The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be agreed by world leaders at the Post-2015 Summit in September 2015. These global goals will guide the world’s priorities and actions on sustainable development for at least the next decade. As part of this process, a ‘data revolution for sustainable development’ has been called for, to ensure we have the information needed to make the best policy choices, hold decision makers to account on their commitments and track SDG progress at the local, national, regional and global levels.

Civil society has an opportunity, as well as a responsibility, to ensure the SDGs, and the data revolution, spur the transformational changes that are required to tackle the huge global challenges, but also leverage the exciting opportunities, that we face.

One concrete way we can do this is by harnessing civil society and citizen-generated data to monitor, promote and drive SDG progress. A huge amount of civil society data already exists. At the same time, civil society and citizens are leveraging technology to generate and use new data in creative ways.
While the post-2015 outcome document1 (now known as the 2030 Agenda) is weak on the role of non-official data sources for SDG monitoring, we believe that civil society needs to move forward with these efforts—whether there is space for civil society and citizen-generated data to be used in official SDG monitoring processes, or through some form of shadow monitoring which needs to be put in place.

The objective of this background note is to support conversations amongst civil society and with other sustainable development actors about how we can collaborate to ensure that we are leveraging civil society and citizen-generated data to monitor and drive progress on the SDGs in the best way we can.

**THE SOURCES: WHAT DATA IS AVAILABLE?**

**CIVIL SOCIETY DATA**

Civil society organisations produce and use huge amounts of data. This data can be quantitative or qualitative, structured or unstructured data, and open or closed. It comes in a number of formats, ranging from numerical data in spreadsheets to text, audio or photos. This data is:

- collected to understand the experiences, perceptions and needs of the communities civil society organisations work with, using tools such as surveys.
- used to track issues and trends such as poverty or income over time.
- produced to support the implementation of projects and programmes.
- generated to monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions.
- translated from publicly available (open) data sets to track a specific phenomenon/issue (e.g. Publish What You Fund’s Aid Transparency Index2).
- collated through expert assessments of relevant regulations and the performance of government and other actors (e.g. Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer3 and CIVICUS’ annual State of Civil Society Report4).

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This data is used to support a number of different civil society activities. These activities include:

- providing new or improved information on an issue (e.g. Development Initiatives’ Global Humanitarian Assistance programme\(^5\)).
- putting an issue on the agenda and advocating for change (e.g. ActionAid’s Making Care Visible report\(^6\)).
- giving voice to the voiceless (e.g. IDS’ Participate initiative\(^7\)).
- understanding and assessing needs and demands (e.g. World Vision’s Citizen Voice and Action\(^8\)).

Despite the large amount and often high quality of civil society data, it is usually sector-specific and generated through a wide range of uncoordinated initiatives. Only a relatively small number of large international organisations are currently able to effectively aggregate data generated in different local contexts. Utilising and aggregating the rich data generated by civil society organisations—including data collected at the sub-national level—is a huge challenge given the significant variance in focus, format and quality.

**CITIZEN-GENERATED DATA**

Citizen-generated data is data produced directly by people and their organisations to monitor, demand or drive change on the issues that affect them. It is actively given by citizens and provides direct representations of citizen perspectives and an alternative to datasets collected by governments or international institutions. It is generated in a number of ways, including surveys, SMS, phone calls, emails, reports, story-telling, sensors and social media. Like civil society data, it can come in a number of forms.

Typically, citizen-generated data is collected through a specific initiative that aims to have a positive social impact. For example, an initiative might address corruption, sexual harassment, service delivery, or environmental degradation. Anyone can set up a citizen-generated data initiative, including businesses, governments and international institutions like the UN. In most cases, however, they are initiated by citizens and civil society organisations.

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Citizen-generated data initiatives are created for a variety of reasons. They can harness the power of collective intelligence to contribute in areas where key data is missing – like the health of our oceans. Plankton Portal, which uses crowdsourcing to locate and classify different photos of plankton to help scientists better understand the function and health of the ocean from small to global scales.

