

CIVICUS Accountability Framework

Introduction:

As civil society grows and becomes more visible in the public eye, it is important that we can be held accountable for our actions. This should be done in a dynamic, evolving way, where accountability is not a report, but a dynamic and constructive relationship with stakeholders that improves the agency and credibility of civil society organisations. At CIVICUS, accountability means we are transparent about who we are and what we do. It also means we answer to our partners, donors, civil society and ourselves on what we have achieved and how we achieved it.

Accountability framework:

CIVICUS, as part of its strategy development process in 2016/2017, elevated its accountability agenda, moving away from a technical monitoring and evaluation (M&E) emphasis to embedding accountability as a culture and strategic enabler.

As a result, CIVICUS' new accountability framework was developed alongside its [Strategic Plan 2017-2022](#) to help consistently and systematically track the organisation's progress and impact against the new strategy, meet accountability commitments and enable organisational learning. It is grounded in two schools of thought - [utilisation-focussed evaluation](#) and [developmental evaluation](#) theory, recognising that in complex environments, where social change is difficult to measure and attribute to one single effort, evaluation needs to be purpose-driven and enhance the likelihood to inform decisions.

We have also made a shift away from traditional notions of measurement of success with the knowledge and understanding that at different levels of programme implementation there are varying markers of success. Neither outputs, nor outcomes, nor impact markers are the most important measurements in our story of success because each are dependent on the other.

Our understanding is that social change does not occur in a vacuum, and every effort to affect social change requires us to tell the *full* story of when/how change happened (or did not). Quantifiable indicators are important for more immediate and intermediate changes. However, longer term changes or measures of success may be, in some cases, less quantifiable because they involve changes in social actors, governments, activists and citizens. These behavioural changes are longer lasting and ultimately the changes required towards realising our strategic goals. And *this change* is what we are most interested in capturing, measuring and learning to inform our decisions.

As a break from the norm, we have adopted what we call Critical Learning Questions for measuring these longer-term changes. For us, this preference makes the most sense as the most useful purpose for an evaluation at the impact level would be based on *what we intend to do with the outcomes*. The below table (Table 1) highlights the difference between indicative impact indicators and our alternative, utilisation-focussed Critical Learning Questions, which we propose will replace non-utilitarian "markers of success". This is incorporated in our full performance story (i.e. our strategy results framework) which includes our strategic goals, objectives and Critical Learning Questions with annual targets and indicative activities which is updated on an annual basis.

Figure 1: Goal 1 Defending civic freedoms and democratic values

Indicative Impact Indicator	Usefulness	Alternative to Impact Indicators: Critical Learning Question	Usefulness
Degree to which alliance members feel that CIVICUS has defended civic freedoms and democratic values	This indicator will help measure the alliance perception of CIVICUS. To change the outcome, we need to improve <i>perception</i> of the impact of our work not necessarily the quality of the work we produce.	Is CIVICUS' research and analysis influencing perceptions among global publics and key stakeholders to spur change in policy and practice regarding civic freedoms and democratic values? What type of research products have impact, when and why?	These questions help us think critically about what we do and why. Including which of the strategies is most effective. If our goal is to defend civic freedoms, we want to be able to best improve the way we do this. This typifies what is expected from an organisation grounded in learning and self-improvement

At CIVICUS, accountability and transparency are more than the frameworks, policies and documents we put in place. More and more, we are seeing accountability becoming a dynamic two-way relationship with stakeholders ensuring people's participation and the systematic use of feedback in decision making at all levels. This type of accountability, called dynamic accountability¹, is how we are approaching implementing the above framework, to ensure that our well-designed and thought-through intentions are embodied in our programme approaches, communications, reports and decision-making processes.

Implementation of our Accountability Framework:

CIVICUS has put in place several processes and systems to make sure we not only meet our commitments but also use this framework to embed a culture of values-based accountability supported by robust data-driven decision-making. Implementation of our accountability framework began with setting up a central system that houses all our programmatic and organisational performance-based data (1). This is supported by an organisational-wide reflection process to discuss annual progress against our strategy and how to course-correct (2). We also launched our [online feedback form](#) to enable us to gather feedback from a wider range of stakeholders (3) whilst working with teams to improve the understanding of the outcome and impact of our work (4). These are expanded upon in the following sections.

