A large, teal-colored circular graphic that is partially filled with a photograph of a crowd of people. The photo shows the backs of several people's heads and shoulders, suggesting a public gathering or event. The graphic is positioned on the left side of the page, framing the central text.

2019

**CSO Accountability
in Focus**

How did our members score?



2.5 / 4

Out of the ten member reports reviewed in 2019

This average was calculated using the scores given by the IRP when reviewing member accountability reports. For more information please read our [reporting framework](#).

In recent years, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) around the world have been subject to strong criticism over their opacity and lack of accountability, leading to questions over their legitimacy and impact. They have also been questioned about who they are representing and if they have the best interest of their stakeholders, namely the people whose lives we wish to transform.

In the current context where civic space continues to shrink and where trust in CSOs continues to decline, the sector has been working intensely to demonstrate that they are more open, transparent and responsive to their different stakeholders. CSOs have drastically changed their approach to accountability: from the traditional approach, which often only flowed upwards to donors, to a more dynamic, horizontal and inclusive process that involves a continuous dialogue between all those people who have an opinion on an organisation's work. We call this approach Dynamic Accountability.

“ ”

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Dynamic Accountability goes beyond transparency and static, traditional forms of accountability. It is grounded in processes of meaningful engagement with all stakeholders that are inclusive, participatory and continuously practiced. Dynamic Accountability is about creating a transformational relationship between a CSO and its stakeholders, and making an organisation's way of working adaptive to these stakeholders' needs. It involves redressing unequal power dynamics and building mutual partnerships with all stakeholders.

For an organisation to truly implement a more dynamic approach to accountability, **they need to meaningfully engage with a wide array of stakeholders:** the people CSOs work for and with and others, like staff, donors, governments, other organisations, and any other actor that might be affected by their work or that has interest in the work that a CSO carries out. For this reason, it is important that CSOs engage their stakeholders in all aspects of their work, from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation of projects, designing and carrying out advocacy efforts, and shaping the organisation's strategy and areas of focus.

CSOs need to foster a continuous dialogue where the feedback loop is not just closed, but feeds into a new process. They need to make sure their mechanisms for engagement are accessible, easy to understand, inclusive and have a clear and well-explained purpose for all stakeholders. Processes should also meet their stakeholders where they are, and happen at eye-level in a mutual partnership.



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Stakeholder engagement is one of the key aspects that is assessed throughout [Accountable Now's 12 Accountability Commitments](#). **Our commitments enquire on external but also internal engagement** and how organisations use the feedback to drive their decision-making processes to become more people-driven.

People-driven work' requires that the resources and power required to achieve CSOs' goals are adequately shared between organisations and people. Ensuring that they listen to and actively involve people in decision-making will make CSOs' work more effective and more relevant to primary stakeholders.

When it comes to:

External stakeholders

People we work for and with

We ask our members to reflect on who they need to reach out to to make sure that they are able to identify people's needs and priorities and also to assess how this information is used and how it drives decision-making processes within the organisation. To achieve this, organisations need to install simple mechanisms through which their stakeholders can communicate with them. They also need to adapt the mechanisms to the specific population they wish to help and be transparent and honest. Managing expectations is essen-

Internal stakeholders

Organisation's staff and volunteers

It is important for organisations to have professional, well-equipped, and loyal staff and volunteers with the purpose of improving the quality of an organisation's work and reducing the risks of mismanagement. To achieve this, CSOs must have transparent and fair principles, policies and procedures for recruiting, developing and managing staff. By including staff and volunteers in planning and decision-making processes, CSOs will create empowering environments in which individuals can effectively perform and grow.

It is on the basis of these reflections that organisations can assess how they are engaging their different stakeholders, allowing them to influence the organisation. Carrying out this type of approach is necessary to truly achieve systemic change in the form of a power shift within and outside the organisation, towards the people a CSO works for and with. Relationship-building enables different stakeholders to be part of this power-shift agenda. In this way the people we work for and with become the recognised drivers of the CSO's work that affects their own lives.

Given the importance of engaging stakeholders, this short document presents a snapshot of our Members' efforts over the past year, covering strengths, challenges, and recommendations for further improvement.

