

The Roles of Civil Society in Localising the Sustainable Development Goals

In January 2016, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as the main international mechanism for guiding development in all United Nations member states until 2030. These global goals concern a wide range of targets, including poverty alleviation, economic growth and environmental objectives. National governments, however, cannot realise these ambitious goals on their own. Collective and individual efforts at the local, national and international levels are necessary. Moreover, governments will need the broad involvement of other stakeholders, such as the private sector, the general public and civil society organisations (CSOs). This paper identifies four critical roles that CSOs can play in the “localisation” of these goals. These roles were discussed and validated by two African think tank dialogues that involved civil society actors as well as other local and international experts.

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which came into effect in January 2016, are a new, universal set of economic, social and environmental goals and targets that United Nations (UN) member states are expected to achieve by 2030 (see Appendix). The SDGs build and expand on the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by focusing on critical dimensions of sustainable development in both developing and developed countries, including human rights obligations, good governance, social justice, equity within countries, sustainability (particularly environmental sustainability), vulnerability and the exclusion of marginal populations and the poorest of the poor (Meyer-Ohlendorf *et al.*, 2013; Simelane and Chiroro, 2013). Like the MDGs, the SDGs will not be legally binding; they represent a political commitment to development by all UN member states (Meyer-Ohlendorf *et al.*, 2013). Ultimately, these universal goals are expected to create a benchmark that ensures the balancing of economic development and global environmental goals with poverty reduction objectives (Sachs, 2012).

Until now, the debates surrounding the SDGs have mainly concerned the setting of goals and indicators. Less attention has been paid to discussing the roles and responsibilities that different stakeholders should take in achieving these goals – in particular, how to best implement this universal framework at the local level. Given the scope and ambition of the SDGs, it is clear that governments alone cannot achieve the agenda. They must also facilitate participation of all sectors of society, including civil society organisations (CSOs), the private sector and the general public at the local level. This “localisation” calls for an inclusive approach that utilises local knowledge to tailor the ambitious global-development agenda to specific local circumstances.

Localisation is defined as “the process of defining, implementing and monitoring strategies at the local level for achieving global, national and subnational sustainable development targets. It involves various concrete mechanisms, tools, innovations, platforms and processes to effectively translate the development agenda into results at the local level” (GTF *et al.*, 2014: 5). In other words, localisation is the local implementation of the new set of goals and the monitoring of progress at the sub-national level (Lucci, 2015). Localisation should be conceptualised in a holistic manner and include civil society, local governments at the frontline of development, traditional leaders, religious organisations, the private sector, citizens and other parties (GTF *et al.*, 2014).

The inclusion of CSOs in these processes is imperative, for these actors play crucial roles in society as agents of accountability and service delivery. In the African context, the inclusion of CSOs is important because governance throughout the continent is described as being “bad” and of low quality (Owuye and Bissessar, 2012), whilst not enough effective institutional spaces have been created by governments to allow CSOs to engage with and act on global development issues. An examination of MDG-related implementation practices in South Africa revealed that CSOs played a critical role in advancing these goals by effectively articulating the needs and aspirations of the poor, fulfilling critical service-delivery gaps and promoting “good” governance practices (Motala *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, it is essential to unravel the potential roles of CSOs in the effective implementation of the SDGs as well as to enhance their engagement, impact and effectiveness in global development processes.¹

¹ This paper includes insights from a roundtable talk involving experts and civil society actors that was hosted by the Democracy Development Programme (DDP) in July 2015. An initial draft was also presented and commented upon at the African Civil Society Circle (ACSC) meeting in Johannesburg in October 2015.

Roles for Civil Society Organisations in Localising the Sustainable Development Goals

According to the United Nations Development Group (UNDG, 2013), there are strong voices demanding that civil society fully participate in the design of post-2015 policies in order to create functional national systems.² Civil society must play a critical role in fostering advocacy and mediation in policy development, identifying crucial development priorities, proposing practical solutions and policy opportunities, and criticising impractical or problematic policies (UNDP, 2014).

Specifically, CSOs must work to localise these goals in four key areas: giving a voice to the poorest and most marginalised citizens, serving as agents of accountability, acting as a service delivery provider and monitoring progress through data collection and reporting.

CSOs as the Voice of the Poorest and Most Marginalised Citizens

“Leaving no one behind” is an underlying principle of the SDGs. Its aim is to ensure that development throughout the world has positive impacts on the poorest and most marginalised members of society. A key criticism of the MDGs in this respect was that national or aggregated statistics do not reflect the geography of deprivation at the local level, and certain areas that are home to the poorest and most marginalised citizens in society have taken a step backwards (UN, 2008; Miyazawa, 2012).

