



# IMPACT AND ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK

Version 2.0, November 2020

## Introduction:

As civil society grows and becomes more visible in the public eye, it is more important than ever that we, the CIVICUS Secretariat, can be held accountable for our actions. This should be done in a dynamic, evolving way, where accountability is not a report, but an ongoing and constructive relationship with stakeholders that improves the agency and credibility of civil society organisations. There are different understandings and types of accountability – for example social accountability (i.e. holding governments to account), or top-down accountability focusing on donor reporting. At CIVICUS, accountability means being transparent about who we are and what we do. It also means we answer to our members, partners, donors, wider civil society and ourselves, on our vision, approach and the actions that we take. Transparency and responsiveness to – along with the influence of – CIVICUS staff from across the organisation is also key to our interpretation of accountability. However, this aspect is rather outlined in the CIVICUS Staff Handbook with references to of Duty of Care to employees and Do-No-Harm. This impact and accountability (I&A) framework reflects the ongoing accountability journey within the organisation and draws heavily on lessons learnt from our own practices and from partners.

## Evaluation principles:

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' I&A framework was developed in 2018 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, test our Theory of Change, and enable organisational learning. This I&A framework is used to hold ourselves accountable against progress on our Strategic Goals, rather than focused on any specific project or thematic issue, such as our work on diversity and inclusion or data and digital security.

The I&A framework is grounded in two schools of M&E 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 shifted away from traditional notions of measurements of success, understanding that at different levels of programme implementation there are varying markers of success – including a combination of outputs, outcomes, impact markers, or stakeholder feedback that are dependent on each other.

We know 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 to inform more immediate and intermediate changes. However, longer term changes or measures of success may be, in some cases, less quantifiable – they often involve changes in social actors, governments, activists and citizens. These behavioural changes are longer lasting. Ultimately these behavioural changes are what is required to realise 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 approach makes the most sense and is the most useful, as it is based on *what we intend to do as a result of the outcomes*. The below table (Table 1) highlights the difference between indicative impact indicators and our alternative, i.e. utilisation-focussed Critical Learning Questions, which replace so-called “markers of success”, often used as key performance indicators (KPIs) to track progress. This is incorporated in our full performance story (i.e. our strategy results framework) which includes our strategic goals, objectives for each goal, Critical Learning Questions, and indicative activities with specific indicator targets which are updated at least once a year.

Figure 1: Goal 1 “Defending civic freedoms and democratic values”

Indicative Impact Indicator	Usefulness	Alternative to Impact Indicators: <b>Critical Learning Question</b>	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.

### Accountability principles:

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 Accountability<sup>1</sup>, is the approach we are using to implement the above framework. This is meant to ensure that our intentions are well-designed and thought-through, driven by ongoing stakeholder engagement, and that our programme approaches, communications, reports and decision-making processes embody these intentions. We believe that if civil society is accountable to and engaged with its primary constituents (“Primary Constituency Accountability”<sup>2</sup>), it will be able to rely more upon them to come to its defence, bridge resourcing gaps, and safeguard its long-term sustainability when it is under political or structural attack.

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

<sup>2</sup> Resilient Roots findings: <https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/rrhypothesissummary.pdf>

## Implementation of our Impact & Accountability Framework:

CIVICUS has put in place several processes and systems to make sure we not only meet our commitments to our different stakeholders (Board, donors, partners, members, staff etc.), but also to use this framework to embed a culture of values-based accountability<sup>3</sup> supported by robust data-driven decision-making. This happens at various levels, including within our staff at the secretariat, as well as through programming and capacity development across our membership communities and organisations. Implementing our I&A framework began with setting up a central system that houses all programmatic and organisational performance-based data (1). This is accompanied 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 gather feedback from a wider range of stakeholders (3), and implementing this at the project level (4), whilst working with teams to improve the understanding of the outcome and impact of our work (5). 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, social media statistics, 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 I&A framework. As such, CIVICUS implemented a system called [DevResults](#) in June 2018, which is a secure web-based monitoring, evaluation and portfolio management system that tracks programme, progress and organisational results data.

