CIVICUS
Independent Review Panel Feedback

Accountability Report 2020-21
Review Round April 2022

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Feedback from the Independent Review Panel

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6th May 2022

Dear Lysa John,

Thank you for submitting your accountability report. We, the Independent Review Panel of Accountable Now, appreciate your efforts to strengthen accountability to communities, local partners, supporters, staff, donors, or other key constituencies. Our key focus is on accountability to those you serve. It is against this background that we critically discussed your report and came to the individual assessment below.

The thirteenth CIVICUS' accountability report is comprehensive and demonstrates great progress across all 12 accountability commitments. CIVICUS appears to have a robust accountability framework in place, underpinned by numerous policies and procedures. The CIVICUS report also demonstrates the organisation's' commitment to increasing transparency and accessibility for stakeholders to its work. In this regard, the Panel has flagged the public availability of the new strategy on its website in several languages (see A1) as a **good practice**.

The report shows progress made in moving closer to implementing dynamic accountability. This is in spite of the pandemic and organisational changes. The following areas have been noted as strengths in the report: Sustainability of your work (B1), Expertise is recognised and welcomed by peers and stakeholders (C2), Stakeholder engagement (E2), recruitment and employment is fair and transparent (H1), and Safe working environment (H3).

The comprehensiveness of the report supported by many links helped the Panel to gain a good insight into the accountability practices. Notwithstanding this, the Panel also acknowledged that external readers might find it difficult to navigate so much information, and suggested reducing the length in future reports by synthesising and reducing the introductory texts when possible.

The Panel further noted that the report focused almost exclusively on CIVICUS members as the key stakeholder group. While this is understandable and brings a clear focus to CIVICUS' work, the Panel suggests broadening this out to include other stakeholders

who may also be affected by CIVICUS' work (e.g. CIVICUS member constituents and other actors who may share the space, etc.). The Panel also noted that concrete strategic indicators and targets seem to be lacking, which may hinder the ability to clearly assess progress. The Panel acknowledged this is a challenge for organisations working on lasting positive change impacts and looks forward to seeing reflection on how to overcome this challenge in future reports.

The Panel flagged the following areas for improvement: key strategic indicators for success (A2), Minimising negative impacts on stakeholders (C4), and internal complaints handling mechanisms and overview of complaints (J4).

We look forward to discussing our feedback with you in a follow-up call, which the Secretariat will be in touch to schedule. This conversation will form the basis for your response letter, which will be made publicly available on the Accountable Now website along with your report and this feedback letter.

If you have any other feedback or comments on our work, please share them with us by sending them to the Accountable Now Secretariat.

Yours sincerely,

Accountable Now's Independent Review Panel

CIVICUS' Accountability Report 2020-21
Review Round April 2022

Opening Statement from the Head of Organisation

The opening statement by CIVICUS' Secretary General, Lysa John, emphasises the mobilisation of civil society against restrictions of civic freedoms in the context of the pandemic. The work on strengthening civil society resilience, which was informed by CIVICUS' members and stakeholders is highlighted.

Examples of accountability processes and systems contributing to change at organisational, programme and constituent levels were shared. These illustrate how CIVICUS 'walk the talk' in their commitment to dynamic accountability.

The statement also highlights the efforts to improve organisational processes and policies, and to close feedback loops with stakeholders.

Cluster A: Impact Achieved

A. The impact we achieve

A1	**_Mission statement and theory of change_** The vision and mission are shared along the four strategic goals. The theory of change is linked to the report via inclusion in Civicus' strategic plan (on page 12). In addition to short introductory videos in four languages, CIVICUS has made a copy of their strategic plan publically available (in 6 languages) on their website. The Panel flagged this as a **good practice** as it enhances transparency and access for stakeholders.	**4**
A2	**_Key strategic indicators for success_** The current Strategic Plan 2017 - 2022 was informed by the inputs of members and partners from around the world. Its strategic goals, objectives and long-term outcomes are presented in a table. Performance is measured through the Impact and Accountability Framework, which is underpinned by the developmental evaluation framework (DE). Each year, workplans are developed and progress is monitored with the DevResults system. Data on progress feeds into different reflection and reporting processes, which include inputs from	**2**

