Toward an Accountability Revolution? Citizen Participation and the SDGs

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WORKING PAPER

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not be achieved without significant public awareness and engagement. It is citizens who will hold governments accountable to the promises they made in 2015, and we need to find innovative ways of raising public pressure to deliver a more just and sustainable world by 2030. Only through such an "accountability revolution" will we have any chance of achieving the commitments made in the SDGs, and the lynchpin for that revolution is citizen participation.

Citizens and civil society have been actively involved in the SDGs since before they existed. They have raised awareness about the importance of the "post-2015" process through nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and actively contributed to the drafting of the goals through the Open Working Group.

As Secretary General of CIVICUS—a global civil society alliance actively involved in the post-2015 process—I have participated in countless United Nations meetings about the SDGs and their predecessor the Millennium Development Goals. Often at these meetings, I would make a half tongue-in-cheek remark that the problem with the MDGs was that no one ever lost their job for failing to meet an MDG target. This comment always made the officials in the room shift uneasily in their seats, especially when I would ask why, if we truly want the SDGs to be a success, would we not hold accountable those of us in governments, intergovernmental agencies, global business, or civil society organisations (CSOs) responsible for achieving them, even to the point that our jobs would depend on it.

If such an argument seems absurd, it is because we do not (yet) see the SDGs as having real political bite. They are not legally binding, their complexity and interconnectedness makes apportioning blame (or credit) difficult, and they arise out of an intergovernmental system that is losing credibility among activists.

When local and national leaders and institutions make promises, almost all societies, both democratic and undemocratic, have fairly sophisticated ways of holding them to account. If the SDGs are a set of global promises—made by our leaders and institutions—then it should follow that we have at least some ways of ensuring these leaders are held accountable.

However, I recognise that the accountability revolution will only be possible if civil society also adapts to the evolving development agenda. We will need to re-evaluate our strategies for cooperation and funding as well as for accountability and communication. We will also need to continue to defend and promote the civic space that citizens rely on to hold decision-makers to account. Despite their potential, the SDGs have arrived at a worrying time for civic freedoms. The civil society institutional landscape does not seem ready to channel citizen voice adequately toward the goals. The rising tide of populist politics across the globe poses a massive threat to the values that underpin the SDGs and internationalism more broadly. Meanwhile there are not enough people thinking about innovative ways of promoting citizen participation in the SDGs or the global governance mechanisms that are their guardians. With all this in mind, this chapter explores some of the challenges and opportunities facing civil society's role in implementing the SDGs.

The MDGs versus the SDGs

One key distinction between the SDGs and their pre-2015 predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), emerges as being of critical importance. Where the MDGs were narrow in focus—aimed significantly at boosting policy attention, especially donor attention, into particular sectors—the SDGs represent a much broader agenda. The new goals are about many things at once. They tackle a nexus of interconnecting global public goods—a comprehensive

framework for ending poverty and a system that provides humanitarian relief reduces inequality and fights climate change.

They are about the quality of life everyone should enjoy by 2030: the right to a minimum standard of living, that is, a global social floor below which no one should be allowed to fall. They are about the right to be protected from extreme poverty, the right to food and clean water, the right to education and to protection from the effects of environmental degradation.

The SDGs move us toward a more universal vision. As such, they require the involvement of all stakeholders: the governments of rich and poor countries, the private sector, civil society organisations (CSOs), and, perhaps most importantly, people. They represent a people's agenda: a vision for improving societal behaviours and a means of holding the 193 governments that have committed to achieving the goals to account. They offer a prospective tool for ensuring that failure to meet their commitments will come with a political price.

The goals represent a global power shift—not rich countries promising to fix the problems of the poor, but all of us changing our behaviours in order to achieve common objectives. The SDGs are an opportunity to usher in a new age of mutual accountability. No longer can accountability just be about what Western governments or donors demand of recipients, but policy coherence and behaviour changes everywhere. Given the universal and thorny nature of the challenges covered by the SDGs, we may need to find inspiration and solutions from all over the world. It may be that Ugandans hold lessons for how to reduce consumption in the United States, or that Rwandans can help improve gender equality in Romania.

