actor in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They play an essential role in translating the SDGs into local objectives, making sure the most marginalised are included in the implementation process, raising awareness in the wider population of a country, and holding the government to account.

The EU defines civil society organisations as non-state actors, non-violent, not-for-profit and non-partisan. They are organisations in which “people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic (Sanz Corella et al., 2020)”. This can include NGOs, community groups, trade unions, faith-based organisations, foundations, research institutions, cooperatives, professional and business associations, the not-for-profit media, and more.

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. Overall, 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 CSOs (Sanz Corella et al., 2020). Similarly, Hege & Demailly (2017) have found that 54% of responding NGOs were not aware of their countries’ implementation plans for the 2030 Agenda.

The 6<sup>th</sup> ESDN Peer Learning Platform hosted by, and in cooperation with, the government of Åland and the Nordic Council of Ministers addresses the chances and challenges of civil society engagement with the government. This Discussion Paper will first examine the role of civil society in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It will then discuss the different ways in which governments can engage with civil society. The final chapter will showcase a number of examples of civil society engagement in Europe. Most of these examples will also be presented at the Peer Learning Platform.

# The role of Civil Society in the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda

## Localisation of the SDGs

One key role for civil society in the implementation of the SDGs is the localisation of the Goals. This process involves identifying and specifying national, regional and local objectives and targets and ensure that they are tailored to specific local circumstances. Civil society organisations become involved to represent the voices of different groups in society and make sure that the voices of marginalised or vulnerable citizens, are heard. It is important that this is not a one-time effort, but an iterative process as implementation moves forward. Including civil society in this process will help to create national ownership of the SDGs (Sanz Corella et al., 2020; UN DESA, 2020).

## Leaving no one behind

To leave no one behind is a key principle in the 2030 Agenda. CSOs are crucial to advocate for the needs of the marginalised and most vulnerable. They can help to translate these needs into strong arguments that can be presented to decision makers. In addition, civil society organisations identify and claim spaces in decision-making processes for the most vulnerable, who are usually excluded from these arenas, even when the decisions affect them directly (Sanz Corella et al., 2020).

## Raising awareness

In order to raise awareness among civil society, governments have reported a wide variety of activities, including conferences, websites, providing communication tools and organising events. Awareness raising was an important first step to make the SDGs known, but should be an ongoing process. As civil society organisations have direct access to diverse groups within society, they act as multipliers of awareness-raising efforts by the government and can provide their expertise in order to reach different stakeholders (UN DESA, 2020). Civil society organisations cannot only promote the SDGs and the actions that are needed to achieve them, but also inform the public about actions and progress (or lack thereof) by the government (Sanz Corella et al., 2020).

One key objective of raising citizens' awareness for the SDGs is to generate ownership by the public (UN DESA, 2020). This will empower them to not only make their own contributions to the SDGs (Sanz Corella et al., 2020), but also to know the responsibilities of the government and hold it accountable on its implementation process (Bhargava et al., 2019).

## Holding the government accountable

In order to hold the government accountable, civil society organisations closely follow and sometimes even participate in the policy process. This includes lobbying for the SDGs to be included in domestic and foreign policies (Hege & Demailly, 2017). In addition, civil society organisations monitor public expenditures to ensure that they are spent in a way that contributes to achieving the SDGs (Bhargava et al., 2019).

## Examples for Civil Society Engagement in Europe

The following examples will be presented at the Peer Learning Platform. The abstracts have been provided by the keynote speakers, who will not be named in accordance with the Chatham House Rule.

### SDG Watch Austria

Austria illustrated good practices in meaningful engagement in the VNR and at the HLPF. In 2020, the government and civil society worked together closely to produce Austria's first VNR. Although it took time to build trust, the collaboration was successful. Starting early with the process and using informal exchanges at different levels of government created the necessary trust.