	members and stakeholders, and are used to inform and strengthen future workplans and adapt ongoing activity. New tools and processes are incorporated to support analysis and reflection. The Panel noted that the strategic plan did not appear to include any actual target indicators (in particular qualitative ones) for the period, making it difficult to measure and assess the organisation's overall success in this area.	
A3	**Progress and challenges over the reporting period** The annual report 2020-21 provides a comprehensive overview of achievements. This publicly available spreadsheet summarises, in a compact and reader friendly manner, key indicators and results per Strategic Goals. A few prominent achievements are presented in the report. The report outlines challenges in monitoring progress and capturing qualitative outcomes that speak to the organisation's overall impact. The Panel notes that while challenges in monitoring progress is part of the scope of this question, an outline of challenges on achieving CIVICUS' strategic objectives would have strengthened the report.	*2*
A4	**Significant events or changes regarding governance and accountability** The report shares key significant exercises around the Midterm Strategy Review, Board elections and risk management among others. The report shares learnings captured from the strategic forecasting exercise in this blog. The introduction of a new (improved) Risk Register Policy, and transition to a new finance software programme (providing an improved audit trail)were also positively noted by the Panel	*3*
	B. Positive results are sustained	
B1	**Sustainability of your work** The report describes three approaches to sustainability of the organisation's work: Testing methods to improve sustainability post-intervention, deepening understanding of resilience, and sustainability as a core criterion for programme evaluation. Numerous links are provided demonstrating outcomes and learnings from the testing experiences (e.g. Youth Action Lab outcomes and learnings). Examples of how CIVICUS foster resilience in the membership, including	*3*

	through capacity building initiatives. Also CIVICUS has an active role on the [Dynamic Accountability COP](#), which aims at fostering Dynamic Accountability among a diverse range of organisations and audiences.	
B2	***Lessons learned in the reporting period*** The report presents learnings generated from the changes in practices in the pandemic context. Limited physical contact needed to be balanced with new media formats, and this shift made clear the need for digital security and inclusivity. A snapshot from the annual report shows "learning areas" articulated as recommendations. The report also provides examples of different channels used for joint reflection and learning sharing. Lessons learnt are also shared in meetings and through staff bulletins. The Panel notes positively the increasing focus on digital spaces and digital security, as they have benefits for all civil society organisations. While the Panel notes the lessons learned cover broad "areas", it would have liked to see the actual steps the organisation planned in addressing them (along with associated timelines for implementation).	*3*
	C. We lead by example	
C1	***Excellence on strategic priorities*** CIVICUS provides leadership in the sector by leading research in civic spaces, facilitating training and offering toolkits and other resources. The participation in several platforms, networks and memberships was also highlighted and a list of them are provided. The report also provided various examples, aligned with the organisation's strategic priorities. These included the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), [Watch List](#) a [toolkit on advocacy in closed spaces](#), and a [Monitoring and Evaluation online toolkit (now in English, French and Spanish)](#). The Panel notes positively the [CIVICUS Donor Finder](#), which is a sector wide contribution to accountability.	*3*
C2	***Expertise is recognised and welcomed by peers and stakeholders*** Outcomes and feedback from stakeholders that indicated that CIVICUS' expertise is recognised are used in annual reports and a [performance story](#). [Media featuring CIVICUS](#) has increased dramatically, helping to amplify members and partners' voices and to advocate on behalf of civic space. The Panel notes positively that 28 CIVICUS' recommendations related to civic space are included in UN reports.	*3*

		Other high level recognitions and an award are outlined. Also, an example of an advocacy outcome celebrated by CIVICUS' danish members, is shared.	
C3	*Inclusivity, human rights, women's rights and gender equality*	The report outlines the internal journey CIVICUS has undertaken around racial justice, and diversity and inclusion, which includes the creation of new roles such as D&I Coordinator (2019/20) and Equity and Engagement Coordinator (2020/21). Outcomes from a diversity and inclusion pilot programme (carried out in 2019/20, in eight organisations) are shared.	*3*

The report highlights CIVICUS' signature of the letter of commitment to promoting parity, equality, and representation of women as part of joining [FAIR SHARE](). CIVICUS has contributed to FAIR SHARE initiatives. [The Missing Conversation on Civil society leadership]() and [Feminist Leadership Series]() are pioneering initiatives, that the Panel notes positvely

C4	*Minimising negative impacts on stakeholders*	*2*

The [Member Code of Conduct](), which ensures that values outlined in the [Membership Policy]() are at the core of members' work, has been strengthened by becoming more inclusive, explicit and comprehensive. The code is supported by various policies, including those on harressment and discrimination.

The report also refers to the meachims to report contravening of the code, and an example of how the organisation responded to a case of violation of the code is shared. The code is also complemented by context specific guidance.