These initiatives can respond to concerns about the accuracy and quality of government data being produced. Float Beijing, for example, gathered citizens in the city to build air quality sensors attached to kites that could produce an accurate, timely dataset on air quality in the city because the Chinese government wasn’t publishing sufficient air quality information.

In other cases, citizens collect qualitative data to raise awareness of a topic that isn’t getting enough attention from institutions – like HarassMap, which collects experiences of sexual harassment in Egypt to raise awareness on this important issue. Sometimes citizens are simply better placed to gather data on a particular topic. For instance, Check My School, a participatory public education monitoring program in the Philippines, enables parents to send in feedback about schools via SMS, twitter and other media, also connecting them with the Department of Education to help inform policy making.

The DataShift is a multi-stakeholder, bottom-up initiative that builds the capacity and confidence of civil society organisations to produce and use citizen-generated data to monitor sustainable development progress, demand accountability and campaign for transformative change. As part of these efforts we have undertaken a study to better understand the number, type, scale and motivation of citizen-generated data initiatives across the world. We have since begun to assess the impact that citizen-generated data initiatives are having, and explore whether good practices can be identified and shared to support efforts to strengthen and scale-up these initiatives.

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International NGOs are also helping communities to harness the power of citizen-generated data. World Vision’s Citizen Voice and Action is a “social accountability” methodology which aims to improve the dialogue between communities and government in order to improve services (like health care and education) that impact the daily lives of children and their families. After learning about their rights, communities produce data which compares their lived reality of service delivery against the government’s own commitments. This data is then used by the communities to influence decision makers to improve services.

Similarly, international organisations are investing in citizen-generated data. My World, for example, is a United Nations survey which asks individuals to rank the issues that matter most to them. This data is being drawn on to inform negotiations and decision making on what the SDGs should be.

Despite its great potential, many challenges remain to effectively leveraging citizen-generated data initiatives for monitoring the SDGs. For instance, to provide meaningful metrics on countries’ progress towards development goals, the number of initiatives actively reporting on specific issues and in specific countries must increase dramatically. Both the comparability and credibility of citizen-generated data also pose challenges, given the wide range of methodologies and metrics used. In addition, many citizen-generated data initiatives are very specific to local contexts – which makes aggregating and using this data to inform national or international policy decisions difficult.

OTHER FORMS OF DATA

In addition to the data it produces, civil society can play an important role in the translation and verification of other sources of data, such as:

- government data.
- institutional/Academic data.
- private sector data.
- international organisation data.

By comparing its own data and experiences with datasets from these other sources, a more accurate and robust picture of progress can be established. Similarly, civil society organisations can translate this often complex data into information that is easier to understand and can use it to hold decision makers to account for their commitments and actions. In some cases, civil society can also raise the alarm if data from these other sources appears questionable or insufficient.

THE CASE:

WHY CIVIL SOCIETY AND CITIZEN-GENERATED DATA SHOULD INFORM SDG MONITORING

There is a strong consensus, partly based on lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), that citizen and civil society engagement is critical to the design, implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. In the context of the SDGs, civil society and citizen-generated data could play an important role in monitoring and driving progress on sustainable development at the local, national, regional and global levels. Civil society and citizen-generated data can complement official sources of data, fill data gaps that exist in a timely way and supplement official reporting when data quality is insufficient. Furthermore, it is gathered on themes and topics that matter to citizens, potentially flagging up issues of social injustice or environmental degradation that might otherwise be missed.

Beyond this, it is often produced in real or near-time, is grounded in local context and can amplify citizen voices and perspectives on SDG progress, including of those typically marginalised and hard to reach. The production and use of citizen-generated data can also enable the direct, active and invested participation of people in the SDGs.
Civil society and citizen-generated data could inform the SDG follow up and review mechanisms at all levels:

- **NATIONAL LEVEL**: civil society and citizen-generated data could feed into national review mechanisms as evidence of the realities experienced by people on the ground. This could include input into national stakeholder reports and official reports on SDG progress.