One of the aims of localisation is to “put the last first” (Chambers, 1983) and to ensure that areas of relative deprivation are targeted when implementing the SDGs at the local level. To represent the interests of the poorest and most marginalised members of society at the local level, CSOs should take on six critical roles:

- 1. Listen to people and be aware of what is happening in their respective areas of operation.** This requires CSOs to be proactive in gathering information and interacting with communities. Therefore, it is crucial to create opportunities, spaces and platforms for engaging with these groups in order to promote genuine dialogues, build community awareness and develop strong relationships. It is important to listen to, and consider the solutions to, problems identified by these groups. Moreover, this dialogue should work both ways: CSOs should provide feedback to

² These “voices” emerged from a global consultation process on the post-2015 agenda and were captured by the report “A Million Voices” (UNDP, 2014). The report was based on approximately 100 national dialogues on the post-2015 agenda, 11 thematic consultations, various e-discussions and the global MY World survey (UNDG, 2013; UNDP, 2014). The stakeholders involved in this process included national and local decision-makers, the private sector, civil society, children, young people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, indigenous peoples, trades unions, displaced people, homeless people, farmers, prison inmates and gang members (UNDG, 2013).

these groups on steps they are taking to address concerns and the (lack of) progress made. This role constitutes a long-term process for CSOs.

2. **Translate the voices of the poorest and most marginalised citizens into rational or strong arguments** that are acknowledged and addressed by the local government. The SDGs represent a globally legitimate frame of reference for CSOs, which can introduce issues into policy dialogues. Where possible, CSOs should identify integrated improvements or interventions that could make a significant difference for vulnerable people. CSOs should also reiterate the value of locally tailored solutions in realising local and global development goals.
3. **Develop relationships or partnerships with the local government**, and in particular, identify the government departments, actors or institutions that need to respond in order to remedy problems. Moreover, they can ensure that action is taken by the responsible person or department, and if this is not the case, they should also follow up with the relevant government officials or departments. The goal is to ensure that local resources are mobilised for those who are most vulnerable and that their needs are reflected in local development plans and national public policies (Ghaus-Pasha, 2004; Save the Children, 2012; Motala *et al.*, 2014).
4. **Use human rights as a lens of analysis.** Adopting a human rights approach will enable the identification of groups of people whose rights have been violated, neglected or overlooked in development processes (UNDP, 2007). This approach also calls for the need to understand why these particular groups of people have had their rights infringed – for example, as a result of discriminatory laws or social practices that perpetuate inequality (UNDP, 2007).
5. **Identify, engage with and learn from other CSOs that interact with these groups.** CSOs should use “claimed” or “invited” spaces to highlight the actions, pilot projects or remedies that are effective or ineffective. In such spaces, CSOs can introduce issues important for their constituencies to the policy agenda through research advocacy, the lobbying of governments, litigation, mobilisation of public opinion and other actions (Coalition on Civil Society Resource Mobilisation, 2012).
6. **Play a critical role as transformers in society** by being involved in training and advocacy processes, which build the capacities and knowledge of the general populace towards achieving the SDGs. This will ensure that people become the focus of the SDGs and that the most vulnerable in society are not left behind when these global development goals are localised.

Civil Society Organisations as Agents of Accountability

Another critical role of civil society is to ensure that governments are held accountable (Bissio, 2015). Accountability is typically based on three elements: responsibility, answerability and enforceability (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). Responsibility entails that those in positions of authority have clearly defined duties and performance standards, which enable a transparent and objective assessment of their behaviour (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). Answerability demands that public officials and institutions present logical and articulate justifications for their actions and decisions to those affected, such as the general public, voters and other institutions (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). Enforceability requires public institutions to implement mechanisms that measure the degree to which government officials and institutions abide by established standards, and that enforce sanctions on officials who do not comply and, when needed, ensure that the proper corrective and remedial action is carried out (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). The three elements of accountability are not mutually exclusive, but interlinked. It is thus paramount that the roles and responsibilities of governments are clearly defined, particularly in terms of the answerability and enforceability dimensions of these development goals.

Responsibility

Governments are responsible for the implementation of the SDGs, but as with the MDGs, they will need to define their specific responsibilities and include other actors that can add value to these processes (Motala *et al.*, 2014). This will likely pose a challenge to accountability. Past observations of the MDGs highlighted that accountability tended to be weakened by an unclear understanding of what governments defined as specific responsibilities and who was responsible for MDG-related practices (OHCHR, 2010).

