



# INTERIM ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT 2019-2020

Empowering a more accountable,  
effective, and innovative civil society

December 2020

## 1. Strategic importance of accountability to achieve CIVICUS' mission: Opening Statement by the Secretary General



COVID-19 presented a new and alarming crisis for us all. While much attention focused on the actions of states, positive and negative, there was far less acknowledgement of civil society's essential role. Even in difficult conditions of restricted civic space, there was a rapid and vital civil society response. Civil society met needs, defended rights and forged new paths for civic action. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the value of civil society and the need to enable and partner with

different expressions of people power, across a diverse range of civil society forms and responses.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the current crisis puts meaningful engagement with stakeholders and the concept of CSO accountability – and our [Primary Constituent Accountability \(PCA\)](#) – under strain. CSOs wishing to remain accountable to the people who they work with and for need to quickly innovate to ensure that their values remain practiced. Thus, CIVICUS [documented](#) how COVID-19 affected the ability of over 125 members from more than 50 countries to mobilise resources, and published two open letters to donors, complemented by targeted outreach, calling for [more flexibility, certainty and stability](#) to support the resilience of grantee partners and for much-needed [support to local organisations](#) in the global south. Both letters resonated within the funding community and with our constituents; 60% of surveyed members reported having found them useful in negotiations with donors and other enablers. In addition, CIVICUS published a [Social Security Protocol for Civil Society](#) to protect co-workers in the pandemic, which has been endorsed by over 200 organisations so far.<sup>2</sup>

The year 2019-2020 was furthermore a moment for us to take a step back and take stock regarding CIVICUS' Strategic Plan 2017-2022 half-way through. After a [successful Strategy and Action Workshop with CIVICUS members, staff and the Board in November 2019](#), the external consultant published the [final review and recommendation report](#) which points to several important choices CIVICUS must make in order to harness the full potential of our strategic ambition. The review report identifies five priority themes – coherence, systems, simplicity, leadership and metamorphosis – and makes eighteen specific recommendations for action. This includes the need to invest in a composite programme model for change and future design on one hand, and the importance of working with new actors and strengthening our engagement with 'people power' on the other. Our [management response](#), co-created in a very collaborative way across all teams, addressed those suggestions in April 2020 and highlighted [which recommendations are already being actioned in 2020-2021](#).

*“Leading by example in terms of its own internal effectiveness is important, and CIVICUS has made impressive strides forward in what it calls its ‘Impact and Accountability’ work in the first two years of the strategy period (also relevant for Strategic Goal 4). Successes include revising the organisation’s accountability framework; adopting a Developmental Evaluation Framework; rolling out the use of a new data platform DevResults; improving the quality of data that reaches the CIVICUS leadership and Board; and encouraging a culture of learning across the organisation. Although there is further to go, the sophistication of critical thinking and direction of travel are extremely positive, and CIVICUS is well on the way to having its own house fully in order as it seeks to support the wider civil society sector to do better on effectiveness.”*

Extract from [CIVICUS Strategic Plan 2017-2022: Mid-Term Review \(December 2019\)](#)

<sup>1</sup> See more details in [CIVICUS' report Solidarity in Times of COVID-19 – Civil Society Responses to the Pandemic](#), as well as [COVID-19 related research briefs by the CIVICUS Monitor team](#).

<sup>2</sup> Listen to the recent [Accountable Now podcast](#) with CIVICUS' Head of People for more details about our Social Security Protocol.

On the following pages, we are providing an account of CIVICUS' progress made in terms of the [improvement areas identified by the Independent Review Panel on our 2018-2019 report](#). We remain appreciative for the constructive feedback through Accountable Now and its Panel – thank you!



*Lysa John Berna*  
(Secretary General, CIVICUS)

## 2. Overview of significant organisational changes

As highlighted in [our Annual Report 2019-2020](#), key figures and achievements for the year include:

- 13 restrictive initiatives defeated with CIVICUS' support – 10 of which were about the release of human rights defenders
- 141 countries where CIVICUS supported or worked with partners engaging in civic space activities
- 9,938 members around the world as of 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020, who CIVICUS is working with to defend and enable civic space
- 20 research products and reports published by CIVICUS – plus 204 published media outputs (including articles, blogs and interviews)
- 48,154 social media fans, 21,600 Twitter followers and more than 600,000 page-views of [civicus.org](#)

On the operational side, CIVICUS' financial situation was overall stable, and we continued to see an increase in membership in 2019-2020. COVID-19 prompted us to shift funds from travel to staff social security (see social protocol mentioned earlier) and digital engagement. We continued work on institutional strengthening aimed at making CIVICUS a fit-for-purpose organisation by enhancing our effectiveness and efficiency, while also focusing on resilience.