- **REGIONAL LEVEL**: civil society and citizen-generated data could be used to bolster regional peer review processes which would enable inter-country learning, spurring improved policies and greater SDG progress.

- **GLOBAL LEVEL**: civil society and citizen-generated data could inform the dialogue on SDG progress facilitated by the High Level Political Forum, including potential thematic reviews. It could be included in the Global Sustainable Development Report and/or in a parallel civil society-led shadow reporting process.

This does not mean that civil society and citizen-generated data should be the only data that is drawn on. Official statistics have a critical role to play and other new forms of data – such as big data – need to be leveraged.

As Thomas Wheeler, of SaferWorld, has argued, innovation will be richest when it involves a diverse range of actors working together as part of an open and dynamic ecosystem of data production. Pluralistic data production will also mean data ownership across society.17

Civil society and citizen-gnerated data could be particularly useful for shedding light on issues which national statistical offices struggle to collect sufficient data on, helping to fill gaps and provide more detailed, more frequent data. Similarly, there are certain issues where civil society is likely to be better placed to provide data for SDG monitoring than governments, such as corruption.

The ideal SDG monitoring system would therefore draw on multiple sources of data in a complementary way, leveraging the comparative advantages of each data type. In reality, however, some governments will still need convincing that civil society organisations and citizen-generated data initiatives can provide data that is both useable and credible. It will likely be necessary, therefore, to concretely demonstrate the value and viability of collaboratively using this data in practice.

THE POST-2015 INTER-GOVERNMENTAL NEGOTIATIONS

The intergovernmental negotiations to agree the outcome document of the Post-2015 Summit in September have now ended. All that remains is for the new 2030 Agenda to be ratified by Heads of State at the Post-2015 Summit in New York during the opening of the 70th session of the UN General assembly this September. This document and the framework of goals, targets and indicators it contains will shape global efforts on sustainable development for the next 15 years.

Largely based on the outcome of the post-2015 negotiations in May 2015, which focused on the topic of follow-up and review of the new framework, the 2030 Agenda contains a number of introductory references to follow-up and review, along with a specific section (III) on this topic. At the global level, follow up and review will be facilitated through the new High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).

While the 2030 Agenda contains some positive language about creating an inclusive framework for action on sustainable development at all levels, there is insufficient appreciation of the vital role civil society can play in monitoring the SDGs and almost no commitment to the creation of specific mechanisms that would enable civil society to actively contribute to this process. As we previously outlined in our analysis of the ‘zero draft’ of the 2030 Agenda, there remains no recognition of the importance of data generated by citizens and civil society which can provide timely, detailed and unique insights into progress on the SDGs.

In addition to the negotiations of the post-2015 outcome document, an Inter-agency and Expert Group on the Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) has been created to develop an indicator framework for the goals and targets of the post-2015 development agenda at the global level, and to support its implementation. The Group has committed to finalising the global indicator framework by the end of November 2015, for submission to the 47th session of the UN Statistical Commission for approval by Member States in March 2016. The IAEG-SDGs has recently published its latest draft list of SDG indicators. In addition to soliciting feedback from governments, the IAEG-SDGs is running a consultation on this indicator list for other stakeholders. Numerous civil society actors such as the Transparency, Accountability and Participation Network have submitted responses, hoping to ensure that the final indicator set put forward by the IAEG-SDGs adequately measures progress against the entire list of SDG targets and enables civil society and citizen-generated data to be leveraged for official reporting processes.

The important role that civil society and citizens can play in producing and using data has also featured prominently in discussions on the data revolution for sustainable development. Many civil society organisations have emphasised that they have much to offer when it comes to generating and using data, but also have many capacity development needs. Some, such as CIVICUS’ Danny Sriskandarajah, have also highlighted that there is a risk that the data revolution serves to further increase, rather than decrease, the divide between people and countries that do and don’t have the means to produce, access and use data. A genuine data revolution will therefore include substantial capacity building efforts to improve data literacy amongst civil society organisations and citizens, along with their ability to generate and use their own data.