Risk assessments are carried out to ensure that stakeholders are not put at risk and a 'do no harm' framework and programmatic risk matrix supports this. However it is not clear to the Panel what are or could have been negative impacts on which stakeholders that are averted.

While the report outlined the policy/process framework, there was limited information as to whether it is working (or has been successfully translated into action).

C5	*Responsible stewardship for the environment*	*3*

CIVICUS' [Environmental Policy]() provides guidance on minimising environmental footprint. The report explains that due to the pandemic, travel and in person events have been suspended and therefore the

	carbon footprint for the reporting period has been lower than in previous ones. The report does not provide data on CO2 emissions. It is not clear to the Panel whether the CO2 data equaled zero or wasn't measured. An analysis of the CO2 data in this period of drastic reduction in travel and in-person events would have provided valuable insights to share.	
Cluster B: Stakeholder Involvement		
D. Key stakeholders are identified with great care		
D1	***Key stakeholders and how they are identified*** CIVICUS 11,000 members include NGOs, activists, civil society coalitions and networks, protest and social movements, voluntary bodies, campaigning organisations, charities, faith-based groups, trade unions, and philanthropic foundations, among others. The [Membership Policy](#) outlines the membership criteria. The membership selection and types of membership are described, along some membership support initiatives. [Membership Solidarity Fund](#), and CIVICUS Solidarity fund are innovative ways to engage key stakeholders, that the Panel notes positively. The Panel notes the comprehensive information provided on CIVICUS' members. While the focus on members allows CIVICUS to support their work on a wide range of issues, the Panel suggests identifying other stakeholders in future reports. This would allow the readers to understand how CIVICUS reflects on the impact its work has in other groups beyond its immediate members.	*2*
D2	***Reaching out to those impacted or concerned by your work*** CIVICUS reaches out to its members through numerous networks and communities of practice (CoP) within the alliance. The large increase in membership in the past year is justified by the networks engagement approach. A new communication strategy was also put in place to address digital and remote reach, which translated into social media footprint growth, and website visits. Media priorities shifted to amplify people's voices and some examples are provided.	*3*

	The report also shares challenges around digital reach to stakeholders, concretely how the most vulnerable are excluded due to lack of access to affordable data. Initiatives to bridge the digital divide are identified. While CIVICUS covered how it reached out to members, the Panel would have liked to have understood what efforts CIVICUS made in reaching intended constituencies over and above its direct members.	
D3	***Maximising coordination with others operating in the same space*** Partnership guidelines followed by CIVICUS in working with partners and communities. Examples on how the guidelines are implemented are provided. The report also describes a new initiative to connect CIVICUS members with one another. The new CIVICUS online community basics is explained in this video. While these are positive, the report appears to be limited to efforts made within its current members group. In this regard, the Panel would have liked to know what (if any) initiatives CIVICUS made on coordinating its work with other bodies also operating in the same space.	*3*
E. We listen to, involve and empower stakeholders		
E1	***Stakeholder feedback*** The Online Feedback Form is the main channel for stakeholders to provide feedback (further details can be found in J3). The Annual Constituent Survey has been replaced in the reporting period by a survey on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on civil society. The online community described in D3 is also an avenue for members to provide feedback to the Secretariat. Other examples of channels to provide feedback and how it is taken onboard are shared, including post-event surveys. While CIVICUS outlined the process used, the Panel would have liked to understand a little more around whether key stakeholder groups acknowledged CIVICUS as being 'is good at listening and acting upon what you [CIVICUS] heard?' The Panel notes positively the availability of channels in different languages.	*2*
E2	***Stakeholder engagement*** The Developmental Evaluation framework promotes the use of iterative feedback from partners and constituents. Examples of how CIVICUS	*3*