A starting point to better understanding responsibility in the context of these global goals is the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” which is anchored in the SDGs. This principle emphasizes that the responses of different UN member states to the SDGs will be context-specific and that their priorities will also be weighted differently. Consequently, countries will need to mobilise or redirect resources to certain goals that address issues that are most pressing in the local context (Osborn *et al.*, 2015). In South Africa, for example, high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality are identified as the core context-specific problems. In the past, the agenda of the South African MDGs prioritised these core issues, and it is likely that the SDG agenda will continue to have a similar context-specific, weighted focus. Although this weighting is understandable, the remaining priorities of the SDGs should not be neglected in South Africa’s development agenda, given the country’s common responsibility to realise these global goals.

As an agent of accountability, CSOs need to participate and be integrated into development and planning processes at the national and local levels. One of the failures of the MDGs was the exclusion of civil society from the planning and formulation of goal-setting processes and development strategies in the beginning (UN Millennium Project, 2005; Sachs, 2012; Simelane and Chiroro, 2013; Motala *et al.*, 2014). Given the lesson learned from this experience, SDGs should feature broader stakeholder involvement from the onset (ACSC meeting, 2015; DDP roundtable talk, 2015). The creation of institutional spaces that facilitate meaningful CSO participation is critical in this regard, with the goal of ensuring that SDG-related decisions can be proactively shaped starting from an early stage.

Beyond including CSOs in the defining of local development priorities, CSOs and citizens should also seek to establish social contracts that detail the implementation of such development priorities. Examples exist where local governments have engaged with citizens to formulate charters that stipulate service expectations of users and the community (UNCDF, 2010). These charters represent social contracts, whereby local officials and authorities publicly commit to locally established standards, the provision of information, the addressing of infringements, performance indicators and value for money (UNCDF, 2010). In this context, local governments have endorsed the use of various CSO-driven initiatives to promote local accountability and scrutiny of local operations: participatory budgeting and expenditure tracking, public expenditure tracking surveys and citizen report cards (UNCDF, 2010). For example, local communities in Tanzania, with support from Norwegian Church Aid, monitored how their governments spent resources, tracked whether expenditures on water and sanitation were received by the intended beneficiaries and highlighted instances where this was happening ineffectively (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). In addition, they elected committees that requested explanations from relevant government departments and officials, which resulted in a more responsive and accountable government.

Answerability

CSOs are able to promote transparency through the dissemination of information. For example, to highlight what has and has not been achieved by the government, CSOs can disseminate

publications on legal provisions, public expenditure allocations, governance, accountability mechanisms and other matters that the government may not want to share (Motala *et al.*, 2014).

The formation of partnerships or coalitions with other CSOs is an opportunity to strengthen the power of arguments in these institutional spaces and to approach development in an integrated manner. CSOs can act as a watch dog, critically examining government policies to ensure that government actions align with global development goals (Environmental Monitoring Group, 2005). This is particularly relevant in regards to the equity of provision or the distribution of services and benefits; CSOs can find out who is being excluded. Such partnerships and monitoring can also be applied to the informing of international donors, who may be unaware of a certain group of vulnerable or marginalised citizens. While existing legal frameworks may inhibit proactive engagement, CSOs should make an effort to shape legal and policy frameworks.

Enforceability

Enforceability is not only centred on punishing those who do not comply with established standards. It is also concerned with ensuring the availability of adequate and systematic mechanisms for measuring compliance according to stipulated responsibilities (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). Enforceability is also associated with the need to ensure that the appropriate corrective action is carried out (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). Although the SDGs are not legally binding, the localisation of these goals into domestic legal systems does provide some form of legal accountability and opportunities for enforcement (DDP roundtable talk, 2015).

Judicial enforcement at the court level is a possible route for CSOs. Litigations, however, are often very expensive and take a long time (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). Despite the costs of litigation, there are a number of success stories. For example, human rights-based social mobilisation resulted in the court-ordered dispensation of antiretroviral treatment in South Africa, which is argued to have saved over a million people (OHCHR, CESR, 2013). The judicial route can often identify systematic policy failures, and courts can be used to promote structural and institutional change (OHCHR, CESR, 2013).

CSOs as Service Delivery Agents

While national governments hold primary responsibility for delivering services in their country, the private sector, communities and CSOs also play a key role, particularly in situations where governments lack capacity, capability or the will to provide essential services for their citizens (UNCDF, 2010; Save the Children, 2012). As a result, these actors must be collectively involved in shaping demand, developing state policies and delivering services (UNCDF, 2010). This is particularly relevant in areas affected by conflict and characterised by high levels of poverty and a lack of access to basic services (Save the Children, 2012). Here, CSOs are often better suited to meeting the needs of the poor, as they can be more flexible than the government and can identify creative and innovative alternatives to development (Coalition on Civil Society Resource Mobilisation, 2012).