Using a [Developmental Evaluation](#) approach, CIVICUS identified 155 outcomes and success stories during 2019/2020, compared to 68 in 2018/2019. This included 42 policy changes linked to CIVICUS's research and advocacy. The increase in data capturing is due in large part to staff adoption (45% in 2019-2020 compared to 38% in 2018-2019) of the DevResults monitoring and evaluation platform. CIVICUS has also adopted new Board reporting guidelines in 2019/2020 to support the board in strategic decision-making. In addition, CIVICUS launched an [M&E Toolkit](#) for the alliance and wider civil society to enhance the generation and use of data beyond the CIVICUS Secretariat.

We furthermore identified several top learnings through our impact reflection processes and mid-term strategy review:

- **Understanding our value-add and prioritising our activities and focus.** It is important to identify where the unique combination of skills and capacities of the alliance can be applied to make a difference, and then create structures to facilitate and scale this.
- **Embracing the power of radical collaboration.** After extensive testing, co-design methodology (e.g. Design Thinking) should be adopted as CIVICUS' standard programme design approach to encourage joint ownership and stronger relationships with key stakeholders.
- **Bridging the gap between CSOs and social movements.** There is a clear need to focus on bringing social movements and a diversity of people and groups into the

alliance as key constituents and allies in protecting and defending civic space and promoting civil society solutions.

- **Learning as an alliance.** It is necessary to look beyond operational efficiencies within the secretariat and contribute to learning in civil society as a whole by convening members to share our collective knowledge, tools and resources.
- **Shifting power and decision-making.** Member-driven initiatives that engage members in decision-making are proving to have better results in terms of ownership of outcomes and strategic engagement with content.
- **Practising people-centred accountability.** Primary constituent accountability initiatives improve our ability to listen to and understand members' contexts and design and adapt programmes and engagement opportunities accordingly.
- **Facilitating member-to-member communication.** There is a clear demand from the alliance to create mechanisms that will allow members to connect with each other directly and draw on the collective skills and expertise of the alliance.
- **Adopting new ways of working.** The move to remote working and online convening seen under the COVID-19 pandemic requires new coordination and facilitation approaches that support coordination and build trust and solidarity.

Below is a list of key activities and initiatives that were conducted in 2019-2020 in relation to our accountability work:

- Resilient Roots tested whether CSOs that are more accountable to their primary constituents are more resilient to closing civic space. To do this, Accountable Now, CIVICUS, Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo and Keystone Accountability worked with 14 national partners of varying size, focus, location and approach, to help them design and implement year-long pilot projects to increase organisational responsiveness, respect and trust with their communities. While the results differed for each partner organisation, [Resilient Roots demonstrated that there is indeed a connection between building public support and trust](#), and the ability of an organisation to navigate both perceived and directly experienced restrictions to their freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.
- The second [Global Accountability Week](#) took place in October 2019, celebrating positive narratives on CSO accountability in five languages and launching the Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA) [good practice platform](#) on LTA procedures.
- The [Diversity & Inclusion Group for Networking and Action \(DIGNA\)](#) launched in July 2019 after a year-long co-design process and in 2019/2020 grew to more than 1,500 members. With representation across regions and thematic intersections, the DIGNA Advisory Group has facilitated peer learning, including regional conversations, a webinar on [Domestic Violence during COVID-19](#), and a research piece '[Holding the Mirror up to Ourselves: Diversity and Inclusion Practices and Trends in Civil Society Organisations](#)'.
- The year marked the continuation of a journey of understanding the needs and realities of youth-led activist groups in the global south. The [Playbook for Resourcing Youth-Led Groups and Movements](#) captured first-hand the struggles young activists face related to underpaid or voluntary work, overburdensome reporting requirements, agenda setting by some donors and miscommunications and misunderstandings of context.
- The [SPEAK! campaign 2019](#) focused on bringing people together across lines of division. The campaign was led by a cohort of *SPEAK!* Champions – 39 community activists in 25 countries – who organised their own *SPEAK!* events and supported others to convene events. The distributed campaign model engaged more than 150 organisations that hosted 179 events in 55 countries, attended by more than 10,000 people, and reached over 2 million people on Twitter.
- The [Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms, and Media Development in Sub-Saharan Africa \(CHARM-AFRICA\)](#) aims to protect and expand the space for

CSOs and human rights defenders, as well as nurture and enhance the effectiveness of independent media and journalism in the region. The initiative started in late 2019 and is funded by Swedish Sida; other Consortium partners include Wits University in South Africa, DefendDefenders in Uganda, or Fojo Media Institute in Sweden.