		incorporates stakeholder feedback into programming are provided, including the CIVICUS Solidarity Fund and Innovation for Change. The report highlights that members steer the organisation's objectives and strategies priorities through their voting rights and through the Board of Directors.	
	E3	**_Main likes/dislikes from stakeholders and organisation's response_** The report briefly outlines the mechanisms to receive feedback already described in E1 and J3, and the substance of the feedback. In E1 and J3 likes and dislikes are further detailed. Notwithstanding this, the Panel would have liked to have understood more detailed feedback from stakeholders (i.e positive and negative aspects, as opposed to the broad topic categories).	_2_
	E4	**_People and partners have gained capacities that last beyond your immediate intervention_** Addressed in B1.	
		F. Our advocacy work addresses the root cause of problems	
	F1	**_Evidence regarding the root causes of the problems you address_** CIVICUS collects evidence through research, continual engagement with stakeholders, and monitoring of world events related to human rights issues and civic space restrictions. Examples of regional advocacy networks CIVICUS engage with, are provided. The CIVICUS Monitor, which provides a four category rating on countries' civic spaces, informs advocacy strategies. Examples of several advocacy products which were informed by local and context specific analysis, are shared. The report also highlights the 10th edition of the State of Civil Society Report, which is yearly produced with inputs of activists, leaders and experts. It outlines long-term trends in civil society.	_3_
	F2	**_Stakeholders support your advocacy work and value changes achieved_** Advocacy work is jointly developed with stakeholders, particularly with those affected by civic restrictions. The report outlines ways used to engage with stakeholders and ensure alignment. The report also provides examples that illustrate how the approach looks like in practice.	_3_
		G. We are transparent, invite dialogue and protect stakeholders' safety	

G1	**Availability of key policies and information on your website** Maintaining transparency is part of CIVICUS strategic goals, and the organisation strives for openness while ensuring privacy. A dedicated [Accountability webpage](#) includes links to several policies and procedures, and to annual plans and accountability metrics in three languages. Information on staff, Board members, governance, annual reports and the recent strategy review are also publicly available.		*3*
G2	**Pay scale, gender pay gap and top salaries** As a result of a job descriptions (JDs) standardisation exercise, CIVICUS has aligned all JDs to the Patterson Grading Scale and approved a [Remuneration Policy](#). The gender pay gap is divided into three staff categories. The top five salaries are also provided in a table. The Panel notes very positively the publication of the remuneration policy as well as the gender pay gap as important steps to achieve fairer employment and promote equality internally. The Panel points that sharing the salary grades in the remuneration policy would further support fairer employment in the organisation.		*2*
G3	**Ensuring privacy rights and protecting personal data** A [Privacy Policy](#) outlining CIVICUS' commitment to maintaining users privacy on all online systems is publicly available. The report also explains the protection of privacy in events context, and the dedicated email to address privacy issues. A Data and Digital Security Working group is mandated with identifying gaps in data and digital security and with recommending mitigation actions. It has also supported compliance with data privacy regulatory frameworks such as GDPR and POPIA.		*3*
G4	**Largest donors and their contributions** The five largest donors and their contributions are shared in a table.		*3*
Cluster C: Organisational Effectiveness			
H. Staff and volunteers are enabled to do their best			
H1	**Recruitment and employment is fair and transparent** A [recruitment and selection policy](#) is published on the organisation website. The report explains that the policy is guided by relevant legislation and organisational values, emphasising that recruitment is based on skills, qualifications and competencies.		*3*

	Positions are advertised to reach people from excluded groups and for internship, candidates based in the Global South from excluded groups are prioritised. The recruitment and selection process which is transparently shared in the policy is complemented with the benefits and remuneration policy and FAQs for potential candidates. The Panel notes very positively the transparency and sharing of policies relating to recruitment. The report provides a staff breakdown by country, gender and type of contract. The report also mentions efforts to promote diversity and inclusion.	
H2	**Staff development** The report states that staff development opportunities are designed to enable staff to do their best and foster attraction and retention of talent. The budget allocated annually for staff development is shared in terms of percentage of salary costs. The identification of development opportunities aligned to work plans is done by line managers. The report provides some information on the topics of training taken by employees in the reporting period, including how to operate in the pandemic environment and well being. The performance appraisal process, Secretary General's performance review and the succession planning approach are outlined. Notwithstanding this, the Panel would have liked to have understood whether the amount budgeted was actually spent, and what percentage of staff did indeed receive some form of staff development.	*3*
H3	**Safe working environment** Staff Code of Conduct, Whistleblowing Policy, and Anti-discrimination and Harassment policy support a safe work environment. These policies are accessible to all staff and promoted through different channels, including staff meetings. The report outlines the process for reporting and handling cases of harassment and discrimination, including timelines. The related grievance and whistleblowing policies feed into the same process, and are applied as relevant depending on the issue. Training and awareness sessions are planned on the refreshed Grievance policy. An third-party employee assistance program provides confidential counselling services to CIVICUS employees including those affected by harassment and discrimination.	*3*

