CIVICUS

OUTCOMES & REFLECTIONS REPORT

THE CIVICUS ACCOUNTABILITY ACCELERATOR ONLINE COURSE

In the first half of 2022, CIVICUS, as part of its Resilient Roots initiative and in collaboration with Rendir Cuentas/ICD, hosted an online course on the topic of constituent accountability. This in-depth seven-week programme helped participants to gain knowledge on what constituent accountability means and how to put it into practice, with the aim of improving the relevance and effectiveness of their organisation's activities.

The course was initially run for English speaking participants, followed by a fully adapted French version. We also used feedback from English course participants and organisers to tweak our set-up and teaching approach for the French iteration. Participation rates were very high, demonstrating a strong demand for a comprehensive learning opportunity on this topic.

This short report provides a summary of the course content, teaching approach, and outcomes and lessons learned, including reflections from the participants themselves. It also outlines what CIVICUS plans to do next on this agenda.
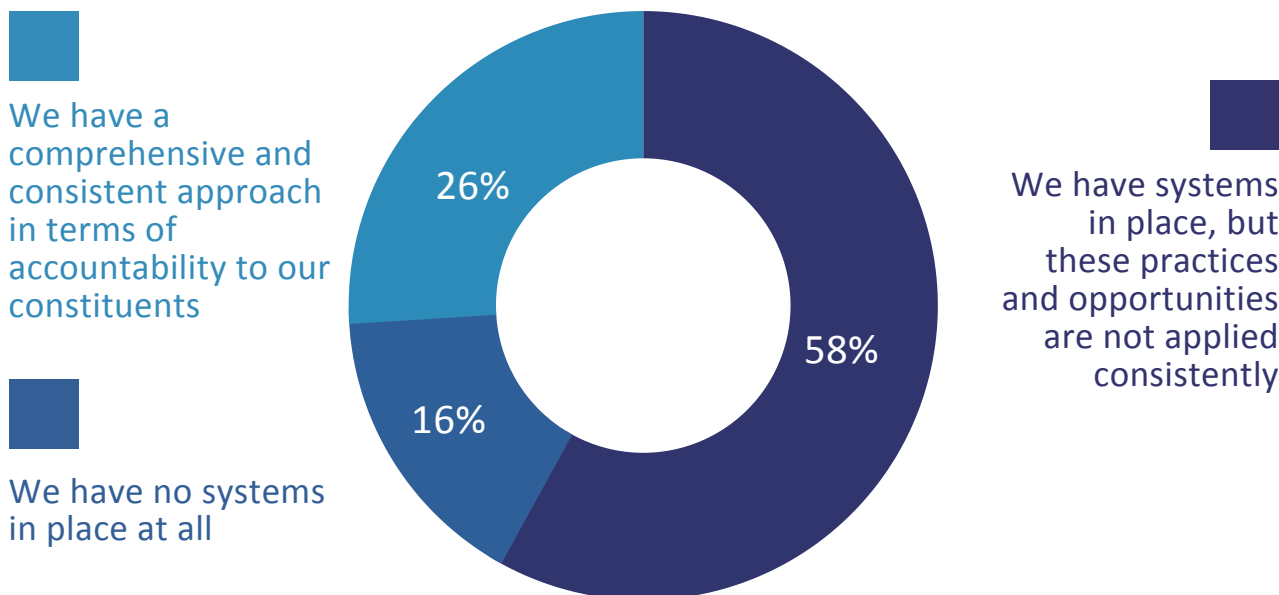
Course objectives & audience

To develop the understanding and skills of staff at national or local civil society organisations (especially within the CIVICUS membership) to improve their accountability policies and practices. Or in other words, how to put the people and communities that they serve and support - otherwise known as their "primary constituents" - in the driving seat.

More than 90% of participants came from countries in the Global South, with 96 countries represented in the English course and 27 in the French course, with this diverse audience learning both with and from each other. In total 132 participants completed the English course, and 53 completed the French course, although many hundreds more participated in at least one module.

A pre-course assessment was used to gauge participant's current knowledge and practices on constituent accountability. In response to the question: "describe your organisation's accountability practices to its constituents", 74% of the

English course participants said that they either had no systems in place, or inconsistently applied systems, and 87% of the French speaking audience responded the same. The course was therefore designed to be relatively introductory, but still including opportunities for those with more advanced practice to develop their skills.