### **3. Update on the improvement areas identified by the Independent Review Panel's feedback on CIVICUS' previous accountability report (see [here](#)):**

#### **a) Monitoring of progress and re-allocation of resources (I2)**

We were asked by the Panel to provide more clarification around how CIVICUS tracks spending against strategic objectives, and how much flexibility there is to reallocate funds or change project design throughout the year. Thus, we revised our annual planning and budgeting templates for 2020-2021 so that teams are now able to do their activity planning per strategic objectives (i.e. three objectives per four strategic goals), with automatised pivot tables to approved team budgets. This has been very helpful and appreciated across the Secretariat. The next step is now to complete alignment for 2021-2022 budgets and plans and continue to implement our new accounting system, Sage Intacct, which will improve real-time budget management and allow for a more continuous effort to maximise budget spend in relation to our strategic goals.

The fact that we were quickly able to adapt to shifted expenditure needs in light of COVID-19 (e.g. moving funds allocated for travel and physical events towards social security measures) shows that CIVICUS is able to quickly adapt to changing contexts – luckily supported by great donor flexibility in this regard.

Overall, CIVICUS continued to make progress on the recommendations resulting from several systems audits and internal reviews of human resources processes and policies, financial management and sub-granting systems, communication planning, risk management, information and knowledge management systems, CRM upgrades, and data security protocols.

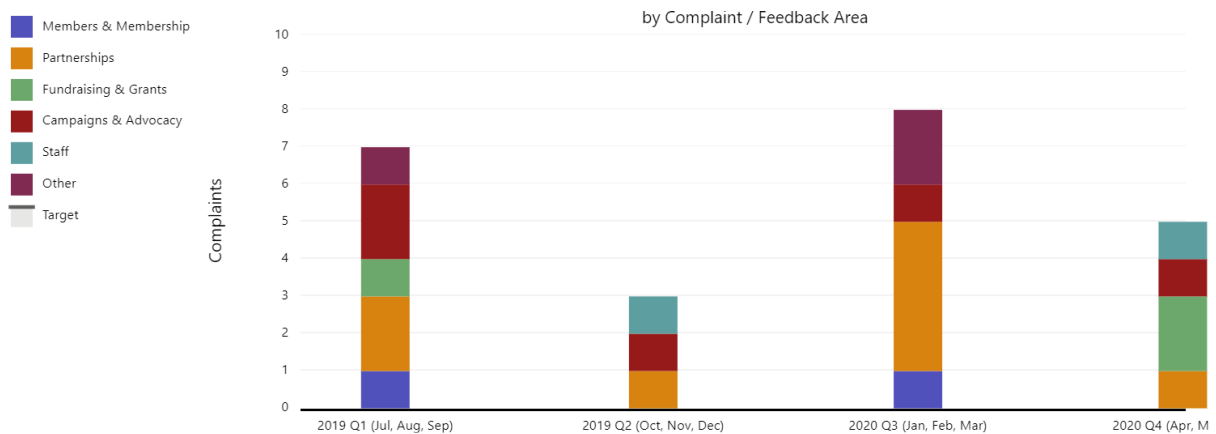
#### **b) Protecting confidentiality and anonymity of those involved in complaints (J5)**

Regarding internal grievances, CIVICUS ensures that we safeguard confidentiality by involving only the HR team on a strictly confidential basis, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) and Legal Advisor (when required) in resolving those grievances. Where any of our HR team members or the COO are the subject of the complaint, they are excluded from the process and replaced with our Legal Advisor, Board Chair, Chief Strategy Officer, or Secretary General as appropriate depending on the nature of the grievance. Other CIVICUS team members are only involved at the grievance hearing stage if their presence is essential to give testimony or act as a witness. Due to the nature of our small Secretariat size of ca. 75 staff members, anonymity remains a practical challenge with colleagues knowing each other well – even if there was a submission form in place for anonymous complaints. Overall, this area has been highlighted for the HR work plan of 2020-2021.

We received two *internal* grievances in the reporting period of 01 July 2019 to 30 June 2020 – one in relation to pay and benefits, the other in relation to work conditions. Both grievances were submitted by female staff members from the Global South. Both grievances were handled in a very structured way and were successfully resolved.

CIVICUS received 23 *external* complaints through our [online feedback form](#) (now available in English, French, and Spanish) in the reporting period – the majority of those in relation to our partnerships. For example, one person criticised the lack of external acknowledgement of partners in our co-designed programmes, and a previous grantee criticised CIVICUS for terminating a grant agreement (due to long-outstanding deliverables and unused funds on the grantee side).