The stakeholder network SDG Watch Austria used a strategy standing together and behind their main priorities, rather than consulting the entire network on every detail of the report. They created internal "red lines" or conditions for collaboration with the government, and put an "exit strategy" in place in case any red lines were crossed; for example, they could end their collaboration with the government and instead prepare an independent shadow report. Following the VNR, a number of structural and procedural measures to improve Austria's coherent implementation of the 2030 Agenda have been taken, such as setting up a steering group to implement the report's suggestions that also aims at strengthening future collaboration with all relevant stakeholders including civil society. One example of this collaboration is the SDG Dialogue Forum.

On September 28, 2021, the SDG Dialogue Forum Austria "Building forward better with the 2030 Agenda -Working together for sustainable development according to COVID-19" will take place (in German/hybrid). The event is hosted together by the federal administration and representatives of civil society. The aim is to discuss the concrete implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Austria - with a special focus on relevant innovations. As envisioned in SDG 17 "Partnerships to Achieve the Goals," through annual SDG Dialogue Forums, the aim is to promote multi-stakeholder partnerships. These are intended to help mobilize knowledge and expertise and thus increase policy coherence for sustainable development. Four innovation pools will address relevant issues for SDG target achievement, in order to subsequently feed the results into further work on implementation in Austria. Those innovation pools are digitalization; climate change and adaptation; women, youth and leaving no one behind; and Austria in the global context. SDG Watch Austria will, in particular, focus on the challenges and opportunities in moving out of the COVID 19 pandemic.

### The Danish 92 Group

The Danish 92 Group is a network of different civil society organisations working together for a sustainable development at national, regional and international levels.

The implementation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs is one of the key issues for the network. This presentation will show an example of civil society engagement, where more than 100 Danish CSOs are engaged in a comprehensive process, coordinated by the network, as they produce a yearly Spotlight report which assesses the Danish government's work, gives a range of recommendations from all parts of society and highlights the need for action from all their different perspectives. Besides, the presenter will tell the story of young people from Denmark and Greenland exchanging viewpoints on sustainability and lifestyles, including whale beef and chocolate chip cookies.

## **Franco-German Forum for the Future: At the “green face”- The city of Marburg’s experience of engaging citizens in climate protection**

Marburg has been one of the first German cities to declare a “climate emergency” in 2019 and has started to implement an ambitious Climate Action Plan. Local citizens have been actively involved in this process, both in terms of pushing the green agenda and in participatory workshops organized by the city. Yet, citizen engagement in Marburg has also faced some challenges in practice and the city is currently rethinking its climate governance to become more collaborative and participatory.

With reference to the concrete experiences in Marburg, this presentation assesses some of the opportunities and challenges involved in trying to engage citizens, civil society and other local actors in climate governance. It also discusses success factors that municipalities need to be aware of when developing participatory and collaborative climate governance models. These are crucial to consider if municipalities are to become catalysts of climate protection at the local level.

# Cooperation and Synergies between Government and Civil Society

Involving civil society in the implementation process for the 2030 Agenda is a critical part of a whole-of-society approach. It can facilitate policy coherence and collaboration between different levels of government and society. In addition, involving civil society organisations permits the government to access a diverse range of stakeholders. On the one hand, this means that CSOs can amplify awareness raising efforts about the SDGs by the government. On the other hand, the CSOs represent and advocate for the interests of marginalised and vulnerable groups to the government (UN DESA, 2020).

When civil society and governments interact, one can distinguish between invited spaces and claimed spaces. Invited spaces are those to which the government or other authorities have invited civil society, as observers, for consultation or active participation in decision-making. This can be ad-hoc for specific legislative initiatives or reports, or in a more ongoing and institutionalised format. These spaces are often described as “controlled from above” (Sanz Corella et al., 2020).

Claimed spaces have been established at the initiative of civil society and often take a more informal shape, for example advocacy initiatives. They are bottom-up initiatives and often include lobbying, campaigning, or public interest litigation (Sanz Corella et al., 2020).