(1) Being more systematic in capturing performance data

CIVICUS is fortunate to be in a very data-rich environment with data being generated through online platforms, participant evaluations etc. However, we needed a common platform to capture results-related data to more holistically analyse our activities, outputs and outcomes in relation to our new strategic plan - which is a core requirement of our accountability framework. As such, CIVICUS recently implemented a system called [DevResults](#), which is a secure web-based monitoring, evaluation and portfolio management system that tracks programme, progress and organisational results data.

¹ <http://restlessdevelopment.org/dynamic-accountability>

Our DevResults platform is aligned to our strategic results framework and was pre-populated with planned activities and associated indicators for the first year of our strategy. CIVICUS teams upload results-related data and learnings at least every 6 months to establish a “bottom-up” picture of our progress against our strategy.

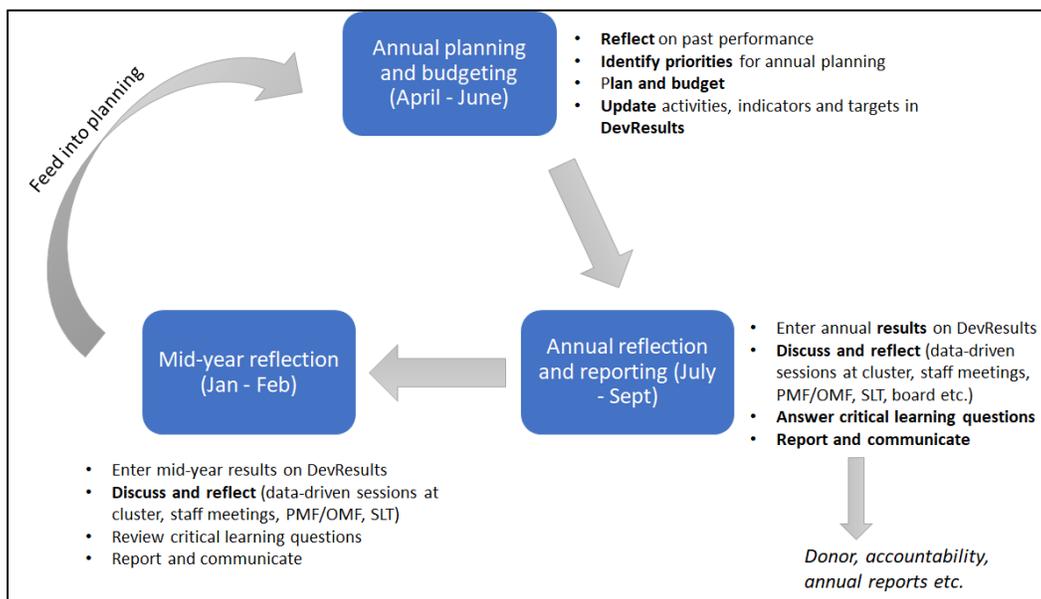
This data feeds into a bi-annual impact reflection process (see section 2) which focuses on reflecting on performance against CIVICUS’ new strategy. In addition, CIVICUS is transitioning current Board reporting dashboards onto DevResults. These dashboards will be used to update the CIVICUS Board on overall performance and organisational health on a bi-annual basis.

(2) Creating a culture of evidence-based reflection and decision making

For us to embed data-driven decision-making in CIVICUS, we needed to ensure that there was an opportunity for all staff to engage in the analysis process of the data and inform how this information is presented to management, Board and external stakeholders. CIVICUS is achieving this through a new **Impact Reflection Process** (see Figure 2) which forms the basis of evidencing, analysing and generating learning in relation to our accountability framework and performance story (i.e. our strategy results framework). The intention of this process is to:

- Encourage data-driven performance discussions based on annual results captured on DevResults (and other sources as well)
- Allow for objective discussions to be held at various levels of the organisation on **what** has/has not been achieved, **why** and **how** we need to change and/or strategically course correct
- Answer our **critical learning questions** on an ongoing basis
- Identify content/discuss/analyse our results for inclusion in **CIVICUS’ annual reporting to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), donors, Board, members etc.**