Work is underway to develop a multi-stakeholder Global Partnership on Sustainable Development Data, and civil society is actively engaging in these discussions to ensure the partnership is established in a way that is inclusive, transparent and responds to the needs, but also leverages the assets, of civil society, particularly in the Global South. To help ensure civil society has an equal seat at the global partnership’s highest decision making table, CIVICUS has pledged to be an anchor partner in this process and will be working via the DataShift and other efforts to ensure that civil society and citizen-generated data are harnessed, but also invested in, through the data revolution.

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A NEW CONVERSATION ON CIVIL SOCIETY COLLABORATION FOR SDG MONITORING

Civil society has an opportunity to ensure that with the set of goals that are agreed in September 2015, civil society and citizen-generated data can inform assessments of sustainable development progress, as well as policy and programming decisions on how to best accelerate transformative change. This will be best achieved if civil society works together.

Since July this year, CIVICUS, through its DataShift initiative, has been attempting to incubate a conversation with a wide range of civil society actors on this subject.

Initial discussions suggest that:
- many organisations are already actively exploring how the data they produce could be used for monitoring the SDGs.
- however, they are primarily doing so as individual, sector-specific actors.
- there is a strong interest amongst civil society in collaborating more effectively within and across sectors on data collection and use.

Ideas for longer-term outcomes this collaboration should aim for range from:
- cooperation on monitoring of specific goals at the country and global levels, starting with goals where data is most limited and civil society and citizen-generated data can add the most value, and then scaling up across all goals.
- comprehensive country-level shadow reporting frameworks across the SDGs, acknowledging that country-level efforts will have the most impact.
- a comprehensive global shadow reporting framework across the SDGs and accompanying data hub and global flagship report. This is seen as being exciting, ambitious but also extremely challenging.

A number of concrete activities have emerged as potential ways to take the conversation forward:
- a mapping exercise to identify civil society and citizen-generated data sources across the SDGs, to better understand where and how civil society organisations are collecting data against each goal and target.
- joint advocacy for the inclusion of civil society and citizen-generated data in Member State-led monitoring and reporting processes.
- joint advocacy to harness resources to help strengthen the data literacy and capacity of CSOs, particularly through the proposed Global Partnership on Sustainable Development Data.
● engagement with National Statistical Offices (NSO), including concrete opportunities for collaboration between NSOs and civil society organisations.
● collaborative initiatives that demonstrate the credibility of civil society and citizen-generated data, and highlight how it can usefully complement official sources of data.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION
The questions below can help guide further discussions on how best to collaborate.

VALUE AND INTEREST IN COLLABORATING:
● how can we harness and build upon the initial enthusiasm for collaboration?
● can we be confident in an emerging consensus across civil society on the value in collaborating and coordinating efforts?
● are there existing initiatives which see civil society organisations collaborating with each other and additional actors on sustainable development monitoring?
● if so, what makes these efforts successful/unsuccessful?

OUTCOMES:
● which options for longer-term outcomes should we be aiming for?
● are there any other key outcomes we should aim to achieve at the global, regional and national levels? What are we missing?
● what are some of the likely challenges in achieving these outcomes?

IMPORTANT STEPS:
● which activities need to be prioritised to lead us towards these outcomes?
● what are the immediate next steps?
● what are the key moments for engagement and face-to-face collaboration?

OUTREACH:
● who else do we need to engage with, how, and when?
● what do we need to support this engagement?
● have we sufficiently communicated the value in collaborating and coordinating efforts?
● how do we link these efforts to broader civil society engagement on the post-2015 agenda?
DataShift is a multi-stakeholder, demand-driven initiative that builds the capacity and confidence of civil society to produce and use citizen-generated data to monitor sustainable development progress, demand accountability and campaign for transformative change. Ultimately, our vision is a world where people-powered accountability drives progress on sustainable development.

DataShift is an initiative of CIVICUS, in partnership with the engine room and Wingu. For more information, visit [www.thedatashift.org](http://www.thedatashift.org) or contact [datashift@civicus.org](mailto:datashift@civicus.org).