As such, the role the SDGs require of civil society also goes far beyond the oversight, or watchdog, function of previous years. True, civil society still has a critical role to play by ensuring that these ambitious goals are not watered down or cherry picked and that states embrace the new universalist, human rights–based approach that is required of them. Holding governments and the private sector to account will be essential. But civil society has a significant role to play in the practical implementation of this new agenda as well. Should civil society fail to understand, and embrace, this necessary shift to include the politics and practicalities of Agenda 2030, our new global framework may not transport us very far from where the MDGs dropped us off.

The State of Civil Society

Civil society, the arena outside of the family, the state, and the market, where people associate to advance common interests and come together to influence broader society, has no specific organisational form. It amounts to more than just nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) or individual civil society organisations (CSOs); its defining feature is that it involves collective citizen action of some form, organised or spontaneous.

Playing a crucial role in instigating social and political change, promoting good governance and people-centered development, civil society often acts as the catalyst for altering deeply entrenched societal power structures. Its role is to speak unpalatable truths to power—to amplify the voices of the marginalised, to tackle the causes of discrimination, and to promote equal rights and access to services.

In the last few years, rising inequality, insecurity, and a sense of political disenfranchisement have fueled an uprising of public anger. We have seen citizens take to the streets to demand change in countries all over the world—from Chile to South Africa, Armenia to South Korea. In Guatemala, Iceland, and Romania. Protests have led to high-level political change, and in the United Kingdom and United States, citizens have caused seismic political disruptions in the form of Brexit and the election of President Donald Trump.

A functioning civil society relies on three fundamental rights: the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. Together, these freedoms define the parameters of civic space: the arena in which civil society can exist and act and the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and CSOs are able to organise, participate, and communicate without hindrance; they are able to claim their rights and to influence the political and social structures around them. A free, vibrant civil society, operating within open civic space, plays a critical role in stemming tides of extremism, intolerance, and exclusion, yet often it is something we appreciate only when it starts to disappear.

Worryingly, in far too many countries—and in all global regions—civic space has worsened appreciably in recent years. The freedom of citizens to protest, to mobilise, and to speak out is being contested and restricted. Data from the CIVICUS Monitor (CIVICUS, 2017) shows that more than 3.2 billion people now live in countries where civic space is repressed or closed, and in 2015 serious violations of civic space were recorded in 109 countries.

The sources and methods of restriction are manifold. Attacks on civil society are being made by political leaders, government agencies, state and private sector security forces, corporations, organised crime cells, and extremists. Most recently, methods of restriction include legislation to constrain how civil society can organise, what it can act on, how it must account for itself and how it can be funded, verbal attacks and hate speech, arbitrary detention and disappearances, criminalisation of activists through biased judicial proceedings, restrictions on travel, as well as physical attacks and assassinations. In the last year, peaceful protests have often been met by a violent state response; civil society personnel have been targeted in conflict settings; international humanitarian law has routinely been flouted and civil society activists have been violently attacked, jailed, or detained in numerous contexts. Governments are brutally silencing dissent by cracking down on protest or by intimidating and murdering human rights defenders, lawyers, and journalists.

These threats to democracy are no longer limited to authoritarian regimes. Citizen-led disruption driven by deepening economic inequality—from the radical mass movements of Occupy to the kind of anti-establishment populism that fueled Trump's insurgency in the United States and the Brexit "leavers" in the United Kingdom—has brought with it a new era of messy, unpredictable democracy, increasing the tendency for authoritarian reflexes. In the face of such disruption, democratic governments are taking increasingly drastic steps to curtail the ability of citizens to criticise authority or even to call for their basic social and economic needs to be met. Restriction of online freedom of expression, including the targeting of social media commentators and restriction of content, is now a marked trend, not only in China, Thailand, and Turkey, but also in mature democracies. The traditional institutions of formal democracy might no longer be sufficient to guarantee civil society's rights and people's participation.

