Thus far, this Handbook has focused on promoting effective CSO engagement in monitoring and accountability work for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs at the national and local level. However, opportunities also exist for CSOs to engage with relevant actors, institutions, processes and mechanisms at regional and international levels, as well as thematic and other approaches to SDG accountability.

Regional bodies and forums

The primary responsibility for implementing the 2030 Agenda rests with national governments, but many countries come together via regional bodies and forums to cooperate and work together to make progress on SDG implementation.

Countries in a given region often share specific concerns and priorities and confront similar challenges, based on comparable geographies, macroeconomic structures, cultures and other shared characteristics. Thus, neighbouring national governments can benefit from both inter-regional cooperation and mutual learning. Regional forums and bodies provide a space for such collaboration and the sharing of best practices. They can encourage countries to review progress more regularly and learn from the successes and failures of regional peers. Governments also tend to appreciate regionally comparative perspectives, and the results of regional monitoring are more likely to be used in policymaking and sustained over time, not least because national governments are usually eager to compare their performance to that of neighbouring countries or regional peers.

Evidence from the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) suggests that regional networking, benchmarking and peer review can catalyse action by invoking reputational concerns and making progress appear more achievable. For example, Indonesia and Mexico came to prioritize MDG implementation at least in part out of a desire to position themselves as

regional leaders. In Zambia, the realization that the country was lagging behind other African countries in making progress towards MDG 5 (reducing maternal mortality) helped mobilize top-level political support for prioritizing the issue.[257]

Regional follow-up and review forums can also provide an important space for promoting thematic goals, such as maintaining a focus on gender equality and strengthening gender-responsive implementation. Regional entities can foster political commitment to and national ownership of gender equality commitments by linking the 2030 Agenda to regionally specific agreements.

CSOs interested in promoting SDG accountability through regional approaches should consider engaging with the following regional bodies and forums:

• **UN Regional Commissions:** At the regional level, national governments are required to identify the most suitable regional forum for following up and reviewing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, building on existing mechanisms and successful experiences. The UN Regional Commissions have emerged as one of the most important forums for regional sustainable development processes, and provide inclusive platforms for regional reviews.[258] Regional processes facilitated by the UN Regional Commissions provide a forum for peer learning through voluntary reviews, sharing of best practices and discussions on shared targets. These forums are usually held between March and May but do not follow a systematic approach. They tend to include: regional intergovernmental forums focused on specific

---

257 UN Women. p. 39
258 CESR/UN Women. p. 16. 2030 Agenda (2015). paragraph 81.

themes; agreement on region-specific priorities and indicators; and regional thematic and progress reports. Regional processes are also important for ensuring that global and regional agendas—such as the **African Union's Agenda 2063** or the **European Union's Consensus for Development**—are aligned with the 2030 Agenda in order to avoid duplication or fragmentation in the pursuit of gender equality and sustainable development. National accountability can be complemented by regional dialogue and monitoring in coordination with and making use of UN Regional Commissions. Civil society engagement at this level is critical to contribute knowledge-sharing, learning and identification of good practices, and in generating solutions and mutual support.[259]

• **Sustainable Development Forums:** Regional Forums on Sustainable Development (RFSD) have been established in many regions by the UN Regional Commissions and help facilitate follow-up and review of the implementation of the Agenda. RFSDs—such as the African Regional Forum for Sustainable Development (ARFSD), Arab Forum on Sustainable Development, and Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development (APFSD)—serve as hubs for follow-up and review activities and help to facilitate peer learning and exchange of best practices, which then feed into the HLPF.[260] These Forums serve as important mechanisms for monitoring and tracking progress in implementation at the regional level, as well as for mobilizing and ensuring the participation of stakeholders.

• **Regional human rights bodies and mechanisms**:

o **Inter-American Human Rights System**: Being responsible for monitoring and ensuring implementation of human rights in 35 countries of the Americas, the Inter-American system is composed of two entities: a commission and a court. Both bodies can decide individual complaints concerning alleged human rights violations and may issue emergency protective measures when an individual or the subject of a complaint is at immediate risk of irreparable harm.[261]

o **European Human Rights System**: In Europe, the principal judicial and quasi-judicial organs responsible for defining and overseeing States' compliance with their regional human rights obligations are the **European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)** and the **European Committee of Social Rights**, both created under the auspices of the Council of Europe. The ECtHR has jurisdiction to decide complaints submitted by individuals and States concerning violations of the European Convention on Human Rights, which principally concerns civil and political rights; whereas the Committee oversees the protection of most economic and social rights in most of Europe. In addition, the **Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights** serves as an independent monitor, highlighting issues of concern in the region. The Commissioner's responsibilities include assisting national governments in implementing regional human rights standards, promoting understanding and awareness of human rights in the region, identifying gaps in protection, facilitating the activities of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and similar actors, and providing advice and information on human rights protection in Europe.[262]

o **African Human Rights System**: The African human rights system is composed of two entities: a commission and a court. The **African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)** promotes and protects human rights in the 54 Member States of the African Union, which – with the exception of South Sudan – have all ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The Commission accepts complaints from individuals, groups of individuals, non-governmental organizations and States concerning alleged violations of the Charter. The second organization guarding human rights on the African continent is the **African Court on Human and Peoples Rights (AfCHPR)**. This is a regional human rights tribunal with advisory and contentious jurisdiction concerning the interpretation and application of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which is also referred to as the Banjul Charter.[263]