We have a comprehensive and consistent approach in terms of accountability to our constituents

We have systems in place, but these practices and opportunities are not applied consistently

26%

58%

16%

We have no systems in place at all

Course overview

The course was run on the CIVICUS member engagement platform – a dedicated virtual space for members of the alliance to connect with one another and access learning opportunities.

Each cycle of the course ran for seven weeks. It included five content-based modules: Introduction to basic concepts of accountability; To whom are civil society organisations accountable?; The three dimensions of constituent accountability; The centrality of feedback in civil society accountability; Accountability in practice (techniques and tools). It was then rounded off with a session focused on course feedback from the participants. The course also asked participants to use a new self-assessment tool based on the three dimensions of constituent accountability, and to use the results to directly inform what they do next on the topic.

Course participants started each module with a live session featuring presentations from topic experts and practitioners from different organisations and regions. In addition, participants were encouraged to study an associated list of reading materials and undertake a short quiz or assignment to test their understanding of the module's content.
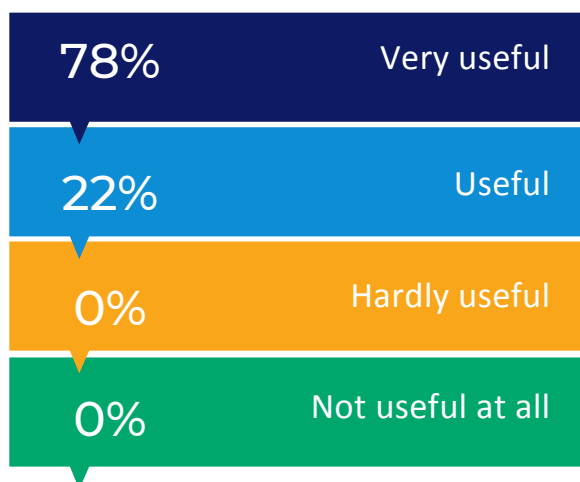
Who are our primary constituents?

When discussing this question during the early stages of the course, several participants, as expected, identified individuals and actors at local or national levels, such as women, children and people with disabilities. Yet most of the participants included donors and governments in their list of primary constituents, which suggested that there is a lack of clarity about what this term really means, and required us to spend some time unpacking the concept together. On the other hand, both staff and partners also featured prominently in responses to this question, which is well aligned with the need for 'horizontal' relationships with these actors to also be included in accountability considerations.
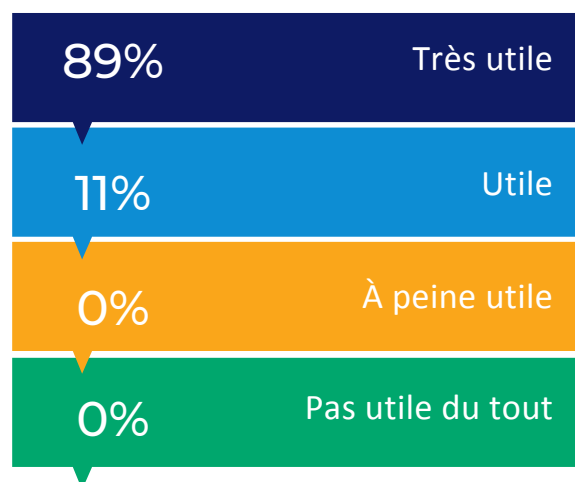
What course participants said about the course

To hold ourselves to account, we dedicated the final module to asking participants what they thought about the course, and how it could be improved. Across both cycles, 100% of participants found the course to be either 'very useful' or 'useful' – a statistic we're very happy with!

In general, this course has been...

78%	Very useful
22%	Useful
0%	Hardly useful
0%	Not useful at all

En général, ce cours a été...

89%	Très utile
11%	Utile
0%	À peine utile
0%	Pas utile du tout

>> What worked well:

For most, the course did a good job of providing practical examples and resources to evaluate and update their accountability practices and mechanisms. Several people also highlighted that learning how to be more accountable to their constituents helped them to enhance credibility and confidence in their work.

They stated that the relevance of the course content, and the expertise and diversity of the facilitators was instrumental for building their knowledge and understanding on the topic, especially those from the same types of places and organisations as them. They also liked the different training methods used, from live Zoom sessions and interesting reading materials to the "three-dimensions" model and opportunities to engage with the facilitators.