UN DESA has categorised the extent to which governments include civil society (UN DESA, 2020). At the basic level, governments *inform* the public about specific problems and their activities to address it. When they *consult* civil society, they also ask for feedback and opinions on an issue and the different alternatives to solving it. Governments can also *involve* the public in a decision-making process, working directly with civil society representatives. When the government *collaborates* with the government, it partners with the public to develop solutions and alternatives to problems. Finally, the government can also *empower* civil society and place the final decision in the hands of the public.

The SDGs are also a useful advocacy tool for civil society organisations. In a survey in France and Germany, many NGOs have reported that they especially use the principle of “leaving no one behind” in their advocacy. This equips them with new and stronger arguments when becoming involved in domestic and international policy-making. However, the study also found that most NGOs do not work strategically with specific target and their indicators, but rather refer to the overarching values of the 2030 Agenda.

CSOs face several challenges when they try to engage with the government in Agenda 2030 implementation. From the side of the government, there is often a lack of willingness to truly engage with civil society. In addition, the appropriate mechanisms at the legislative or policy-making level that allow for constructive collaboration often do not exist (Sanz Corella et al., 2020). On the CSO side, the survey of French and German NGOs has found that many organisations are not aware of their government’s implementation plan and their role in it. Therefore, it is important that the government clearly communicates the role that it foresees for civil society. In addition, some NGOs may distrust the government that it will really implement the SDGs and are discouraged by the lack of coherence in its policies (Hege & Demainly, 2017).

Civil society tends to be more engaged and active in working towards the SDGs when the government actively includes them in their decision-making processes and the stakeholders feel like they have a real influence on policies (Hege & Demainly, 2017). Government needs to transparently communicate on what the government’s implementation plans are and how it wants to involve civil society (Bhargava et al., 2019; UN DESA, 2020). So far, discussions have revolved more around setting targets and

objectives and less about how responsibilities for implementation should be split between different actors (Sanz Corella et al., 2020).

UN DESA summarised ten lessons in multi-stakeholder engagement for the 2030 Agenda:<sup>1</sup>

1. Plan to engage;
2. Include non-state actors in institutional arrangements for 2030 Agenda implementation;
3. Create inclusive multi-stakeholder spaces for ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and partnership;
4. Make awareness-raising ongoing and do it in partnership with others;
5. Continue to consult on priorities and report on progress to citizens according to agreed timetables;
6. Empower citizens to participate in the 2030 Agenda implementation through capacity development, direct support and inclusive partnerships;
7. Engage with diverse groups while respecting representative stakeholder bodies;
8. Take targeted steps to leave no one behind in stakeholder engagement;
9. Recognise the expertise of others; and
10. Report on your experience and the experiences of others that contribute to the 2030 Agenda implementation as part of a whole-of-society approach.

## Examples for Civil Society Engagement in Europe

The following examples will be presented at the Peer Learning Platform. The abstracts have been provided by the keynote speakers, who will not be named in accordance with the Chatham House Rule.

### Finland: Civil Society Engagement

The Finnish case will focus on the different ways the National Commission for Sustainable Development has been able to advance the participation of civil society in its sustainable development policies. During the Commission's almost 30-year history, there have been many ways to involve different sectors of society, since its work has always been based on the whole-of-society approach.

Currently, there are number of tools and ways to increase engagement on top of the regular operations of the Commission. Most notably, the Citizen's panel for sustainable development, the Youth Agenda2030 – group and the Science Panel for Sustainable Development are ways of receiving feedback on current developments. On top of these, the online tool "Commitment2050" continues to be a significant, yet easy way for all organizations and individuals to participate in Finland's sustainability work.

### Germany: Joint Action for Sustainable Development

The German Federal Government, together with the Governments of the Federal States (*Länder*), agreed on joint activities and goals for the implementation of the Agenda 2030 in Germany in June 2019. At the same time, they appealed to civil society, municipalities, the business sector and academia to contribute to SDG implementation in their respective fields of competence.