One acute risk, however, is that CSOs capable of service delivery are often co-funded by Western donors. While this arrangement can reduce the need for national or local governments to allocate money for service delivery, it has dangerous potential to make developing countries excessively reliant on official development assistance and to encourage an abdication of financial commitments from national or local governments (ACSC meeting, 2015). For example, Moss *et al.* (2006) found that states in Sub-Saharan Africa that are heavily reliant on the international community for revenue have tended to be less accountable to their citizens and are less likely to invest in effective

public institutions. This risk is exacerbated by recent cases of donor resource withdrawal, which has led to increasing pressure on governments to fulfil their own responsibilities related to local development (UNCDF, 2010; ACSC meeting, 2015).

Data Collection, Reporting and Monitoring

It is clear that data gaps, the insufficient use of data and differences in indicator values between national and international sources hampered the MDG process (Easterly, 2007; Sanga, 2011; Sachs, 2012). Moreover, “traditional” forms of large-scale data collection take a number of years to complete and analyse, which ultimately delays action for those in need (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015).

In an effort to remedy this, the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Agenda called for a “data revolution”: data collection systems should be low-cost and reliable, and they should ultimately ensure that data are accurate, timely and immediately available to policymakers, the public and CSOs (UN, 2013; Gandure and Kumwenda, 2013; Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015). The data revolution needs to be an inclusive and transparent process that includes statistical experts, CSOs, national human rights institutions, service providers and marginalised populations (UN, 2013). Furthermore, data should be disaggregated, should focus on the local level and be crowd-based to capture statistics about the most poor, vulnerable and marginalised citizens of society (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015).

To realize this ambition, there need to be adaptable tools for data collection, monitoring and evaluation of processes related to the implementation of the SDGs. Recent improvements in information technology, such as the innovative use of mobile technology in collecting data, create an opportunity to enhance statistics for accountability and decision-making purposes and to create new forms of participatory monitoring (UN, 2013). This could be used by CSOs to enhance government and service-provider accountability (UN, 2013). Moreover, geo-referenced data provides opportunities for the collection of disaggregated data about some of the SDGs, as well as the inclusion of many voices in the design and monitoring of projects related to these goals. An interesting example of the possibilities of geo-referenced data is the Nigerian MDG Information System, an online interactive data platform that enables the general public to comment on Nigeria’s health, education and water facilities. Citizen information is then forwarded to the relevant policymakers and development planners. While the use of such online and mobile technology can facilitate the real-time monitoring of development results, this innovation is currently disconnected from traditional statistical communities throughout the world (UN, 2013) and will need to change.

For their part, CSOs have an important role to play in this new form of data collection by encouraging people to use these new platforms. CSOs can also use the data from such platforms to highlight ineffective or problematic areas with the overall aim of ensuring that domestic resources are mobilised to address issues. However, it is imperative for civil society to be aware that the complexity of certain technologies could exacerbate the exclusion of the most marginalised citizens in development processes. This relates to the possibility of these people not having the “know how” or access to certain technologies. Thus, CSOs need to be aware of the limitations of “technical” monitoring tools and endeavour to assist the most marginalised with the use of these technologies.

Beyond supporting data collection, CSOs also have the important role of directly monitoring the local implementation of the SDGs (Arowolo, 2015). Civil society can produce shadow reports, particularly when it believes that a country report is inadequate and does not highlight the plight of the poorest and most marginalised citizens (Motala *et al.*, 2014). When interacting

with government departments, CSOs have the potential to inform the relevant and responsible authorities of such groups of people. In addition, Arowolo (2015) suggests that SDG implementation in countries should include an evaluation process to assess whether the implementation of these goals was informed by human rights treaties, as well as the principles of good governance, broad and inclusive participation, and the rule of law. Therefore, effective data collection, analysis and reporting mechanisms need to be established with regards to the localisation of the SDGs (ACSC meeting, 2015).

A DDP roundtable talk (2015) suggested that CSOs could play a more effective role in the implementation of the SDGs if the UN or some other authoritative body produced a guideline document further outlining how they can interact and enhance their roles in SDG processes. Such a guideline document would potentially have binding “power” as a result of its issuance from the authoritative body in question; this would ensure that CSOs abide by the roles outlined and effectively fulfil the associated responsibilities. Furthermore, these roles could be localised to a particular context, which would be beneficial to CSOs operating in different areas.