	Although CIVICUS outlined the policy framework used, the Panel would also have liked to understand how the framework had been operationalised.	
I. Resources are handled effectively for the public good		
I1	***Resources are acquired in line with your values, globally accepted standards and without compromising independence*** A resourcing and sustainability strategy (shared with the Panel) guides resource mobilisations, and funding partnerships are subject to partnership guidelines. The report outlines principles that guide CIVICIUS' resource mobilisation, including the importance of maintaining independence, long-term view, and increasing Global South donors base.	**2**
I2	***Monitoring of progress and re-allocation of resources*** Several of the elements outlined in A2 for performance measurement are again presented here. It is mentioned that yearly reflection allows to allocate resources and focus on the most impactful work	**2**
I3	***Minimising risk of corruption, bribery and misuse of funds*** Several mechanisms are outlined, including cash flow and budget monitoring, external annual audits, and risk list, that aim to minimise risk of corruption and misuse of funds. The Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption Policy and The Whistleblowing Policy (both shared with the Panel) formalise the zero-tolerance commitment, and outline processes for implementation and reporting. The report also provides information on efforts to prevent malpractice in procurement and travel.	**2**
J. Governance processes maximise accountability		
J1	***Governance structure and recruitment of trustees/board members*** The CIVICUS Board of Directors is elected by the membership, and Board members serve for a three-year term that can be renewed. The nomination process and composition of the Board is outlined, providing a brief overview of the last elections. The Board committees are listed. The Annual General meeting of Members is highlighted as an accountability moment for the Board in which previous work is reviewed.	**3**
J2	***Board oversight of adherence to policies, resource allocation, potential risks, and complaints processes***	**2**

		The Board has influence over all CIVICUS policies to different degrees and several policies directly approved are listed, including the Member Code of Conduct. The Board oversees the risk management framework (RMF), which applies a bottom-up approach involving staff. A table outlining RMF responsibilities at different levels of the organisation is provided.	
J3	*Complaints handling mechanisms and overview of complaints (external)* The [Feedback and Response policy](#) applies to the CIVICUS Secretariat and Board. An [Online Feedback Form](#) is linked in every webpage for easy access. It is the main mechanism for receiving complaints. Other alternatives are also available. A chart showing the submissions broken down by categories received in the reporting period is provided. The complaints are documented and followed up till issues are solved. An example of a complaints follow up is provided. Other less formal mechanisms to receive feedback are also outlined, and it is acknowledged that there is room for improvement on how to systematically capture and act upon feedback received through team members and clusters.	*3*
J4	*Complaints handling mechanisms and overview of complaints (internal)* It is stated that a Grievance Policy is in place and includes steps and timeframes for handling complaints. A grievance procedure document has been shared with the Panel. The Grievance policy is socialised across staff through the new staff orientation sessions. Moving forward it is planned to regularly socialise the Grievance Policy more regularly and an external expert will facilitate dedicated sessions. The Panel notes positively this initiative as the low numbers of complaints (only one) might be caused by lack of awareness among staff. The Panel would be interested to know whether the organsiation captures complaints raised through other channels, including informal ones.	*2*
J5	*Protecting confidentiality and anonymity of those involved in complaints* The report explains that confidentiality is ensured in reporting and investigating cases of anti-discrimination and harrassment, and referes to the same name policy. The Code of Conduct and the Feedback Response policy also provide guidance on confidentiality in complaints and more generally respectively. While the report covers the policy and procedure in place, no information has been provided as to whether - and how - it has been operationalised.	*2*

K. Leadership is dedicated to fulfilling the 12 Commitments	
K1	**The governing body and management are held accountable for fulfilling strategic promises** The 'Financial and Delegated Authorities Approvals' guides decision-making and oversight across the organisation. As explained in J! the Board has fiduciary responsibility and is directly accountable to the CIVICUS membership. The annual planning described in A2 and A3 is an accountability vehicle to stakeholders. The Panel looks forward to the Racial Justice Plan in future reports.	**2**
K2	**Inclusion of staff in discussing progress toward organisational accountability** Staff develop the annual plan, which sets organisational commitments and how resources are used. Key cross-organisational priorities part of the annual plan which involved staff feedback and deliberation, are listed. A Impact & Accountability (I&A) cluster led work on organisational accountability in the sector, including CIVICUS itself. The involvement of staff around the accountability report production and on the socialising of the Panel feedback is explained.	**2**
K3	**Scope of this accountability report and influence over national entities** The Panel appreciates the report highlighting the role of the accountability report on reflecting the accountability journey within the alliance.	**3**