Overall, CIVICUS paid significant attention to keeping staff and partners safe at our virtual and face-to-face convenings in the reporting period. However, below are a couple of examples of recent incidents in this regard:

- CIVICUS only offers Zoom convenings with passwords so that staff can monitor who is let into the meeting. At one of our International Civil Society Week (ICSW) webinars, an external speaker received offensive comments in his/her Zoom chat box. While the bully was removed immediately, the offensive comments stayed in the chat box. While Zoom settings can be set to disable the commenting function, this would also limit the overall engagement level and user experience of those webinars. Thus, this area remains a challenge for us and we would like to know how other Accountable Now members are dealing with this.
- A participant attending a face-to-face Resilient Roots meeting did not feel safe due to another participant in the room. This has led to a discussion of revising our Code of Conduct. In addition, the internal Diversity and Inclusion Group (DIG) developed a survivor-focussed concept for the organisation for which we sought advice from Oxfam’s safeguarding team.

As Accountable Now no longer offers a final escalation possibility to handle complaints against their members, we revised our [Feedback Response Policy](#) in May 2020 accordingly.

c) Engaging members in strategic and programme planning, monitoring and evaluation processes (E2)

CIVICUS was asked to provide better understanding of how members are engaged in strategic and programme planning, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes. Generally, all of our work is guided through our [Developmental Evaluation framework](#) which puts great importance on participatory M&E. Examples from 2019-2020 include the representation of member voices at the Strategy and Action Workshop in Johannesburg in November 2019, or the joint Goalkeeper Youth Accelerator evaluation with members. The Membership Team moreover started their work on a new member-to-member communications platform (MangoApps) which is being tested and rolled out in 2020-2021. Furthermore, we developed member personas to test current civil society challenges as part of our member feedback integrated into strategy scoping work (more details will be shared in next year’s report).

In addition to programme-specific feedback loops, we also carried out the [CIVICUS annual constituency survey](#), which yielded 726 responses. This was a significant increase (60%) compared to 2018, in part reflecting an increase in the number of members. The Net Promoter Score (NPS) remained average (42), with a number of respondents indicating that they were too new to the alliance to provide a strong opinion about their membership experience. The Annual Constituency Survey was a significant data point that informed the mid-term strategy review, annual planning and budgeting exercises.

Another example of how the CIVICUS alliance has embraced new approaches to encourage citizen engagement was the [Innovation for Change](#) (I4C) Innovation Working Group's adaptation of its Design Thinking for Civil Society tools for low-tech and low resource settings. The revised methodology was more inclusive and accessible for civil society personnel and groups struggling to balance online and offline engagement methods during the COVID-19 pandemic. It allowed I4C members and partners to collaborate from across regional hubs in Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, Caucasus and the Pacific and enabled the development of solutions to enhance the accountability and transparency of government responses to the pandemic.

d) Working with partners to strengthen their capacities, means, self-esteem and institutional strengths (E4)

While we laid out our overview of partnerships, Partner Checklist, selection criteria, due diligence form, membership criteria, etc. in our Accountability Report for 2018-2019 (see [here](#), pages 8-12), the Panel requested a fuller account of the actual working relationship with partners in this interim report. Overall, CIVICUS greatly values the power of partnerships and the alliance. As communication and empathy between CSOs and activists become disjointed due to travel restrictions, it is now more important than ever to focus on collaboration, meaningful exchange of information and collective bargaining. CIVICUS sees partnerships as relationships that need ongoing communication to manage expectations and maintain trust.

As a rule, CIVICUS sets all goals, plans and implements all programmes together with partners. This is usually done through co-design processes or applying Design Thinking methodology to all new initiatives. It is seen as good practice to agree on and monitor success indicators together, and to commit to mutual ways of working and behaviours. We then also identify potential capacity needs early on to provide targeted support where needed. For example, Youth Action Lab participants received a training / mentoring program along the way of their individual programme implementation. Finally, we commit to hold one another accountable in our partnerships with clear lines of responsibility and communication.

Activities as part of the [DIGNA community](#) and [Membership Solidarity Fund](#) helped the Advisory Groups, participants and partners of this network to strengthen their capacities, means, self-esteem and institutional strengths. We know this due to regular embedded feedback loops (e.g. through regular check-ins or monthly learning reflections) and trusted working relationships with the Network Coordinators. However, the trust is highly dependable on the CIVICUS' staff representative(s) and we are aware of the associated risk in case these co-workers left the organisation and associated time needed to build new working relationships with these same partners.