Civil society actors who work to question the power of political and economic elites, to expose corruption or poor governance, and to realise human rights are facing the strongest restrictions. Within the last year alone, assassinations and violent attacks in Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Peru, the Philippines, and South Africa show the dangers faced by those CSOs, activists, and investigative journalists who challenge corporations linked to economic and political elites—often those with extractive or agribusiness concerns.

When civil society actors challenge dominant narratives, they risk being accused of promoting terrorism, sedition, or instability. Indeed, recent attacks on civil society in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan have all been made with reference to upholding national security and combating extremism. Since civil society is often the target of threats from extremist and terrorist forces, this seems particularly ironic.

Despite these myriad challenges, civil society has also seen significant success—not least on the global stage—in the past two years. Playing an important role in the processes to develop the major international commitments of 2015—the Sustainable Development Goals and Paris Climate Change Agreement—civil society successfully advocated for both to be more comprehensive, ambitious, inclusive, and rights-oriented than any previous agreements. Civil society contributed to the formal negotiation process through, for example, formal contributions to the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals. It also mobilised like never before through platforms such as Action/2015, where more than 2,200 organisations from 157 countries joined forces and took actions to demand that world leaders play their part in delivering an ambitious Agenda 2030 (CIVICUS, 2016). Indeed, civil society is mentioned, in different ways, ten times in the Agenda 2030 resolution (UN, 2015).

Civil society must build on these successes to contribute to the realising of Agenda 2030. It must continue to play its important watchdog function, speaking truth to power and holding governments and the private sector to account for their commitments. But we must also be ready to roll up our sleeves and contribute to SDG implementation—continuing the important work we have done for decades but also forging new alliances with each other and with others, and experimenting with new ways of contributing to social change. To do this, we need to adapt to a new development landscape and engage with and push this landscape in directions that still align with our core values.

Adapting to a New Development Landscape

The development landscape is shifting dramatically as it re-orients itself around the SDGs and adapts to rapid global socioeconomic changes. As such, civil society must also begin to think and behave in radically different ways. Sustainable development is not simply about how much aid should be provided, or about what the rich world can do for the poor; it is about our shared responsibility to achieve a more sustainable future for everyone. A useful, universal tool for holding governments—but also businesses and CSOs—to account, the SDGs empower people to question what progress has been made and to demand further action.

Helping to construct this new development landscape—and learning to operate within it—will be crucial to successfully implementing the SDGs. And the importance of civil society's role in this endeavor cannot be underestimated. We must seek to protect the core values at the heart of the development project as a global public good. We must call for governments and other major donors to remain true to the essence of aid, maintaining existing commitments to a minimum 0.7 percent of gross national income (GNI) spending on development. We must safeguard all that is good in the current system and ensure that the development sector's foundational principles are not lost.

Charting this middle ground, between protecting what is good about our existing system and branching out into new territory, will not be easy. Tensions are already clear and the challenges many and varied.

Much of the critical role that civil society will need to play in implementing the SDGs depends on our ability to push back against the narrowing of civic space around the world. In recognition of this, a broad global movement to defend civil society rights is beginning to form. This emerging movement will need to develop strong, more accessible messaging around why civic space matters and the roles citizens can play in defending it. It will need to engage in international processes to foster norms and structures that uphold civic space and work to see the same standards applied at national levels. Equally, civil society will need to maintain the highest standards of integrity, developing its own capacity to demonstrate transparency and accountability, so that it is in a position to rebut any criticisms that undermine its legitimacy.

In the context of this new development landscape, civil society will have to engage simultaneously in multiple functions—accountability, implementation, engagement, advocacy; at multiple levels—local, national, regional, global; and on multiple fronts—with the public, the media, governments, and the corporate world. There is also a challenge of encouraging more actors from across civil society to take sustainable development and the SDGs seriously, ranging from CSOs in the Global North, which work on domestic issues and don't see the SDGs as relevant, to the Southern activists who still see the SDGs as a UN-led, top-down process.