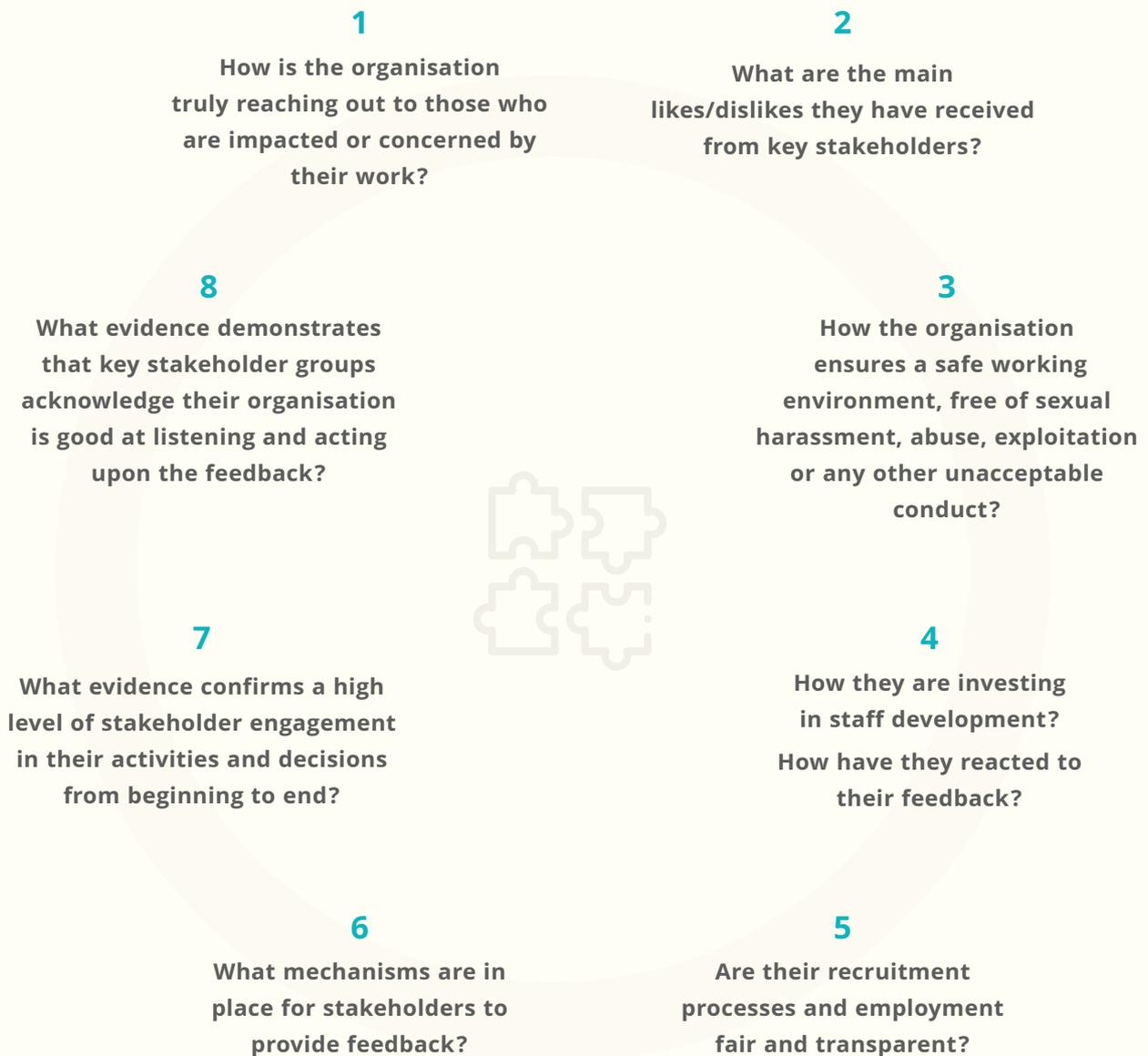


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How are our members engaging external stakeholders?

When reviewing our members' accountability reports submitted in 2019, in general, we saw that our members perform well at providing their stakeholders with information, obtaining feedback from them, and responding. This is the first step to ensuring strong stakeholder engagement.

To assess this commitment, our members are asked to reflect on how they listen to, involve and empower all their stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement is assessed through the following questions:



From the 10 full accountability reports received in 2019 we were able to draw the following conclusions on stakeholder engagement and feedback:



10

All 10 organisations **have at least a policy and a procedure** to engage their stakeholders.

A majority

A majority of members described **sound feedback mechanisms and processes.**

3

Only 3 member organisations were commended by the Independent Review Panel on **the strength of their approach** to engaging their stakeholders.

A half

Only half of members assessed **were able to consolidate the feedback** they had actually received and to share the key likes and dislikes raised by their stakeholders, as well as how they responded. This suggests a need for improvement in either the actual collection and use of feedback, or if this is being done, a need to better communicate it.

2

However, there are 2 organisations that are **very close to receiving the '4' mark** which means that there is evidence that stakeholder engagement is widely used within the organisation.

None

None of the members **received a score of 4** from the Panel, which means that they have not been able to demonstrate how the practice has been fully embedded in the organisation's day to day operations.

Meaningfully engaging stakeholders would require that CSOs involve their stakeholders from the very beginning of their work; consulting them in the planning stages and in fact encouraging them to lead the design of programmatic work. Stakeholders then take an active role in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programmes. This approach should also be applied beyond programmatic work, to an organisation's advocacy efforts and strategy design and implementation.



In this way, a CSO's work reflects the true needs and wishes of the people whose lives they aim to impact. Due to the ongoing engagement and contact, the CSO can respond to any challenges that may arise, and shift or adapt their work in a timely manner. The people and communities, due to their involvement, will become more invested in the work, and be more likely to take it forward even after the project ends, leading to more sustainable impact.

When it comes to taking stakeholder engagement further, this remains an area for improvement for many of our members. Based on conversations with a number of our members, we believe that their efforts on stakeholder engagement are stronger than what is actually reflected in their accountability reports, but that in a number of cases members did not share enough details or concrete examples to fully explain their practices. In this regard, we are providing support to our members to help them better communicate their efforts.