In summer 2021, the Federal Chancellery asked the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) to build up a common platform for a "Joint Action for Sustainable Development in Germany".

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<sup>1</sup> The detailed list with explanations can be found [here](#)

An integral part of this new networking exercise will be a new website showing the activities of approximately 40,000 different organizations from civil society, municipalities, the business sector and academia. The aim is to make their social engagement visible, to expand it still further, to create new networks between those involved in the “Joint Action” and broaden the SDG activities beyond the typical organizations engaged in the field.

For further reading, see the German Sustainable Development Strategy, p. 22: [2021-07-26-gsds-en-data.pdf \(bundesregierung.de\)](https://www.bundesregierung.de/SharedDocs/Publikationen/EN/Strategien/2021-07-26-gsds-en-data.pdf)

## **Sweden: Engaging Civil Society**

For Sweden, an energetic, independent, and open civil society is crucial to the transition to a sustainable society. Civil society comprises innovators, knowledge brokers and watchdogs demanding accountability, as well as those who perform key activities and welfare functions. They are a cornerstone of a democratic society. A large number of civil society organisations in Sweden, in the most varied spheres, are engaged in implementing the 2030 Agenda and are active at all levels, from local communities to the global stage.

Sweden’s presentation will cover the government’s work to engage civil society in the work of the 2030 Agenda.

Some of the points that will be addressed in the presentation are:

- A new initiative with a series of dialogue meetings together with civil society on issues related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The series is conducted with NOD, a platform for cooperation between the Swedish Government and civil society.
- The joint declaration of intent signed by 82 Swedish civil society organisations that clearly sets out how civil society views its role and contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
- Swedish civil society contributions to the international implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

## **Romania: Coalition for Sustainable Development and Education Campaigns for the SDGs**

The presentation will focus on the work the Department has done so far in involving youth in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. More specifically, it will emphasize the importance of young voices in drafting national legislation and strategies in a coherent, coordinated and holistic manner, through the amplification of youth voices for the promotion of a sustainable world and through supporting their access to quality education and services alike as per SDG 4.

In the second part, the presentation will touch upon the projects that the Department has developed in the past year with, and for, young people. The Department believes in partnerships for the Goals, in securing real partners, especially youth who can bring their substantial input with regards to the decision making processes and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

## **Netherlands: Youth Engagement on Governmental Sustainable Development Policies**

Finding ways to ensure meaningful youth participation is a challenge many countries face. In the Netherlands, the SDG's, as well as the debate on building back better after Covid-19, have provided new opportunities for young people to engage with policy-making.

Within the tripartite Social-Economic Council (SER), an influential advisory body to government, a Youth Platform was set up and is providing strong advice on a wide range of SDG-related issues. The SER also facilitated a Youth Think Tank on post-Covid-19 recovery, which recently came out with a call on government to urgently invest in the equal opportunities of young people to avoid a lost generation.

Government itself is piloting several youth engagement projects in the framework of working out a 'generation assessment' for policy-making. Within the SDG Movement, young people have been active and vocal from the start: each year, the National Youth Council writes a chapter in the [national SDG report](#) with youth recommendations to strengthen SDG implementation in the Netherlands.

Youth organizations are active in the SDG Alliances as well. From within the SDG movement, an independent Ombudsman for Future Generations was set up, which recently came out with an advice on the right to water.

Internationally, strengthening youth engagement is a priority in Dutch development cooperation: a specific strategy to support young people's voices ([Youth At Heart](#)) was launched in 2020. The Dutch UN Youth Representatives play an important role in representing the youth voice in the UN.

In short: many channels and initiatives for youth participation exist and are being developed. The challenge is to continuously work from all sides to make sure they are meaningful and lead to truly just intergenerational policies.