259 TAP Network (2018). Position paper.

260 Danish Institute of Human Rights. HR/2030, p. 17.

261 Amnesty International. p. 33.

262 *Ibid*

• **Other bodies and forums (including peer review mechanisms)**: There are a number of other bodies and forums, including peer review mechanisms, with which CSOs can engage at the regional level for SDG monitoring and accountability. In Asia, for instance, CSOs might seek to collaborate with the **Asia-Pacific Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (RCEM)** or the **Asian Parliamentary Forum**. Other relevant peer review mechanisms include the **African Peer Review Mechanism**, the peer reviews of the **Pacific Island Forum** and the **Organization for Economic Cooperation Development initiative**, which cover many thematic aspects of the 2030 Agenda.[264] Finally, routine reports on regional support and achievements from both public and private and civil society sources, such as the **EU's annual "Accountability Report on Financing for Development"** or **Concord Europe's annual "Aid Watch Report,"** are useful accountability tools that employ both learning and peer pressure "naming and shaming" mechanisms.[265] The EU even has a programme for peer reviews of national sustainable development policies, though this is rarely used.[266]

Engaging with the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

Every year, the UN hosts its High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) where national governments have the opportunity to present VNRs as part of the formal follow-up and review architecture of the 2030 Agenda.[267] The HLPF's mandate is to: provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations on the 2030 Agenda's implementation and follow-up; keep track of progress on the SDGs; spur coherent policies informed by evidence, science and country experiences; and address new and emerging issues.

Since the HLPF plays the central role at the apex of the review architecture for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs at the global level, what does this mean for participation of civil society at the national level?

Civil society can engage in various ways in the Forum, many have which have been described in detail elsewhere in this Handbook:

• **Joining their government's delegation** to the HLPF when they present Voluntary National Reviews (see Chapter 5 for more information on engaging with the VNRs);

• **Issuing their own reports** on their government's experiences with SDG implementation, or a "spotlight" or "shadow" report to be issued alongside the government's (see Chapter 12 for more information on producing civil society SDG reports);

• **Providing data** or other information to be used in global stocktaking reports of SDG progress (see Chapter 11 for more information on using data for SDG accountability), including the Secretary-General's report on 'Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals,' which provides a global overview of "the current situation of the Goals" each year; and 'The Sustainable Development Goals Report' produced by the UN Statistics Division, which reviews the preceding year's progress towards implementation. Both draw on the available official data for the global indicators, which can be found in the Global SDG Indicators Database (https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/), and is sourced from the "custodian" UN agencies for each indicator. The data collection focal points and their contact information are compiled here: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataContacts/;

• Participating at the global level in ways that domestic processes may not allow, including in the **thematic/SDG reviews** held each year at the July session of the HLPF; and

• Advocacy with governments to shape the Ministerial Declaration adopted each year through intergovernmental negotiations leading up to the July session of the HLPF.

As part of its role as the global hub for review of the SDGs, the HLPF also serves to gather the results of the range of national, regional, international and thematic

263 Amnesty International. p. 33.

264 White Ribbon. p. 21.

265 DG DEVCO. 2016.

266 Espey et al. (2015). p. 18. DIE. p. 21.

267 UN (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, para. 84.

processes, mechanisms and institutions that have the potential to contribute to the follow-up and review. Thus, civil society actors can influence the Forum's discussions and, by extension, the accountability of their own government, by contributing to processes that feed into the HLPF, such as:

• Regional commissions' dialogues that serve as preparation for the HLPF sessions (see Chapter 17 for more information on regional processes);

• Expert Group Meetings on the specific SDGs under review each year; and

• Contributing to events on HLPF margins that feed informally into governments' discussions on SDG progress.

CSOs can also utilize the HLPF for forming partnerships and alliances with the thousands of civil society representatives and other actors gathered at HLPF meetings, to strengthen advocacy and accountability at home.

Civil society participation in meetings of the HLPF is facilitated by the Outreach and Partnerships Branch in the Division for Sustainable Development Goals, which is part of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

Currently, the Forum's provisions for accountability of national governments are considered relatively weak: national reporting is voluntary, the interactive discussion on each VNR is very brief and has not met the substantive standards of other accountability processes in the UN system, and space for civil society participation in many aspects of the Forum is limited and not considered adequate for ensuring meaningful contributions. In addition, the technical preparations for the Forum are not linked to its high-level discussions in such a way to ensure their findings and inputs are addressed. As UN Women has noted, the UN General Assembly's review of the HLPF, which is expected to begin in early 2020, could provide an opportunity to strengthen its role as an accountability mechanism.[268]

Key agreements on the HLPF

• UNGA resolution 67/290 agreed in July 2013, on the

'**Format and organizational aspects** of the high-level political forum on sustainable development,' which calls on the Forum to ensure a dedicated role for civil society and space to engage;

• The 2030 Agenda itself, titled, 'Transforming our World,' adopted in September 2015, which sets out **several commitments** on follow-up and review through national, regional and global processes; and

• UNGA resolution 70/299 agreed in July 2016, detailing **additional features** of the follow-up and review architecture for the 2030 Agenda.