There are at least four things civil society will need to do collectively to ensure we are able to make our rightful contribution to the achievement of the SDGs. First, we will need to engage honestly with the problems of our existing funding models and contribute to building more sustainable and fair resourcing models. Second, we will need to navigate blurring boundaries on what constitutes development partnerships, engaging with the corporate sector while also maintaining our independence and ability to challenge the status quo. Third, we need to put citizens at the heart of the data revolution, to ensure that people and their organisations are central to measuring and driving progress on the SDGs. And fourth, we will need new, accessible narratives that localise this global agenda and genuinely represent, resource, protect, and engage those that are most affected by global injustice. Making these things happen will not always be comfortable. But it is crucial if civil society is to have the legitimacy it needs and drive the change we want to see.

Changing Funding Models

Introducing new sources of funding, and diverting existing flows, will be critical to constructive disruption of the current system. Moving more money through direct funding to civil society in the Global South must be a priority. The development sector's existing dominant funding model, which sees money channeled through chains of "fundermediaries" in the Global North (agencies that receive large grants and pass them on to local partners), has one major flaw: funding may trickle down, but power does not. It remains concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of big players, predominantly in the Global North. In recent years, only about 1 percent of all official aid, and an even smaller portion of humanitarian assistance, has gone directly to civil society in the Global South (OECD, 2013). And research into private foundations suggests that they too channel the majority of their giving through Northern-based fundermediaries.

If we are to have any hope of achieving the SDGs in the Global South, a fundamental transfer of power must be the defining feature of our new development landscape. Northern civil society has a continuing role to play, but not in its current organisational form, dominated by massive, competitive, service-delivery focused NGOs. These organisations will need to move back toward something more closely resembling their original identities as membership networks, social movements, and powerful voices for change. They will need to abandon their overriding commitment to the science of delivery and instead rediscover the art of social transformation and disruptive change. Civil society actors have a responsibility to kick-start this fundamental shift in the power hierarchy and, in the process, to construct a truly multipolar civil society sector, more suited to the universalist demands of the SDGs.

When it comes to this rebalancing of civil society's role in the art of social transformation versus the science of delivery, local resourcing has the potential to tick both boxes. Local actors offer more efficient sustainable development solutions, so supporting local CSOs, based in the communities they seek to serve, satisfies many of the technical efficiency criteria that are so important to the allocation of development resources. But going local is also about more than technical efficiency and development impact; it's about a political, transformative power shift.

The power imbalances perpetuated by the dominant development modalities of the last two decades have actively contributed to worrying global restrictions of civil society's core freedoms.

Certainly, they have made civic freedoms more difficult to fight for. Our funding models have nurtured a cadre of contracted, professionalized CSOs who excel at "accounts-ability," but struggle to catalyse disruptive social change. Advocating for human rights and sustainable social justice is an awkward fit with most donors' insistence on short-term, discrete, measurable projects, leaving the very organisations that may be best positioned to fight back against closing civic space severely under resourced and struggling for survival.

The dominance of official development assistance (ODA) and high-level, large-scale funding in many developing countries has also facilitated the ongoing trend for politicised government regulation and the imposition of barriers to what is commonly termed the "foreign funding of dissent." Even as we begin to see official government donors withdraw, for example, from countries recently designated as middle income, the dependence they have created, at the expense of homegrown resource bases, leaves a gaping hole, often quickly filled by repressive governments, intolerant of civic activism and dissent. These governments then choose only to fund CSOs that will deliver against the government's own agenda—some openly using the threat of funding cuts to silence critical voices—leaving the independence of the civil society sector dangerously compromised.

The public in many countries now view CSOs with suspicion—as self-serving, corrupt agents of external forces. In recent years, a rapid rise in engagement with charitable activities in some countries in the Global South—many home to exploding middle-class populations—raised hopes of a global surge in private donations. But the relationship between in-country wealth and the proportion of people giving money to charity has been shown to be weak. Deeper, underlying conditions and narratives drive or restrict a culture of giving. Widespread campaigns of vilification against civil society, and all the more subtle ways in which civic space is being restricted, are a real problem.