One of the recommendations that emerged from the ACSC meeting (2015) was the establishment of effective data collection, analysis and report mechanisms. CSOs have a role in these processes. By focusing on and aligning with the SDGs, CSOs will be able to highlight the areas where the implementation processes of the SDGs are effective or lacking. Advocacy is strengthened when grounded in contextual research (Coalition on Civil Society Resource Mobilisation, 2012). In addition, CSOs can thus create their own set of indicators to help identify, and bring attention to, the issues that are most pressing in the local context. These indicators need to focus on the local people who should benefit from the realisation of the SDGs. This means that civil society can perform a watchdog function by ensuring that governments are delivering on these commitments. It is envisaged that this will aid the mobilisation and redirection of resources.

The Way Forward

The roles highlighted in this paper reflect the value that civil society organisations bring to society and, in particular, how CSOs can best contribute to achieving the SDGs at the local level. As CSOs are recognised as having an increasingly important role in carrying out global development goals, they need to engage with other stakeholders in the implementation of the SDGs. Here are a number of steps that can enhance CSO engagement on the SDGs and encourage CSOs to fulfil the various roles discussed earlier:

Firstly, CSOs stand to benefit from aligning the framework of their programming to that of the SDGs. Looking back, the MDGs became part of the dominant development discourse for many developing countries, as well as donors and other important multilateral institutions (Ghaus-Pasha, 2004). By adopting the framing associated with the SDGs, CSOs will be able to participate in debates on global development, which have local level impacts, and can effectively create an argument for forming partnerships with government. This will open up possibilities for CSOs to engage with governments on the allocation of resources, on facilitating the implementation of the SDGs and on monitoring activities related to this process. In addition, the SDGs can be linked to programmes and funding proposals of CSOs, which could improve the possibilities of international partnerships and other collaborations. This would also increase public awareness of the SDGs.

By being aware of and linking with the objectives of the SDGs, CSOs can take a cross-cutting approach to identifying creative solutions on the ground – solutions that government departments, which tend to operate in silos, may miss. Furthermore, CSOs need to actively engage with their communities so that they are aware of the local issues. This will allow them to choose which areas to focus on, ensuring that they operate effectively in their communities and function as a community’s “voice.” This engagement would include understanding the relevance of different issues and providing feedback about what is going on in the community’s local context, so that communities, thusly informed, have the knowledge and confidence to become more involved.

Secondly, CSOs need to forge new partnerships with other CSOs as well as with governments, the private sector and other international bodies. Within these partnerships, best practices and other information should be shared and translated into meaningful vehicles for the implementation of the SDGs. As relationships between CSOs and the government are often strained, CSOs must adapt and be flexible, rather than adopting an “always oppose the government” doctrine (DDP roundtable talk, 2015). Ideally, this would create a more effective space for engagement and dialogue.

Thirdly, CSOs need to work in a coordinated fashion with each other – for example, by forming a coalition of CSOs to organise civil society engagement with the SDGs and to enhance their interactions with governments (DDP roundtable talk, 2015). Furthermore, local champions could emerge from these coalitions, which could further enhance and drive the local implementation of the SDGs (ACSC meeting, 2015). Such a model of collaboration is essential for promoting deliberative governance, identifying gaps, facilitating inclusivity and generating collaborative solutions to challenges related to the SDGs. A coalition is likely to have greater power and presence in governance processes than CSOs attempting to engage with the SDGs on their own. By having power and presence in these processes, the voices of coalitions are more likely to be recognised and considered by governments, which would enhance the impact of CSOs in the localisation of the SDGs.

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Appendix

Following various meetings, conferences and consultations, the United Nations directed an intergovernmental Open Working Group (OWG) in 2014. The OWG discussions resulted in the generation of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (see list below) and 169 targets, which were conceptualised as the way forward after the MDGs. The SDGs have a universal focus. They thus have a broader focus than the MDGs and will apply to both developed and developing UN member states from 2016 to 2030 (Sachs, 2012). The SDGs also reflect the moral principles that no one, and no country, should be left behind, and that every country has a common responsibility with regards to achieving these goals (Osborn *et al.*, 2015).

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

About the African Civil Society Circle

This publication is a joint output of the African Civil Society Circle, a group of civil society organizations and think tanks from Africa whose goal is to strengthen Sub-Saharan voices in global, continental, regional and national development debates and promote good governance through critical reflection and innovative ideas.

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