Thematic and SDG-specific Forums and Other Opportunities

CSOs can consider engaging in thematic accountability mechanisms and opportunities for SDG accountability.

For example, the UN has bodies and forums that review progress in specific areas addressed by the SDGs, including: the **World Education Forum**, the **World Health Assembly**, the **International Labour Conference**, the **Committee on World Food Security** and the **Human Rights Council (HRC)**.[269] These bodies and forums can be utilized for Goal-specific approaches to SDG implementation. For example, the **NPOA** program of action on civil arms, which requires countries to report every two years, can be used by CSOs to raise awareness on arms control. Other mechanisms, such as those that focus on anti-corruption, can be useful in relation to SDG 16.

There are also specific accountability frameworks for various sub-sectors and/or themes of development cooperation, such as the **IHP+ Global Compact** for the health sector and the **New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States**.[270] In relation to water, in 2017, **End Water Poverty (EWP)** and its members and partners (Watershed Programme, Coalition Eau and WSSCC) agreed to conduct an in-depth, inclusive analysis and produce a comprehensive report on country-level accountability mechanisms, assessing their strengths, limitations and effectiveness. This report was then launched prior to the 2018 HLPF with the aim of

---

268 UN Women. p. 39.
269 See A/70/684: page/para? 46.
270 DIE. p. 23

strengthening and building the capacity of national CSOs when advocating for improved accountability mechanisms. The goal was to have a much-needed conversation at the country level between national governments and other relevant stakeholders. This aimed to improve existing accountability mechanisms, ultimately speeding up the delivery of safely managed services for the most marginalized and vulnerable people.

CSOs may also look to **WASHwatch** for another example of a thematic approach to SDG accountability. WASHwatch is an online monitoring platform that increases monitoring and accountability towards the achievement of SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation). It provides an easily accessible information hub for the WASH sector that encourages greater focus on monitoring and accountability. Through collaborative efforts, this platform provides information on institutional frameworks, commitments, budgets, access figures and coordination mechanisms in the WASH sector, enabling monitoring progress at the global, regional and national levels.[271]

Other thematic opportunities include bodies such as the **Open Government Partnership (OGP)**, a multilateral initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. As of early 2016, 69 countries that are part of the OGP submit biannual Action Plans, developed in consultation with national civil society. In the five years since its inception, OGP Action Plans have emerged as a proven mechanism to get time-bound, independently monitored commitments from governments on policy reform towards many SDG 16 related issues. Many CSOs are already using the OGP platform to advance their policy priorities related to the SDGs.[272]

This is by no means an exhaustive list of thematic and Goal-specific approaches to SDG monitoring and accountability, and CSOs seeking to engage in these opportunities should explore other accountability mechanisms—specifically ones in the development cooperation space, such as the **Development Cooperation Forum (DCF)**, the **Global Partnership for**

Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), and the **Development Assistance Committee (DAC)** of the OECD.

Beyond regional, global and thematic bodies and forums, there remain other accountability mechanisms and opportunities for CSOs to advance SDG accountability, including:

• **HLPF Partnership Exchange**, which provides a forum for national governments and civil society to share experience and expertise in the design and implementation of partnerships that will contribute to achieving the SDGs;

• **Partnerships for SDGs** online platform, which contains the multi-stakeholder partnerships and voluntary commitments being profiled at the HLPF Partnership Exchange. CSOs can sign up for access to the database and use it to submit progress reports to the HLPF;

• **Partners for Review**, a transnational, multi-stakeholder network for a robust review process of the 2030 Agenda. The network facilitates dialogue and peer learning on challenges, provides space to explore best practices and lessons learned, mobilizes knowledge and shares expertise on new and emerging issues related to national monitoring and review;

• **Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data**, which helps stakeholders across countries and sectors harness the data revolution for sustainable development, using this new knowledge to improve lives and protect the planet. The network includes governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, academic institutions, foundations, statistics agencies and other data communities;

• **SDG National Reporting Initiative**, which facilitates greater information-sharing for reporting on the SDGs between international, regional and local communities.

• **Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA)**, a Wold Bank initiative focused on funding and knowledge;and

• **G20**, which presents a yearly SDG Accountability Report on its development policy agenda.

271 CESR/UN Women. p. 26

272 TAP Network. Toolkit, p. 32; Open Government Partnership. http://www.wri.org/blog/2015/10/open-government-partnership-achieving-sustainable-development-goals-through