



CIVICUS

Independent Review Panel Feedback

Accountability Report 2022-2023

Review Round January 2024



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Feedback from the Independent Review Panel

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15th January 2024

Dear Lysa John,

Thank you for submitting your accountability core report using the new framework. 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 actions, and came to the assessment below.

The core report is concise, comprehensive and informative. CIVICUS's strong commitment to the principles of dynamic accountability practice is reflected in their different planning and management tools. The notable ones include their Strategic Plan 2022-2027 and the new Integrated Results Framework (IRF). A review of the documents shows how the commitments are rooted in learning from across the Alliance, and how the organisation plans to practise an improved, people centred and participatory set of work programming to enable more effective responses.

To more effectively capture the story of the changes made in the lives of people and the process of social transformation, CIVICUS has planned to adopt an improved method of assessment that combines quantitative and qualitative data. This is reassuring to note that a comprehensive resilience and impact measurement framework will, among other indicators of change, seek to record evidence in support of improving dynamic accountability practices at all levels.

Given that the Action Plan is still pending, the Panel looks forward to receiving and reading the plan at a later date.

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 via the Accountable Now Secretariat.

Yours sincerely,

Accountable Now's Independent Review Panel





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Opening Statement from the Head of Organisation

Opening statement from Secretary General Lysa John emphasises the current context that many of CIVICUS's primary stakeholders are operating in, sharing that conflicts, crises, and shrinking civic spaces are deeply impacting progressive, rights-oriented civil society groups and individuals around the world.

She further shares about how the organisation is tackling this context through a new [strategic plan](#), which resulted from a series of extensive consultations alongside both internal and external stakeholders. The plan's overarching goal is "to strengthen civil society and citizen action for expanded civic and democratic space". With this, the organisation aims to shift towards an ecosystem strengthening approach.

Internally, the new Integrated Results Framework is supporting the organisation to take a more community-led approach to impact monitoring and evaluation. Other notable changes include the revamped Learning and Development Framework, reorganisation of the internal management systems, and new accountability commitments from the Board of Directors.

Core Responses (See [Guidelines and Grading](#))

1 What have been your most significant achievements and impacts this year and how has this been validated with your stakeholders?

The response shares about the organisation's significant achievements in the past year (see also Annual Report attached as Annex). The year 2022 signalled the start of a new strategic period, brought on as a result of an in depth review alongside multiple stakeholders.

In terms of programmes, the response highlighted a handful of important achievements, including: strong media attention for its research and advocacy outputs, major programmes such as the Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI) and Local Leadership Labs (LLL), the online Accountability Acceleratorcourse, partnership with USAID (alongside grassroot organisations) to address unequal power relationships in grant-making, and learnings taken forward from the CIVICUS Solidarity Fund. For many of these, results and impacts reported by target stakeholders are also shared. While not mentioned in the response, the new [integrated results framework](#) supports the organisation in monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of its programmes, with many "evidence of change" metrics (pg. 15) being rooted in stakeholders' feedback.



Internally ,the Panel notes that the organisation has put together a new Registry of Processing Activities to strengthen its data security in accordance with GDPR requirements.

Furthermore, the organisation is rolling out a new learning and development framework, for this, it would be interesting to learn more about staff's feedback on this end, beyond the co-creation of goals so far, or plans to continue soliciting such feedback in the future. Potentially such actions can be included in the upcoming Action Plan if timeline permits.

FM The response fully met the specific guideline.

2 **If applicable - How have your organisation's accountability processes been impacted by significant internal or external changes over the reporting period?**

The response outlines significant internal and external changes over the reporting period. Internally, CIVICUS has introduced a new strategic plan alongside a new organisational management structure with an expanded Senior Leadership Team and changes to how teams are constituted. Reflections and feedback from stakeholders on internal changes are also included. Notably, both the changes in organisational structure and team transitions have been informed by a series of consultations with the alongside staff. The Panel is impressed by the extensive and systematic consultation opportunities that CIVICUS provides to its staff in the strategic planning process.

Externally, the report shares that increasing levels of civic repression (“shrinking civic space”) have put limitations on how the organisation can engage with its targeted stakeholders; this led to a strengthening of the safety and wellbeing aspect within the organisation's travel policy specifically, and a more general enhancement in terms of duty of care to external stakeholders.