## Italy

*Although Italy will not be presenting at the 6th ESDN Peer Learning Platform, the ESDN wanted to also present some initiatives that Italy is undertaking regarding civil society engagement.*

Following the spirit of the 2030 Agenda, civil society engagement and consultations with public and private institutions have been central in the processes of implementation and revision of the **National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS)**<sup>2</sup>, since its approval in 2017, from the context analysis measuring the distance to the SDGs achievement, to the identification of main strengths and weaknesses to be addressed, leading to the definition and revision of widely shared national objectives.

To ensure continuity in the engagement of civil society and stakeholders, the Ministry of the Ecological Transition, launched a National **Forum for Sustainable Development**<sup>3</sup>, through the publication of an expression of interest in April 2019. To date, more than 180 organizations have joined the Forum. It is composed of 5 Working Groups (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Vectors for sustainability) coordinated by a steering committee composed of representatives of civil society networks. A sixth transversal WG have also been constituted, involving youth organizations and components to express their views and voices, both within each group, and in the steering committee.

The **objective of the Forum** is to accompany the implementation of the NSDS and the 2030 Agenda in Italy and its updating and three-year revision, through the effective contribution of the actors who promote actions and policies towards sustainability. The Forum represents a workspace where

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mite.gov.it/pagina/strategia-nazionale-lo-sviluppo-sostenibile>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mite.gov.it/pagina/il-contributo-della-societa-civile-il-forum>

subjects and practices of sustainability can emerge and affirm, according to a process of mutual exchange between public policies and social energies, aiming at supporting the implementation, monitoring and revision processes of the NSDS. The Forum activities concern the following main objectives:

- support the assessment of NSDS implementation, taking into account the SDGs monitoring platform created by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT);
- updating and three-year revision of the NSDS;
- recommendations, suggestions and opinions on how to measure the impacts of NSDS on public policies, according to the method proposed by the OECD in the Partnership on "Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development";
- promotion of education for sustainable development, with particular attention to the creation of listening and interaction paths for young people;
- dissemination of the contents of the NSDS;
- support for the exchange of information, mutual knowledge and networking among sustainability actors;
- elaboration of a positioning document of the Forum to contribute to the definition of national positions for European and international negotiation processes on sustainable development;
- relationship with the activities of the regional fora for the implementation of the regional sustainable development strategies.

To encourage the dialogue between Forum's Working Groups and institutions, a **steering committee** has been established which:

- fosters the links among the Working Groups towards the coherence of policies for sustainable development;
- fosters the relationship among Forum, territorial administrations, Regions and Metropolitan Cities and the institutional subjects involved in the governance of sustainable development, such as CIPESS (Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning and Sustainable Development);
- actively participates in the organization of the annual Conference for Sustainable Development, as well as of other events and activities relevant to the implementation of the NSDS;
- participates in the PCSD project "Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development: mainstreaming the SDGs in Italian decision-making process", funded by the European Commission under the Structural Reform Support Program 2017-2020, that involves the Ministry of the Ecological Transition, the DG Reform of the European Commission and the OECD, for the definition of a national action plan for the coherence of policies for sustainable development;
- collaborates in investigating topics and issues relevant to all Working Groups, such as coherence of policies for sustainable development, involvement of youth organizations and education for sustainability.

To support the process, the Ministry signed an agreement with three Italian Universities that provide **technical and scientific support** to the implementation process of the SNSVS. A peculiar task relates to the coordination mechanism of the Forum, in close cooperation with the steering committee and the coordinators of the Working Groups.

At the **territorial level<sup>4</sup>**, to improve coherence and strengthen vertical coordination, in the process of localizing the NSDS and the SDGs at subnational and local level, the Ministry activated a coordination

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mite.gov.it/pagina/il-contributo-dei-territori-regioni-province-autonome-e-citta-metropolitane>

mechanism with Regions, Autonomous Provinces and metropolitan cities aiming at exchanging experiences and comparing methodological approaches to increase coherence in the implementation of regional and metropolitan strategies. To this aim, the Ministry also signed agreements with each of them, providing financial and technical support. Additional technical support is also provided by the Ministry through the CRelAMO PA Project (Competences and Networks for the Environmental Integration and for the Improvement of the Public Administration Organizations) in the framework of the programming period 2014-2020 of the European Social Fund. In this context, Regions and Autonomous Provinces have established the Regional Fora for sustainable development in synergy with the National Forum and the consultation activities and mechanisms developed by the metropolitan cities.

