Accelerator Discussion Frame

Accelerator 3. Community and Civil Society Engagement

Community and civil society engagement: accelerating results through strengthened resources, representation and rights

Agenda 2030 recognizes that “responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels” is critical to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and that civil society\(^1\) is an indispensable actor to the ‘whole of society approach’ necessary to deliver on the Agenda. Enabling meaningful engagement from community-led and civil society organizations (CSOs) constitutes a critical catalyst to achieving the SDG 3+ targets and leaving no one behind.

CSOs have historically fulfilled key and often unique roles to improve health equity. This includes promoting and defending health as a rights and social justice issue, monitoring and tracking political health commitments, addressing service gaps for people most excluded through advocacy and activism and, when needed, through the delivery of quality services. Such organizations contribute as demand creators, campaigners, innovators, experts, co-creators, agents of change, implementers and monitors and demanders of accountability.

Given that States bear the duty to fulfil the right to health, neither the existence nor the crucial role of CSOs can release States from their obligations to their citizens. CSOs should not replace essential functions of the State, and community and civil society responses to health should be seen as complementary and facilitative.

CSOs often face a range of barriers that can limit their impact and effectiveness including a lack of resources, capacity and support, and challenging legal, social, and policy environments. Data from CIVICUS suggests that more than 3.2 billion people, in all regions of the world, live in

---

\(^1\) Civil society refers to voluntary, non-state, not-for-profit organizations formed by people in the social sphere with commonly held values, beliefs and/or causes. Its defining feature is collective citizen action. CSOs include non-governmental organizations, community groups, constituent-led organizations (those led by and for the people most affected by a health condition), labour unions, indigenous peoples’ movements, faith-based organizations, professional associations, public interest organizations, foundations, think tanks, charitable organizations, and other not-for-profit organizations. For this paper, the term civil society focuses on those groups engaged in some way toward improving access to the highest attainable standard of health.

---

Disclaimer: The accelerator discussion frames are preliminary documents and have been prepared to stimulate multi-stakeholder engagement and discussion toward identifying collectively-shaped, country-relevant, concrete actions at global, regional and country level. They are unedited, unofficial documents and should not be interpreted as final. The publication does not constitute official endorsement by the agencies signatory to the Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All.
countries where civic space is repressed or closed, and in 2015 serious violations of civic space were recorded in 109 countries.

Civil society is not homogenous and individual organizations may not always act in the public interest, including in relation to health and well-being. Some organizations serve as front groups for health-harming industries (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, etc.). Some CSOs consider the SDG framework insufficiently transformative to address the structural causes of ill health.

The United Nations (UN) is fully committed to enabling meaningful engagement of CSOs, as illustrated by the Human Rights Council request to the High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a compilation of recommendations for the creation and maintenance of a safe and enabling environment for civil society.2,3

Empowering civil society as critical agents to demand, support and ensure delivery of the SDG 3+ agenda

A range of challenges inherent to the realization of SDG 3+ could be more readily overcome if global health organizations coordinated and mainstreamed their support to enable community organizations and CSOs to serve key functions, including:

- **Mobilizing political will and investment in SDG3+.** Generating sustained investments for SGD3+ will be challenging, as will ensuring sufficient, high-impact investments and doing so in the most efficient and sustainable way. CSOs, as part of social movements and grassroots activism, can generate moral and needs-based arguments and incentives to compel decision-makers to accord greater priority for health as well as address social, environmental and climate change-related, and commercial drivers of ill health.

- **Advocating for just and healthy policies and empowering people to demand their right to health and gender equality be fulfilled.** Achieving SDG3+ will require laws and policies that promote and protect health for all. Activists’ ability to lobby within and outside government and the private sector can bring about legislative and regulatory action. CSOs can provide legal support and legal literacy to enable people to claim and enjoy their health-related human rights. They can engage communities in participatory research to identify emerging issues and key drivers of vulnerability. They can empower citizens and consumers

2 Resolution 27/31
3 See report by the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/32/20)
to exercise healthier choices and to demand quality and non-discriminatory services and promote public participation in planning people-centered services. The role of CSOs in leaving no one behind is critical as they give a voice to those who are more susceptible to exclusion or marginalization.

- **Tackling upstream determinants of health.** Population health is determined by policies, actions and forces beyond the health sector. One of the biggest health threats today lies in inequity and the unhealthy choices or the absence of choice altogether as a result of structural, economic and other factors. These include urbanization and unhealthy built environments, which lead to major and increasing burdens of chronic and acute illness, mental ill-health, road traffic injuries, and exposure to air/water pollution among others. These determinants are universal but impact the poorest most acutely. CSOs can play a unique role in supporting community-based research on these issues, improving health prevention and promotion as well as raising public awareness, enabling civic participation and lobbying for stronger controls over the commercial drivers of exposure to unhealthy products and processes. Civil society can be an ally to work on health promotion with other sectors, such as education, social protection, urban planning, transport and the environment, where traditional health stakeholders have been constrained by biomedical orientation and other internal and external barriers.

- **Ramping up coverage through community delivery.** Increasing UHC coverage from millions to billions will require health services capacity that does not exist in traditional medical infrastructures. Task-shifting and -sharing with community-led organizations and personnel can provide wider coverage of integrated health services. Services delivered by community and faith-based organizations have played a critical role, sometimes replacing government provision in rural areas. Peer- and community-based counselling and support groups have been effective in increasing prevention coverage as well treatment adherence and in linking with health facilities – often overcoming stigma and discrimination in the process.