Additionally, through involvement in coalitions (such as Lifeline), the organisation has reflected on its own granting mechanisms, and shifted towards support groups that have been traditionally excluded from funding opportunities. While mentioned in passing, it would be great to learn more in future reports about how CIVICUS has made the granting process more accessible to these groups and what success would look like from the organisation's perspective.

FM The response fully met the specific guideline.

3 **How has your organisation learned from reported incidents, complaints and grievances received in the past year? (These may include safeguarding, fraud, corruption, whistleblowing, integrity violations, etc.)**

An overview of a number (5 total) and type of external complaints received were provided (3 regarding service providers, 1 regarding governance, and 1 regarding staff).



Internally, the report notes that no formal grievance procedures were commenced, however written complaints were received. These internal complaints covered areas such as “differing levels of awareness and therefore implementation of internal policies, siloed planning and working resulting in tensions between teams, lack of clarity on dispute resolution processes in certain instances.” From the report, the Panel can see that there are processes and systems in place, however more clarity regarding the how resolutions were reached alongside complainants would have strengthened the response.

The response also shared how challenges underlying complaints have been taken up, including addressing operations related complaints through staff training and embedding the decision making (DFA) framework.

Additionally, to strengthen the handling of complaints and feedback, the organisation is also looking to update its Feedback Policy, unifying it into a wider Code of Ethics framework. For referential purposes, Transparency International has a comprehensive approach to [ethics and integrity](#), underpinned by an [Integrity System Framework](#) and an [Integrity Violation Reporting Policy](#) that includes an external whistleblowing channel.

PM The response **partially met** the guideline, with **minor improvements** needed.

4 Internally, how has your organisation practised a more dynamic approach to accountability?

Throughout the reporting period, there were multiple opportunities for staff to input into organisational processes (as explained and shared in responses to Questions 1 and 2). The response here added to those processes, unpacking how CIVICUS is strengthening its DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) approach, creating intentional space for staff to come together in person through a staff retreat, and learning from exit interviews.

Regarding DEI, it is very laudable to see the increases in diversity of candidates for both intern and leadership training positions. CIVICUS has also ensured that its Diversity and Inclusion Group (DIG) is more representative of the organisation, and this group will have a stronger mandate to drive cross-cutting DEI outcomes. These actions follow the general direction of travel within the sector. Other types of learning opportunities that CIVICUS may want to consider include peer mentoring for horizontal support and mentorship system.

For the future, it would be helpful to share further outcomes of the DIG, and to share whether interns are taken into account under the organisation’s learning and development framework, and whether they are remunerated through stipends or similar growth and development opportunities.

Elsewhere in the report (Q2), we note that the organisation carried out an assessment on ways of working, potentially areas of concern from this can feed into the accountability action plan if processes allow.

PM The response **partially met** the guideline, with **minor improvements** needed.



5

How has your organisation worked towards being dynamically accountable to your external stakeholders (i.e partners, communities, programme participants, etc)?

The response shares about CIVICUS's work alongside their primary stakeholder group, which are their members (organisations and individuals). Given members feedback, the Membership Engagement Month (MEM) focused on supporting members' growth, and promoted programmatic priorities.

The response further notes that teams across the organisation are working with a new quarterly MEL template, where space is provided for narrative testimonies from stakeholders. Other examples of how the organisation is working to become member-led is provided, such as the CIVICUS Solidarity Fund and Innovation for Change. Another example lies in CIVICUS's work to ensure co-creation at the inception phases of its programmes (such as the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly (FoPA)). It is also interesting to see how learning from one programme (FoPA) has informed another area (mainstreaming DEI through CIVICUS Lens) of the organisation's work.

To enhance accountability to its members and the general public, CIVICUS's Board has begun to publish talking points on [its website](#). Through a SIDA external audit, the organisation has also identified areas of strengths and areas for improvement, which will be codified into the previously mentioned code of ethics.

While there are a number of very strong practices being implemented within different programmes, are there ways for the organisation and its staff to systematically discuss and draw learnings to be applied elsewhere?

PM

The response **partially met** the guideline, with **minor improvements** needed.

| Key | Explanation (See expanded guidelines) |
|-----------|---|
| FM | The response fully met the specific guideline. |
| PM | The response partially met the guideline, with minor improvements needed. |
| PS | The response partially met the guideline and significant improvements are still needed. |
| NM | If the response has not met the specific guideline. |