With regard to the involvement and consultation of **young people** identified as "critical agents of change" in the 2030 Agenda, young associations have been invited to participate into the steering committee and in the Working Groups of the Forum for Sustainable Development. Also, regional centres for environmental and sustainable development education have been appointed in some regions as sustainability pivot to localize the SDGs and they are actually working with schools and cultural centres to spread sustainability towards young generations. In addition, in the framework of the COP26 UN climate change conference, Italy, with the support of the Ministry, will host the preparatory session "Pre-COP26" and the event dedicated to young people "Youth4Climate: Driving Ambition" (28-30 September 2021). The event will offer to young people from all over the world the opportunity to develop concrete proposals for Pre-COP26 in Milan and COP26 in Glasgow.

**In 2021**, the preparatory conference of the annual National Conference for sustainable development, organized by the Ministry of the Ecological Transition was held on March 3 and 4 in live streaming. The conference, promoting the dialogue on sustainability among institutions, civil society, young people and businesses, was structured in three thematic sessions:

- the Forum for sustainable development, civil society and institutions together for the recovery phase;
- youth representatives in decision-making processes;
- the territories as a key for SDG implementation.

In the first session dedicated to the Forum for Sustainable Development and the voices of civil society, the coordinators of the Working Groups of the Forum and young people's representatives, presented the results of the activities carried out in 2020, the perspectives and above all the requests that the non-state actors intend to address to the institutions in the context of the revision of the national strategy, as the result of a shared work of the 185 members of the Forum, reported in the position papers.

The comparative reading of the position papers allowed to identify some thematic nodes transversal to all the Forum's Working Groups, which outline a multi-dimensional sustainability policy paradigm:

1. **Educating communities for the culture of sustainability.** It refers to the establishment of educational and training systems based on the cultures of sustainability through innovative forms of education (new objects of study, new teaching practices, new educational and training processes) that support a change in individual and collective values.
2. **Combat inequalities and social marginalization.** It concerns the social fragility created or worsen by unsustainable paradigms. Equal attention is paid to both access to equal opportunities and support for actions that correct inequalities. It is closely linked to strengthening social cohesion, democratic institutions and climate change.

3. **Affirmation of the rights of people and environment.** It relates to the legal-institutional issues supporting the sustainable transition. It affects both the private and individual spheres as well as the public and collective ones and can also be extended to animal and plant ecosystems.
4. **Social cooperation for inclusive territories and communities.** It relates to innovative forms of governance to achieve the sustainable transition. A cooperative network model emerges between public and non-governmental actors and civil society in the construction of integrated actions for social well-being. The network model should be able to strengthen social cohesion and trust in public administrations as well as to ensure greater efficiency of sustainable transition projects and territorial policies.
5. **Economic models for sustainable transition.** It concerns both the demand side (the consumer) and the supply side (process innovation and business culture): the acquisition of skills together with the implementation/use of new technologies and adherence to transparency and accountability are a useful tool towards sustainability objectives.
6. **Policy coherence and positive peace promotion globally.** It relates to the trans-national and international dimension of sustainability. The central role that Italy should play in multilateral processes of support for development, conflict resolution, environmental issues and migratory flows is emphasized.

These key nodes appear to be able to represent a common, broad but precise conceptual framework for the future development of the Forum's work. In a future perspective, the Ministry also intends to activate co-planning paths with the Forum, aiming at building initiatives for promotion and support to exemplary experiences of ecological transition projects for sustainable development based on innovative partnership among young people, companies and research organizations (i.e., hackathons and calls for financing ideas).

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