The SDG agenda will never be anything more than aspirational unless we are prepared to build a more diverse and resilient civil society. To do this we need practical measures that have a chance of early impact.

One example will be a greater role for community foundations. There has already been a significant increase in the number of community foundations around the world in recent years but a further investment in these mechanisms could help build community assets, support sustainable development, and change the power dynamics within the development sector—all at once. A well-resourced, established community philanthropy sector would entail our sustainable development efforts being grounded in strong relationships of trust, responsive to the evolving needs of communities, as well as to local political and social dynamics. Because of their independence, the financial backers of this kind of philanthropy—social investors and grant makers—are empowered to take risks, to seed-fund new ideas, to test innovation and to tolerate a degree of failure. Perhaps most important—by supporting communities' efforts to gain control of their own development future, this kind of philanthropy is inherently sustainable.

Another area for potential action is around localisation, defined as distributing a greater share of resources to local actors and giving them greater control over how those are spent. There has been no shortage of commitments to localisation in recent years. For example, in 2010 the U.S. government announced the USAID Forward initiative that promised to promote sustainable development through greater investment in local solutions, including support to civil society organisations that serve as engines of growth and progress for their own nations. More recently, participants at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 agreed to a "Grand Bargain" that included a commitment to more direct resourcing of local actors and first responders in humanitarian emergencies.

Yet despite these commitments, we have seen very few concrete measures that have made a difference. We need to find new mechanisms for channeling resources from international donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs quickly and flexibly to national and local actors. One set of actors that will play a critical role will be a new generation of Southern institutions that will be able to deal directly with Northern donors and be more grounded in the communities they serve. In some cases, these will take the form of dedicated Southern fundermediaries that allow Northern donors to devolve funding decisions closer to the ground. Examples like the African Women's Development Fund and the newly formed NEAR initiative on humanitarian assistance are likely to hold a key to localisation, which in turn, will have a positive impact on supporting a more diverse and resilient civil society.

Indeed, if traditional donors and international actors are interested in building local capacity and long-term impacts, investing in new development modalities like community philanthropy and local fundermediaries should be at the top of their list. This will require a nuanced approach and an honest acknowledgment of the politics embedded in their funding decisions. Above all, it will require a willingness to use their power to shift unequal power structures on the ground.

Navigating Blurred Boundaries

As major donor governments in the Global North seek to adapt to the new development era, many are placing a new emphasis on the importance of market-based solutions. In many ways, this is understandable: if the resourcing challenges around the MDGs were huge—and ultimately not achieved—then the funds and structural changes needed to achieve the SDGs are eye watering. As a result, the private sector, philanthropic foundations, and social enterprises are being expected to play a greater role in sustainable development, and an increasing proportion of ODA is also being channeled through or in partnership with these actors.

In many ways, the multi-stakeholder approach to Agenda 2030 is reflective of broader trends around the changing nature of traditional "sectors" around the world. Seismic shifts are already taking place in the balance between the traditional functions of each sector, as we know them. Businesses no longer exist solely to make profits: many see themselves as social enterprises, pursuing more than just monetary profits. Governments no longer hold a monopoly on providing public services: many such services are being delivered by the private sector, civil society organisations, or community actors. And civil society organisations are themselves changing rapidly: many of the largest NGOs have multibillion-dollar annual incomes and a global reach equivalent. Previously distinct sectors are undergoing a process of hybridisation: a transformative shift from competition to collaboration that will need to be a defining feature of the new SDG landscape.

Yet, civil society must also be careful to safeguard its ability to stand beyond the market and the state in order to question the fundamentals of the status quo. Should we fail to maintain this degree of independence, as we collaborate—and as the private sector plays an ever-increasing role in development—we risk simply working toward a perpetuation of the dominant capitalist system and a naturalisation of neoliberal market fundamentalism. The SDGs are about tackling the drivers—the root causes—of poverty, inequality, and climate change. And as such, civil society must secure its ability and impetus to criticise the current economic system and to challenge dominant powers.