Our DevResults platform is aligned to our strategic results framework and is populated with planned activities and associated indicators of all teams' annual work plans. CIVICUS teams upload results-related data and learnings on a quarterly basis 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, the quarterly DevResults data trend analysis and updated performance story are used for Board reporting in order to inform 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 opportunities for all staff to participate in analysing data and informing how this information is presented to management, the 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 I&A 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)

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<sup>3</sup> CIVICUS' organisational values and principles: <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/who-we-are-2/about-civicus>

- 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 (version 2)

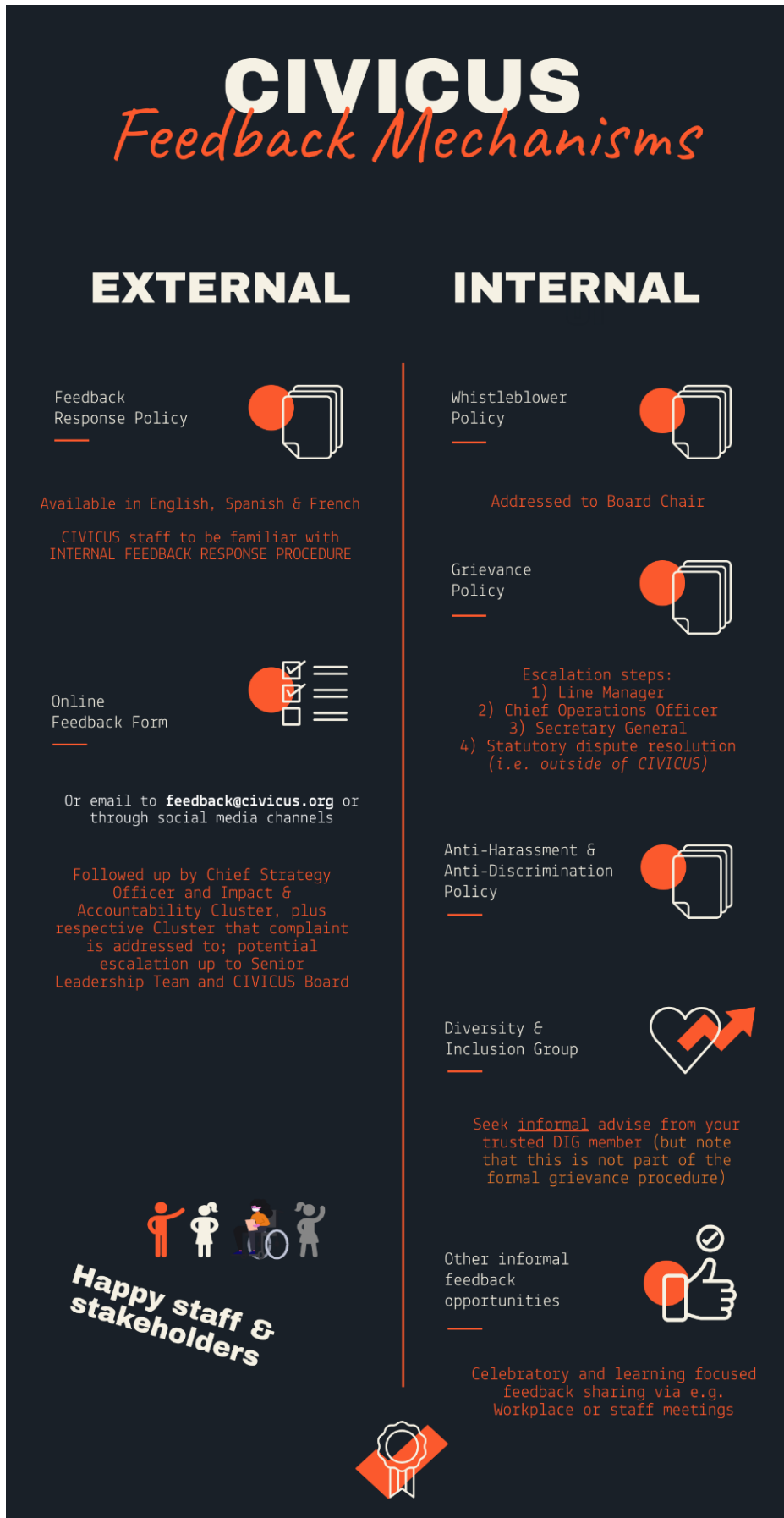


In addition to organisational-wide impact reflection cycles, there can also be reflection sessions at the project or grant level. These contribute to making CIVICUS a learning organisation; however, they do not replace the formal impact reflection cycles. The project level processes have enabled clearer communication with project staff and participants, increased the motivation of staff to capture evidence of learnings, success and challenges, and contributed to increased sharing across CIVICUS and its stakeholders.

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

Along with our impact reflection process, many other mechanisms help generate feedback and engage with members, donors and other constituents. The CIVICUS Board approved a new [Feedback Response Policy](#) in January 2018 (updated in May 2020), 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](mailto:feedback@civicus.org). Members and partners are furthermore invited to provide regular inputs via the Annual General Meeting, Annual Constituency Survey (see (4) below), Membership Survey, event feedback forms, project evaluations, and ad hoc surveys in relation to changed contexts such as with Covid-19. Overall, it is our aspiration to make the feedback collection processes embedded in all member engagements. 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 with and confidence of stakeholders, and identify areas of work which need strengthening or gaps to fill. Thereby embedding a culture of values-based accountability rather than one-directional reporting.

#### *(4) Examples of implementing this I&A framework at the project level*

As detailed in our [accountability reports](#), our work focuses on strengthening accountability policies and practices across all our projects and programmes, with and to our constituents, and in how we structure our work:

- Through the [Resilient Roots initiative](#), we were able to adopt and promote new civil society performance metrics for Primary Constituent Accountability with 14 national civil society organisations to test and develop approaches to build long-term accountability and resilience mechanisms in restricted civic space contexts.
- Our [Annual Constituency Survey](#) of alliance members and partners continues to be an all-important source of feedback on the things we are doing well and what we need to change. This member feedback is systematically integrated in our impact reflections since 2019 and in our annual planning process and template since 2020.
- The integration of mechanisms like the ‘Net Promoter Score’ in key programmes, including International Civil Society Week (ICSW), has helped us get better at listening to those we engage – and has provided an evidence base for our decision to transition to a new ICSW format in 2020.
- In 2018, the Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA) launched a [good practice platform with transparency and accountability examples from civil society from around the world](#). This is yet another illustration of how a networked approach to increasing trust in civil society is informing our core work – and is regularly updated and promoted during the annual Global Accountability Week.
- In late 2019, we conducted an external mid-term strategy review to identify improvement areas until 2022 (see [full report](#) and [CIVICUS’ management response](#)) which are embedded in this framework.
- Board and staff developed a Delegated Authorities Note in early 2020 which defines decision-making processes within CIVICUS, with an emphasis on: (a) information sharing, (b) feedback and engagement, and (c) clarity on accountability and levels of decision-making across the organisation.

#### *(5) 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 operating as a collective tool, driven by local and national partners and members to shift the sector across the globe 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 primary

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](#), [Rubrics](#), and other Developmental Evaluation methods that can better serve us our learning and accountability commitments, both internally and externally. As of May 2019, CIVICUS implemented its own [Developmental Evaluation Framework](#) which was also the baseline to develop our public [M&E Toolkit](#), available in English, French, and Spanish, to share lessons learnt with the wider alliance and civil society sector.

As these programmatic-level M&E approaches are further embedded, collecting output data will remain important, but our M&E emphasis will be stronger on outcome data collection and analysis. This 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 I&A 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.





Mid-Term Strategy Review Workshop (November 2019)

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