- **Driving and monitoring science and technological innovation.** Think tanks and professional organizations have often led essential research efforts in areas critical to health efficiency, effectiveness and implementation science which will contribute to achieving progress on SDG3+. Civic engagement will be critical to effective m-health, e-health and new frontiers of health communication as well as to protect the public from health harming
product promotion through social media. CSOs have a role to play in governing these technologies, ensuring equitable access and confidentiality and protecting human rights.

- **Fostering transparency and holding governments and organizations active in health accountable for ambitious SDG3+ commitments.** CSOs can serve as watchdogs and independent monitors to promote transparency and enhance accountability for SDG3+ as well as for agreements and conventions that support SDG3+ (e.g., TRIPs). In an era dominated by ‘fake news’, civil society can play an important role in strengthening civic trust in public institutions and official data, shining a spotlight on corruption and initiating processes of healing in communities mistreated or failed by the health system. CSOs can facilitate a two-way transfer of information, by serving as a conduit between people, communities and health providers. CSOs also play a critically important part in advocating for sufficient and sustainable health financing, domestic resource mobilization, and equitable, high-impact and efficient spending of resources that enables increases in service coverage and access, and reduces out of pocket payments, in particular for those furthest left behind.

**Nature and scope of the accelerator: space, resources and governance to ensure CSO engagement**

This Accelerator is constituted by a range of actions, both established and innovative, that organizations commit to undertaking in a more harmonized manner, aimed at expanding political space for civil society resources and more meaningful engagement for civil society in our governance and operations. The actions aim to strengthen our engagement with CSOs across all health-related SDG targets with implications at institutional, organizational and individual levels.

**Short-term coordinated actions among global health organizations**

Expand political space – towards shared global norms on meaningful CSO engagement in health

- **Technical support.** Increase and better harmonize support to country health coordination platforms to enable them to more meaningfully engage civil society.
- **Advocacy.** Undertake joint advocacy on expanding political environments for CSOs to engage effectively in all health arenas.

---

**Disclaimer:** The accelerator discussion frames are preliminary documents and have been prepared to stimulate multi-stakeholder engagement and discussion toward identifying collectively-shaped, country-relevant, concrete actions at global, regional and country level. They are unedited, unofficial documents and should not be interpreted as final. The publication does not constitute official endorsement by the agencies signatory to the Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All.
• **Normative guidance.** Jointly develop, share, disseminate and promote good practice on CSO engagement and representation in the health sector.\(^4\)

**Increase resources – towards enhanced joint investments in capacity strengthening of CSOs and coalitions at national and global levels**

• **Investments and funding modalities.**
  o Map and publish global health organizations’ investments in CSOs with a view to adopting investment targets and ensuring alignment of CSO support in health-related investment cases.
  o Increase investments (and coordination thereof) in strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations, in particular at the country level, and south-south/south-north networks, to enable them to more meaningfully engage in health sector.
  o Review and coordinate global health organizations’ funding modalities to facilitate CSO access to resources and develop sustainable resource mobilization strategies.

• **Innovation.** Support development of innovative service delivery models that are based within communities and support community-based participatory research on priorities, approaches, best practices and accountability.

• **Movement building.** Support civil society to make common cause across social and other sectors to promote and protect population health, including support for CSOs to translate political high-level agreements into local advocacy campaigns for accountability.

**Strengthen governance and accountability of global health organizations through enhanced civil society engagement** – towards implementing a common set of best practices for engaging CSOs in global organizations’ operations and monitoring at all levels.

• **Support meaningful civil society engagement in GHO governance mechanisms.** GHOs to ensure adequate representation including on boards advisory bodies etc within the mandates of the organizations.

---

\(^4\) This guidance should draw on the literature and practice of the wide spectrum of participatory approaches and techniques, from information to consultation, involvement, collaboration, and empowerment of communities. There is no single best approach as it will depend on the purpose of participation and engagement. A number of tools and guidelines are available, such as those developed by the International Society for Public Participation, or the UNDP and civil society organizations: a toolkit for strengthening partnerships, UNAIDS guidance for partnerships with civil society.

---

**Disclaimer:** The accelerator discussion frames are preliminary documents and have been prepared to stimulate multi-stakeholder engagement and discussion toward identifying collectively-shaped, country-relevant, concrete actions at global, regional and country level. They are unedited, unofficial documents and should not be interpreted as final. The publication does not constitute official endorsement by the agencies signatory to the Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All.
• **Monitor and account for CSO inclusion.** GHOs to adopt harmonized performance indicators for monitoring and reporting on meaningful engagement with civil society.

• **Capacity and staff accountability.** Build civil society engagement capacity in a more coordinated manner at all levels in GHOs, including appointing CSO focal points, sharing best practice with staff and assessing staff performance in terms of civil society engagement.

• **Efficiency measures.** Simplify, harmonize and coordinate CSO monitoring and reporting frameworks and support civil society to improve their accountability mechanisms and adopt practices to reduce transactions costs for civil society engagement, including through strengthening existing joint mechanisms (e.g., back-to-back GHO Board meetings and joint briefings).

---

**Disclaimer:** The accelerator discussion frames are preliminary documents and have been prepared to stimulate multi-stakeholder engagement and discussion toward identifying collectively-shaped, country-relevant, concrete actions at global, regional and country level. They are unedited, unofficial documents and should not be interpreted as final. The publication does not constitute official endorsement by the agencies signatory to the Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All.