As we move into the implementation phase of the SDGs, civil society has a role to play in counterbalancing the influence of the private sector in development. Left unchecked, this growing influence threatens to privilege those parts of the global agenda that most closely connect with private sector interests and to downplay those that do not. The role that large, transnational corporations are being asked to play in funding UN agencies and other international initiatives risks creating opportunities for corruption, reducing accountability, and substituting corporate

charity for citizens' rights. When the institutions of global governance begin to be used to advance corporate agendas and to launder the reputations of private sector corporations, we are entering dangerous terrain.

Finally, amid this growing "multi-stakeholderism" and collaboration, it is also important to recognise and protect the special role that civil society needs to pay in achieving sustainable development. A resilient, independent, and effective civil society is both a means and an end in itself when it comes to the SDGs. Successful implementation of the SDGs will require strong and efficient civil society institutions that can help deliver programs and interventions, but a vibrant and vocal civil society is also critical to achieving the just, inclusive, peaceful, and democratic societies envisioned in Goal 16.

Putting Citizens at the Heart of the Data Revolution

Another way in which we will need to redistribute power closer to the ground—if we are to achieve the SDGs—will be by altering the way we produce and use data. In this respect, the MDGs achieved something remarkable by entrenching the idea of measuring progress through robust metrics, partly to measure effectiveness for donors, but more importantly to promote greater accountability on international development objectives.

The SDGs may follow in the tradition of the MDGs, but their requirements in terms of volume, complexity, and breadth of data go far beyond anything previously attempted in the development sector. SDG metrics may still be in their infancy, but already there is widespread consensus that significant investment in the capacity of all development actors— including citizens—to generate, use, and curate data will be crucial. If we are to have any hope of achieving the new vision, robust new metrics, fed by nothing less than a data revolution, will be essential.

When citizens wanted to understand a country's performance in relation to a particular MDG target, the only information available was official, often patchy, government data or academic research. Indeed, the first countries to present their SDG plans to the UN in 2016 all said they would require better data in terms of geographical coverage, frequency, and specificity. Some official data are only collected once every five to ten years, making it very difficult to track change. The quality of rural and urban data often differs hugely, with metropolitan areas benefiting from much better data coverage and rural areas often being omitted from datasets or included only in a limited capacity. Women and indigenous communities are among the large demographics less likely to be represented in traditional household surveys and data collection techniques. With 230 distinct indicators to quantify, measuring progress toward the SDGs is a daunting task, but one that comes with opportunity: the opportunity to create a new approach to monitoring and accountability that puts citizens at its core.

New forms of citizen-generated data—produced by people, or their organisations, to monitor, demand, or drive change on issues that affect them—will revolutionise the successful implementation of this agenda (see Lämmerhirt, Jameson, and Prasetyo, 2017). New technologies offer exciting new ways for citizens to generate and use data democratically and creatively. Data disaggregated by age, gender, disability, and so on cannot be considered an expensive, optional add-on to the SDG framework. Citizen-generated data can monitor commitments made by governments (for example, Promise Tracker in Brazil) and feed evidence from the ground up into higher-level policy debates (for example, the ocean litter program Dive Against Debris). Importantly, data can also be used to verify official narratives and datasets, empowering people and giving them a way to actively engage with political processes that might otherwise seem far removed (for example, Float Beijing in China).

Work is under way on connecting these efforts with SDG monitoring sub-nationally, nationally, and globally. Everyone Counts, for example, is an initiative building on the success of community

scorecards as accountability tools to monitor SDG progress. In this case, Care International, World Vision, and the social enterprise Kwantu are working to connect and aggregate citizen generated and community-level service delivery data to monitor and hold power holders to account for commitments made on the SDGs.[1]

Of course, citizen-generated data does not come without challenges. While there are some encouraging examples of citizens already generating new data on important aspects of development, these initiatives, thus far, remain scarce, of mixed quality and sophistication, and unable to be compared within and across countries. Most CSOs lack the capacity and confidence to use new technology to generate data, or to use it in ways that can support their decision making and bolster their campaigns. At global level, while the role of national statistics and big data in driving the data revolution has gained considerable traction since the launch of the SDGs, less attention has been paid to the role that citizens and citizen-generated data could play in monitoring progress and supporting accountability.