"Being part of DIGNA allowed me to connect with activists and Organizations from all over the world who work tirelessly to make our societies more diverse and inclusive. Being part of a valuable, broad and open community of practices that continues to grow and enrich our daily work has been very encouraging, as it is living sign that we are not alone in this shared goal".

**JULIANA CATANIA**  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR  
RACI  
ARGENTINA  
DIGNA INCUBATION GROUP



"DIGNA provided a pathway for me to seek better answers to difficult questions of diversity and inclusion. The Advisory Group I served with is an inspiration and has guided me in elevating D&I practices at the organisations that i work with. DIGNA will help you nurture a curiosity for innovative evidence and community based solutions and will provide a network and community that allows you to leverage impactful solutions globally."

**VANDITA MORARKA**  
FOUNDER & CEO  
ONE FUTURE  
COLLECTIVE  
INDIA  
DIGNA INCUBATION GROUP

## WHAT ARE MAG MEMBERS SAYING ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE?



"[...] It has been a learning opportunity to get hands-on and behind-the-scenes experience supporting the development of a participatory grant-making scheme. Lastly, my fellows MAG members never failed to impress me; we had rigorous, reflective and even challenging conversations that allowed us to all step up, challenge our assumptions and get out of our comfort zones." - Victoria Wisniewski Otero



"While challenging from a pandemic perspective, the mentorship relationship with my grantees was rewarding from a developmental perspective. I am proud of how they used the allocated funds to swiftly and efficiently adapt their activities to counter the COVID-19 outbreak. It was an honour to set the foundation for the CIVICUS Solidarity Fund, a grant mechanism that is well poised to grow in size and impact." - Tanya Lallmon



"Finding resources for activism can be very daunting for activists around the globe. Hence, MAG provided me with the opportunity to review grant applications, mentor, support and encourage grantees from all over the world. Speaking to the applicants, finalist and grantees is always fulfilling because it provides me with an opportunity to inspire, activate and support them to continue to lead positive change in their community despite the challenges" - Runcie C.W. Chidebe



"As part of MAG, I could learn a lot about implementing democratic assessments and defining processes in global scale out of scratch. It has been a continuous and exciting journey to be working along with extraordinary people from all around the globe and being fully supported by CIVICUS staff, who provides us with access to the best practices on accountability and governance[...]" - Ana Addobbati

In our donor coordination meeting in June 2020, several emerging issues came up how to support the financial resilience of local civil society in the context of COVID-19. One priority is around creating new partnerships and alliances with international organisations, governments, private sector, etc. Thus, in the coming year, CIVICUS will prioritise working with strategic partners to facilitate targeted engagement with governments on supporting civil society in [Rebuilding for Good post-COVID-19](#), while also scoping partnership opportunities with the private sector and other key stakeholders.

### e) Publishing policies and key documents online (G1)

We were asked by the Panel to make more of CIVICUS' policies publicly available and [our Accountability website](#) now includes more published policies at the bottom of the page (e.g. the Whistleblower Policy or Risk Management Policy). Our revised [Impact & Accountability Framework](#) was published in December 2020. Additionally, work on a new Diversity and Inclusion Policy, embedding a survivor-centred approach, and new staff code of conduct are underway and will be added to the page once finalised.

## 4. 2020-2021 Outlook

[2020-2021](#) will be an interesting but also challenging year. We are moving our main flagship event the International Civil Society Week (ICSW) from a face-to-face convening with 600+ CSO representatives to an online webinar series and local events, experimenting with other forms of dynamic stakeholder engagement in times of a global pandemic. At the same time, we are stress-testing with our Board, staff, members, and consultants whether our Strategic Goals are still relevant beyond 2022 – or what needs to be amended. Moreover, triggered through the global debate about #BlackLivesMatter, we are investing into our racial justice efforts, aligned to our focus in the coming months on the roll out of an organisational-wide



learning and development plan. Finally, like other CSOs, we will have to face accountability challenges around fewer financial resources and laying off staff as a result. This and more will be discussed in our report on 2020-2021.

*This interim report covers the period from 01 July 2019 to 30 June 2020 – with more recent examples where clarified. It was compiled in a participatory process with involvement from other CIVICUS Clusters where needed and representation from designated members of the Senior Management Team. In case of any questions or feedback on this report, please get in touch with the Impact & Accountability Cluster (Merle Rutz, Impact & Accountability Coordinator, [merle.rutz@civicus.org](mailto:merle.rutz@civicus.org)) or via [feedback@civicus.org](mailto:feedback@civicus.org).*



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