Three examples of how an organisation can meaningfully engage their stakeholders:



SOS involves children and young people in both organisational decision-making and programmes at all stages of the process -from inception and planning to implementation and evaluation. At the highest strategic level, an International Youth Coalition brings together 20 young people to formally represent youth from all SOS regions in the organisation. The Youth Coalition has strongly shaped SOS' strategy and regularly consults young people for input on SOS' work and globally relevant issues.

An example of a programme that is co-created with youth are the YouthCan! A project which prepares vulnerable young people to lead independent lives. Something that is interesting to highlight is that during implementation, regular feedback sessions are organised, which allow participants to continue shaping the project. Young people are also engaged in the evaluation of the programme.

At **Restless Development**, regular and continuous engagement with a wide variety of stakeholders is seen as a key part of achieving strategic goals. Restless Development's Youth Leadership Model sets out different ways of engaging with young people across the agency and in programmes.



Their strategic model is built around long-term community engagement led by volunteers. Stakeholder engagement is built into programme design, delivery and monitoring, evaluation and learning systems -young people are part of programme design teams and work with peers and other community members on all aspects of the programme.



Educo makes a serious effort to engage children. Children participate in all stages of their projects, from conception and planning through a participatory Child Rights Situational Analysis process, to implementation and evaluation. Participation is adapted to context and individual needs and there is a commitment to improving participatory practices. Approaches are tested and learnings are shared throughout the organisation.

Educo also carries out capacity building on children's rights in order to better involve them in monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning initiatives. They make an effort to be flexible and adapt to children's needs during the process.

A set of Child Participation Standards provide guidance to Educo and their partner organisations on how to work alongside children to ensure their active participation. The nature and scope of child participation is determined by the principle of the best interest of the child and adapted to reflect local contexts and the child's age and maturity level.

Key aspects of the standards include:

- Participation is voluntary, relevant, inclusive and safe
- The information children receive is transparent and child-friendly
- Participation is not a one-off but a continuous process
- Children are informed of the results of their participation

Engaging internal stakeholders

Another key area of stakeholder engagement is how CSOs interact with their internal stakeholders – their staff. Traditionally, CSOs' efforts around feedback and engagement have been focused on external stakeholders. When staff were engaged in planning and decision-making, it was often those at the top levels of management. This is beginning to change:

Members are increasingly seeking feedback from a wide range of staff.



Members are better involving staff in decision-making processes.



Members are introducing mechanisms to increase staff and peer support and learning.



Members are encouraging staff to be more involved in different areas of work.

In response to a number of internal challenges in CSOs over the past year, with allegations of bullying or harassment, or staff coming under stress due to staff cuts and organisational restructuring, CSOs have also responded by strengthening their communication mechanisms with staff and by increasing efforts to foster safe and equal working environments. These initiatives all contribute to a more open and supportive culture where staff feel empowered to carry out their work and to adopt more engaging approaches with one another as well as with external stakeholders.

When it comes to demonstrating these efforts in members' accountability reports, there is still room for improvement. For example, a number of our members conduct annual staff surveys, but very few actually shared the key issues that were identified in these surveys and how the organisation responded. By providing this information, CSOs can more effectively show their learnings and demonstrate that they take the feedback they receive seriously, which in turn is likely to strengthen trust in the organisation.

One good example here is Restless Development

(who are also strong at engaging external stakeholders):



Within **Restless Development**, an annual Agency Survey ensures staff opinions feed into decision-making processes. The scores and feedback from the survey feed into an Annual Directors Conference and key decisions about priorities and focuses for the coming year are made using this data. Staff are also encouraged to grow into leadership positions; hiring decisions take into account future potential and support and training is provided.



Educo gathers feedback from staff with a global questionnaire and focus groups as part of the evaluation of their Strategic Plan. Findings from these processes will feed into the next strategic plan. A global questionnaire has been conducted in line with the strategic cycle but for the future they are planning on conducting it annually to be able to influence annual organisational development plans.

Recommendations: How can CSOs improve stakeholder engagement?



Engage stakeholders in all stages of the project cycle, from design and planning to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.



In addition to project work, **engage stakeholders in strategy** and other strategic organisational discussions.



Don't forget your internal stakeholders – staff and volunteers. Seek their feedback and involvement, strengthen peer support and learning, and foster an open, reflective and supportive organisational culture.



Better capture and share the feedback received from both internal and external stakeholders, including common issues raised, learnings, and how the organisation is responding.

Accountable Now sees this as an area for opportunity; our members have a solid base from which to build on their practices, and the potential to showcase many more of their efforts. This is why Accountable Now has identified stakeholder engagement as our core area of focus for 2020. We will be creating more detailed resources, fostering conversations and peer exchanges, and sharing these on our website throughout the year.

References

- **Dynamic Accountability** is an approach that is encouraging organisations to practice accountability in a more dynamic, continuous, horizontal and inclusive process.
[Find out more in our position paper.](#)



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