More citizen-generated data initiatives across the world, particularly in the Global South, and greater complementarity and comparability of these datasets will be crucial to ensuring that citizen-generated data comes to be widely accepted as credible, reliable, and valuable. This kind of more timely, nuanced, and comprehensive data collection will also need to be at the very heart of any decision making if we're to succeed in ensuring that the sustainable development agenda truly leaves no one behind.

Developing New, Accessible Narratives

An additional challenge facing those who would like to see the SDGs become "famous," and therefore a popular and frequently used tool in the advocacy strategies of those campaigning for sustainable development, is to come up with a new strategy for communicating them. At one level this will mean finding new ways to raise awareness in a shallow sense among the largest possible population possible—something we failed to do for the MDGs. In a more important sense it will mean finding effective ways of bringing these "global goals" to life in the local context. For example, this could include showing a community activist working on gender equality or children's rights how the SDGs could become a useful tool. Initially and primarily this would drive accountability at their local or national level, but would also help contribute to a global accountability strategy. Recent experience in Lanet Umoja Location, Nakuru County in Kenya, through a collaboration between the Open Institute, Chief Francis Kariuki, and DataShift, has demonstrated the power of "domesticating" the SDGs.[2] Indeed, this experience has demonstrated the utility of the SDGs as a framework for measuring progress and demanding accountability on sustainable development at the local level—in this case SDG 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

The commitment to "leave no one behind" appears no less than six times in the declaration made by world leaders when they announced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) and has quickly emerged as one of the most powerful means of framing our new approach to inclusivity: a means of engaging and motivating people in a way that a list of seventeen goals and 169 targets cannot. Civil society must be at the vanguard of shaping and delivering this agenda. When we signed up to the SDGs, we committed to reach the furthest behind first, to listen to their voices, to involve them in designing policies that promote inclusion, and challenge the social barriers that deny or limit potential. We signed up to ensure that our new approach to

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[1] See UN, "Everyone Counts," SDGAction 11910 (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnership/?p=11910).

[2] See "Global Goals for Local Impact," Open Institute, June 22, 2016 (www.openinstitute.com/global-goals-for-local-impact-lanet-umoja-community-leaders-meeting/).

development will address all forms of discrimination and exclusion, including on the basis of gender, age, location, caste, religion, disability, or sexual identity.

The MDGs' inadequate attention to inequality and the most marginalised emerged as one of the earlier goals' key weaknesses. The MDGs focus on aggregate figures and overall progress failed to take into account growing social and economic disparities, while incentivising states and large NGOs to prioritise big-picture wins. Even as overall poverty levels fell, inequality often increased and the standard of living for the poorest and most marginalised sometimes worsened significantly. Take India, often held up as an exemplar of economic growth and poverty reduction using basic income-level measures. But research shows that it has not kept pace with progress in other large countries; the proportion of the Indian population that fall within the poorest 20 percent of all people globally has grown from 16 to 38 percent in the last twenty-five years (Development Initiatives, 2017). In the same period, the absolute gap between the poorest 20 percent globally and the rest of world has widened significantly. Indeed, only eight individuals now own as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population (Oxfam, 2017).

The SDGs call on us to tackle social and political marginalisation, as well as economic, to amplify the voices of those who are not ordinarily heard and to create a system in which people are empowered to shape their own communities. Civil society has a critical role to play in mobilising to make these global goals relevant, useful, and powerful for local actors.

Interestingly, the SDGs may offer a way of connecting progressive and populist political agendas. In most cases, recent moves toward populist and anti-establishments movements around the world are in response to poor people being pushed further to the margins of society and middle-class people feeling left behind. This deepening of social and economic marginalisation is perceived to be a by-product of globalisation, privatisation, and power captured by established elites. The universal nature of the SDGs could in fact be a vehicle for uniting grassroots civil society actors across the political spectrum who are concerned with rising economic inequality. This would require bold leadership as well as humility, but the SDGs could in fact become a framework for constructively bringing together civil society actors who typically don't collaborate, all in an effort to see governments deliver in tangible ways on commitments that they have made.