>> What could be done better:

On the other hand, participants felt we could have provided more space for interaction on the online platform and group discussions during the live sessions. There were also challenges with the platform itself, which proved frustrating for some as it was difficult to navigate. So a recurring recommendation was to simplify the platform and make it more intuitive to use.

Recommendations for the future

- Longer live sessions and more in-depth course assignments
- Another round of trainings to help cement the capacities strengthened during the first course
- More training on using the tools introduced by the course
- Summarising all modules into a manual that can be made accessible online to anyone wishing to learn more about the course content
- Linking the course to wider learning and implementing opportunities on related topics

CIVICUS is taking all these great suggestions on board and trying to integrate them into a new Member Learning Experience on constituent accountability.

What participants plan to do with their newly acquired knowledge

Participants told us that they plan to:

- Share the course content and their learnings with people across their organisation
- More directly focus on accountability to their primary constituents, including by initially more comprehensively mapping who they are and how they engage with them currently
- Adapt their internal governance systems to place more power directly in the hands of constituent representatives
- Design new feedback and complaint collection mechanisms
- Continue to address the priority areas flagged when using the constituent accountability self-assessment tool.

What we learned

The top five things we learned about running online courses and constituent accountability are:

1. We knew there was strong demand for this course, but we were surprised that nearly one thousand people registered to participate! But the number of people completing the course was much smaller. So while there will always be dropouts, we'll need to double down on our efforts to keep people engaged and consider how to better compensate for external factors like poor internet connectivity. Nevertheless, this provides us with a strong mandate for making this learning opportunity available to more participants in the future.

2. Constituent accountability is still not a commonly used or particularly well understood term. CIVICUS uses it because it is less top-down than alternatives like "beneficiaries", however there is a trade off with the difficulty in explaining it clearly, especially in other languages. "Community accountability" has been suggested as a more easily understood alternative, which we will try using the future.

3. The accessibility of the course platform and content differs significantly for different audiences (including language-wise). This is a factor that can make or break your course! We had to spend a lot of time fixing bugs and responding to access-related queries, which at times distracted both us and the participants from engaging more on the course content. As a result, we made some important improvements after the English course, which ensured the French cycle ran much more smoothly.

4. Providing high levels of interaction between facilitators and participants, and amongst participants themselves, is a vital ingredient for effective learning. It also provides networking and other opportunities as an additional value to the participants. So we will try to make our future courses even more interactive.

5. Striking the right balance between learning and doing. The curriculum should be simple and manageable, with the reading materials prioritised into primary and secondary lists. This can free up more time for support with applying the new knowledge and tools the course includes – something participants told us they want more of next time.

Next steps

All English-speaking course participants were encouraged to join the Dynamic Accountability Community of Practice (DACoP). This is an online space where civil society actors come together to ask questions, share knowledge and build capacity on this topic. The DACoP has just run a in-depth consultation on its future, which you can read all about here.

CIVICUS is also hoping to convert the constituent accountability self-assessment tool piloted during the course into a more user-friendly format. To do so, we will be asking course participants for their feedback on the tool.

Perhaps the most important indicator of success for an online course is the extent to which participants can put the knowledge they acquired into practice. Yet this step is often missed out! CIVICUS will therefore be in touch with course participants again later in the year to ask how things have been going.

Then in terms of future learning opportunities on the topic, CIVICUS is developing a new Member Learning Experience on constituent accountability. This will see us make updates to the online member community platform for a smoother, more intuitive learning experience, centred on a self-paced version of the course content. This will also explore more peer learning opportunities, integration with wider CIVICUS initiatives, and follow-on guidance for those who completed the first version of the course. The Member Learning Experience also aims to cater for those unable to access the member community platform by revamping the CIVICUS Impact and Accountability Toolkit.

Global Accountability Week 2022 (#GAW2022), taking place from 3-7 October, is also a great opportunity for course participants to continue their learning and share stories about their accountability journeys with wider actors on social media. Details about how to participate will be shared shortly. #BeAccountable

A big thank you to everyone who participated in the course, delivered the sessions, and worked on everything behind the scenes. It was a big undertaking, but participants found it useful, and we learned a lot along the way. Please don't hesitate to contact resilientroots@civicus.org if you have any questions or feedback. We'll be in touch again soon on the items outlined in the Next Steps section!

CONNECT WITH US!

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