



IT'S TIME!

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



PARIS 2016

BACKGROUND NOTE

The role of civil society: from the UN to day-to-day politics

After successfully pushing for ambitious outcomes in the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, civil society organisations (CSOs) now have a critical role in complementing the 'official tracking' of the multifarious 2015 commitments, as well as challenging any inadequate implementation of these commitments and pressuring countries and Non-State Actors (NSAs) to implement—and go beyond—their commitments. To be effective in 2016 and beyond, CSO tracking and pressuring must overcome several barriers, the most important of which is the current general lack of mobilisation of local CSOs, who hold an inestimable legitimacy in in-country tracking, yet which may feel widely disengaged with the 2015 commitments and agreements, seeing them as empty political promises far removed from their reality on the ground. This session will explore how CSOs can overcome these barriers and create a 'strategic approach' to tracking and pressuring which can bear fruit for all.

1. CONTEXT

After successfully pushing for ambitious outcomes in the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, civil society organisations (CSOs—e.g. NGOs, think tanks, research organisations, etc.) continue to have an essential role to play in moving forward these processes as they enter into an implementation phase. Two areas appear as particularly ripe for CSO action: (1) contributing to tracking the commitments taken by countries and NSAs (e.g. cities, sub-national jurisdictions, and businesses) in 2015 and (2) challenging any inadequate implementation of these commitments and exerting pressure for rising ambition over time. These actions go hand-in-hand: domestic tracking give CSOs the legitimacy to pressure countries to fully implement—and transcend—their commitments. They also complement the important implementation role CSOs themselves have, especially when it comes to the SDGs, which cover topics that grassroots social and environmental NGOs have been fighting for and working on for many decades already.

CSOs can indeed critically complement the 'official' tracking established by the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. While promising in some regards (e.g. the Paris Agreement's universal yet flexible reporting and

review system holds the promise of keeping all countries accountable to their commitments), this official tracking is nevertheless lacking in various respects: its ambition is inherently limited (since contingent on limits countries agree to impose—collectively—onto themselves, and watered down to a 'lowest common denominator outcome' in international negotiations), yet also incomplete (e.g. the 'transparency' system under the Paris Agreement tracks countries' progress toward their commitments, not toward decarbonization), inchoate (e.g. the case with SDGs), or currently inexistent (e.g. the case of the UNFCCC's Lima-Paris Action Agenda). Drawing on their tracking, implementation and influence experience so far, CSOs can help fill these gaps and create an enhanced tracking ecosystem to help keep countries more accountable to their commitments, as well as raise trust among actors that collective action is occurring, which may lead over time to rising ambition.

CSOs can also influence ambition more directly, by pressuring countries and NSAs to implement their commitments, and surpass them so as to achieve the SDGs' and Paris Agreement's ultimate objectives. CSO pressure has been fundamental in keeping NSAs accountable to their commitments—and, in many cases, in pushing them to take on a commitment in the first place. Experts and practitioners agree that in-country CSO pressure is fundamental for getting governments to establish policies and measures to achieve their climate commitments and operationalize SDGs. This in-country CSO activity can then be harnessed to exert pressure in the international arena, especially during the recurrent 'high-level' political moments that have been built into the Paris Agreement and SDGs processes. CSO pressure at this scale can significantly contribute in igniting a 'naming and shaming' dynamic that may push recalcitrant countries to act.

2. ISSUES/SOLUTIONS

So far, most CSO tracking has been on NSA commitments taken prior to 2015, yet initiatives to track and monitor 2015 country commitments are also springing up. This includes the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data which opens up the space for CSOs to generate and use SDG-related data along governments, as well as CIVICUS' Datashift and the Open

Institute's SDG Tracker which are starting to collect and use CSO and citizen-generated data with the aim of complementing official tracking. On climate, various think tanks working at the international level have also started tracking countries' financial, mitigation, and adaptation commitments, as well as decarbonization progress.

Yet various barriers and challenges continue to hinder effective CSO engagement on 2015 commitments.

While some local-international CSO coordination exists on tracking and pressuring NSA commitments (e.g. on zero-deforestation commitments), and collaborations for harnessing data and ensuring CSO monitoring of SDGs are seeing the light, broad coordination between CSO active at the international, national, and local levels is still largely lacking. Nascent tracking efforts, especially on climate, are often conducted by international NGOs and think tanks little engaged in domestic implementation. In turn, many local NGOs embedded in sustainable development or climate implementation are likely to be highly skeptical of engaging in tracking commitments which they may likely view as unambitious empty promises very far removed from their concrete preoccupations. To them, tracking might seem like a *de facto* legitimization of commitments they do not believe in.

Coordinated collaboration across all scales is essential for effective action: CSOs active on-the-ground are most legitimate to track their respective countries' progress on domestic implementation, while those involved in the international scene have built up the legitimacy and weight to exert real pressure within UN processes.

Three challenges seem particularly salient: (1) the multifarious nature of tracking needs, seeing that commitments range in type (i.e. 'means' such as finance, or 'end' such as climate mitigation, adaptation, SDGs), legal nature, timeline, scope, maturity, etc; (2) the shrinking political space and voice of CSOs precisely in countries in which CSO pressure to implement commitments may be most valuable; (3) funding constraints, amid funders' growing emphasis on actions that deliver quick and concrete results—a category which excludes tracking, by nature a discrete, long-term endeavor.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSIONS/ QUESTIONS

- Where and on what should CSOs focus their tracking efforts, to best complement and/or challenge official tracking?
- How can international and other CSOs engaged in tracking mobilise local and national CSOs to help track the 2015 commitments and pressure their governments to act? How can grassroots CSOs utilise the 2015 commitments to their own benefit as a lever to demand concrete government action and accountability on issues directly concerning them, or engage in UN processes to increase their legitimacy in the domestic political scene (e.g. the case with NGOs involved in the Committee on World Food Security)?
- How can CSOs develop 'tracking coalitions' to face the enormity of the tracking need in a strategic manner, to enhance linkages between CSO acting at different scales, to make the best use of limited funding, to avoid duplication of efforts, and share best practices? How can CSOs harness data collection and monitoring sharing at the national level to exert pressure internationally at the high-level UN climate and SDG accountability events?
- How can CSOs convince the funding community of the importance of engaging in tracking to support the successful implementation of the SDGs and Paris Agreement?

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