Within this radically changed development context, civil society must embrace a new way of working. Our old, or perhaps existing, global campaigns were largely Northern-led, dominated by international NGOs, and aimed at influencing global targets and Northern governments with top-down, centralised messaging. Our new models of campaigning—if they are to align with the SDG era—will need to be networked, bottom-up, decentralised, and, more often than not, designed, led, and owned by actors in the Global South.

A sustained, coordinated, collective, radical effort on the part of a global community of active, engaged citizens committed to the creation of a more just and equitable world can enable us to meet the most pressing global challenges of our time. This will need to encourage and rely on cooperation between networks of CSOs in countries around the world, be based on common objectives and coordinated and aligned activities, and involve sharing knowledge, skills, and other resources. It will need to create a space for organisations that may ordinarily have differing areas of focus and agendas to cooperate and, where appropriate, to campaign under one global brand.

There are reference points to draw from. In the 1970s and 1980s, nuclear disarmament and anti-Vietnam war movements in the West birthed a new kind of public consciousness around the value of peace and tolerance. The anti-apartheid movement managed to deliver a peaceful transition in South Africa. More recent movements such as the women's marches of 2017 give us hope that we will find the techniques and tools to build a similarly powerful, constructive, social movement around sustainable development.

Conclusion

It is positive that civil society was involved in creating the Sustainable Development Goals. But this is a far cry from what will be needed in order to ensure that the goals are achieved. Involving civil society in implementing the SDGs will be essential. And it will also be necessary to address the negative trends in civic space that harm people, planet, and prosperity.

We need to find ways to reverse the negative trends around civic space, and the legal and regulatory restrictions that hamper civil operations. Further, civil society needs to find ways of building resilience, voice, and independence. We will also need to encourage healthier democracies, characterised not just by the absence of violations, but by those in power taking proactive steps to safeguard citizen action, tolerate dissent, and provide platforms for meaningful dialogue. We need fewer governments fearing people power and instead more governments nurturing active citizenship (something that will be critical to achieving Goal 16 on the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies). More open spaces—online and offline—that channel citizen voice and dissent in meaningful ways without dismantling open and democratic societies are also needed.

The civil society sector itself also faces its own challenges. It must make sure to model good practice in addressing inclusion and no longer reproduce the exclusionary attitudes and practices of the societies around it. Civil society must lead the way in creating new, progressive, peace-building tactics to convince a radicalising world of the need for reconciliation and constructive dialogue.

For CSOs involved in sustainable development, the SDGs present some significant challenges and opportunities. In an era of disintermediation and disruption of existing power dynamics, no longer can it be assumed that a few, relatively well-resourced international NGOs will be at the leading edge of citizen action around sustainable development. We need a new set of actors, including many more grounded in local action—whether it is the soup kitchen in the Global North or the women's rights organisation in the Global South—who can effectively translate a global agenda to local issues and, in turn, feed local concerns into global monitoring frameworks. Promoting this sort of translocal action will increase the chances of civil society raising political pressure on both local actors (who will feel the power of locally led mobilisation) and global actors (who will see evidence grounded in local realities) to act. Indeed, broadening participation in this process beyond the relatively few CSOs who are currently active around the SDGs to a wider set of civil society actors will be critical to delivering any sort of accountability revolution.

Successfully implementing the seventeen SDGs will require a new way of working with more meaningful multi-stakeholder partnerships. Civil society needs to play its rightful and multifaceted role in sustainable development—not just the campaigners pointing out shortcomings but innovators leading delivery. If a government official somewhere is held accountable for delivering Agenda 2030 or indeed loses their job for not meeting an important SDG target or indicator,it should be clear that they are ultimately answerable to citizens.

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