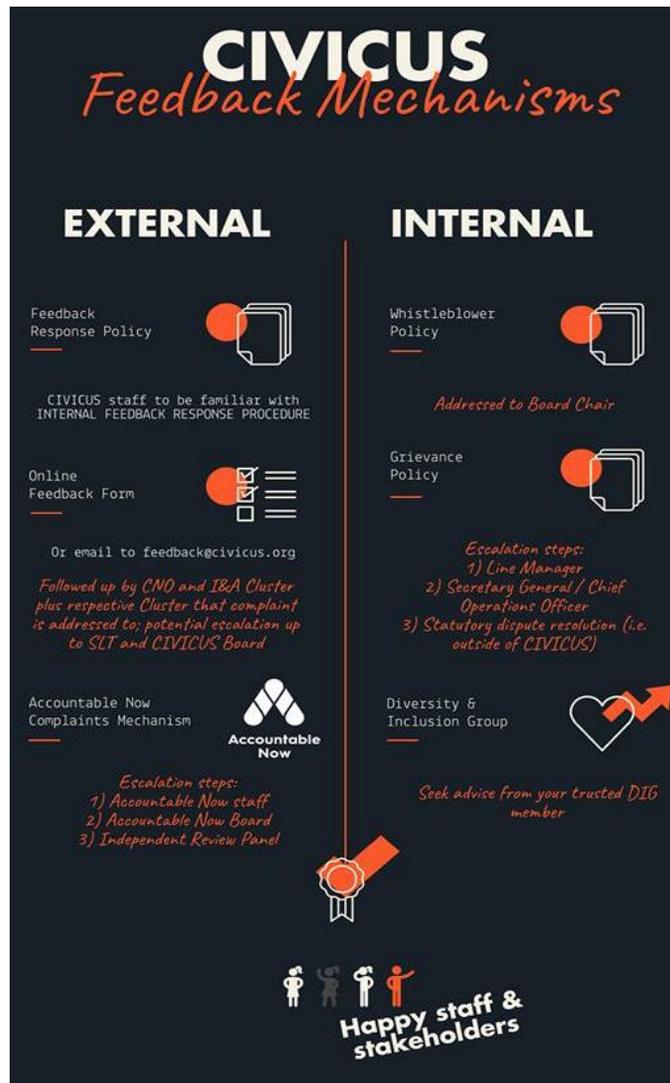
Figure 2: CIVICUS Impact Reflection Process



(3) Proactively engaging with and feeding back to stakeholders at all levels

Along with our impact reflection process we have many other mechanisms to generate feedback and engage with members, donors and other constituents. The CIVICUS Board approved a new [Feedback Response Policy](#) in January 2018, which facilitates external complaints, advice and suggestions from members, partners and the general public. Feedback can be filed through an [online form](#) (ensuring anonymity if needed) or via feedback@civicus.org. In addition, external feedback and complaints can be filed via the [Accountable Now mechanism](#). Members and partners are furthermore invited to provide regular inputs via the Annual General Meeting, Annual Constituency Survey, Membership Survey, event feedback forms and project evaluations. Exposing ourselves to critical or dissenting voices is important so that we do not risk locking ourselves in echo chambers.

Figure 3: CIVICUS feedback mechanisms



CIVICUS is confident that having well-designed and responsive mechanisms for handling external and internal feedback (including suggestions, complaints, or positive feedback) will improve the quality of its work, enhance trust and confidence of stakeholders, identify areas of work which need strengthening, and ensure that CIVICUS learns from feedback provided through such a process. Thereby embedding a culture of values-based accountability rather than one-directional reporting.

(4) Improving our understanding of the outcomes of our work

CIVICUS operates within the very dynamic context of civic participation. We have a broad range of programme approaches including research, advocacy and campaigns, whilst also piloting new programmes in areas such as youth participation, civil society resourcing and resilience. A fundamental principle of CIVICUS' theory of change is that of operating as a collective, driven by local and national partners and members to shift the sector across the global to meaningfully embrace civic participation on multiple levels.

As such, understanding the impact of these projects and measuring outcomes is not an easy task, especially considering the multiple actors in these spaces and acknowledging our role as an enabler and convener rather than an implementer. CIVICUS aims to continually seek new, innovative M&E methods to help understand the outcomes and impact of our work through tools such as [Outcome Mapping](#), [Outcome Harvesting](#) and other Developmental Evaluation methods that can better serve us our learning and accountability commitments, both internally and externally.

As these programmatic-level M&E approaches are further embedded, we will realise a shift away from output data collection towards outcome data collection and analysis which will be captured on DevResults and inform our reflection discussions and improve the quality of the evidence and learning that informs decision making and course correction.

It is our hope that this framework will help us deepen our understanding of our contribution to the sector and how we need to adapt based on feedback and changing contexts. By this, we strive to become more effective and targeted in our mission to strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world.