Accountable Now

CIVICUS

Independent Review Panel Feedback

Accountability Report 2023-24

Review Round April/May 2025

CIVICUS
Feedback from the Independent Review Panel

Review Round April/May 2025

May 14th 2025

Dear Mandeep Tiwana,

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 actions, and came to the assessment below.

CIVICUS has submitted a comprehensive report that reflects a strong commitment to accountability, learning, and responsiveness across both internal operations and external engagements. The organisation continues to demonstrate significant achievements and sector-wide influence, particularly through the State of Civil Society Report, CIVICUS Lens, CIVICUS Monitor, and targeted advocacy initiatives such as the UNMute Civil Society campaign. Internally, the organisation responded proactively to a challenging whistleblowing case by revising key policies and strengthening staff engagement and well-being practices.

At the same time, the report would benefit from a high-level framing statement, such as a message from leadership, to offer candid reflection and situate CIVICUS's work within the broader global context. Furthermore, the Panel would have appreciated discussion and reflections beyond activities and outputs, touching more on impact and outcomes in this very challenging global context.

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

CIVICUS
Accountability Report 2024
Review Round Month April/May 2025

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?**

Significant achievements include the continued impact of the State of Civil Society Report, CIVICUS Lens, and CIVICUS Monitor as knowledge and resources that inform civil society trends at various levels, contributions to highlight civic repressions at the UN (Human Rights Council and UNMute Civil Society Initiative), work to enhance and strengthen the civil society ecosystem and narratives, as well as work to defend the freedom of peaceful assembly. Throughout the list of examples, high uptake and positive feedback by other CSOs, movements, journalists, activists, governments and platforms show that the organisation's work is highly valued by stakeholders.

The report furthermore shares that CIVICUS uses participatory validation in its project work, collaborating with partners to review and confirm outcomes. Additionally, for its Locally Led Learning initiatives, CIVICUS also uses a living Theory of Change approach to keep projects relevant and responsive to emerging changes (complementary approach - Accountability Lab's Theory of Action).

Beyond using approaches that foster collaboration, it is worth mentioning that CIVICUS is an organisation that deeply promotes and works by collaborating with others. Examples from the HRC sessions and the CIVICUS Monitor demonstrate how the organization sets up platforms for other voices to be amplified.

However, while the breadth and depth of activities are evident, generally the report contains less evidence and reflection on the outcomes that these efforts contributed to. As in previous reports, the Panel continues to encourage CIVICUS to finalize and implement tools like its outcome inventory and dashboard to better track and assess the organization's contributions to its defined outcomes and objectives. Given the challenging areas that CIVICUS is seeking to influence, we encourage more intentional and collective evidence-based reflection on progress and limitations, to ensure that the organization's contributions are as meaningful as possible given the difficult global and national contexts of its work. Other organizations too are exploring how they are tracking, measuring, and visualizing the social impact of their work (see also Educo's 2024 Accountability Report, pg. 4-5).

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

2	**If applicable - How have your organisation's accountability processes been impacted by significant internal or external changes over the reporting period?**
	Internally, the organisation faced a complex whistleblowing allegation that was ultimately proven malicious. This prompted a significant change in the organisation's accountability processes, which encompassed the revision of the Whistleblowing Policy, an extended pilot of the Collective Management Forum and additional learning sessions (Brown Bag sessions) to socialise the new Code of Ethics with staff.
	The report reflects that these new changes will help strengthen the organisation's accountability practices. It's very good to hear that staff received transparent updates and well-being support. A good practice comes from the Taiwan Fund for Children and Families, whose staff also receive psychological support (2023 Accountability Core Report, pg 6).
	Looking ahead, it would be helpful to understand what will happen to the CMF after its current operational phase, particularly given its apparent role in the organisation's evolving structure. What learnings have emerged from the CMF's implementation so far? Additionally, we note that staff are being socialized on the new Code of Ethics, and in doing so, we nudge the organization to clearly share with these stakeholders about the updates it includes, what are the major shifts, and the vision for the culture that leadership wants to work towards.
	Finally, we suggest providing clarity around data confidentiality practices, especially regarding protocols for handling sensitive information related to whistleblowing: such as whether and how third-party investigators are involved, how confidentiality is ensured in those cases, and what are the parameters for deciding whether a complaint is malicious or not.
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.)**
	The report provides a general overview and numerical summary of the complaints and feedback received during the reporting period. It is encouraging to see that the organization has incorporated positive feedback into its complaints process. Based on the breakdown and subsequent explanations, the increase in numbers appears to reflect greater awareness and understanding of the complaints and feedback portal.

Given that the organization handled a complex and ultimately proven unfounded, whistleblowing allegation last year, much of the report's focus has been on learning from that incident. Many of these lessons are particularly valuable, especially those related to diversity and inclusion whereby women and BIPOC leaders are more vulnerable to malicious complaints, and those that relate more closely to operationalizing accountability changes, such as establishing clear guidelines, improving the communication and socialization of policies, aligning leadership behaviour with accountability expectations, and ensuring transparency throughout the investigation process.

Regarding the latter point, we acknowledge that this case is unique, as the complainant publicly shared their accusations with all staff, significantly affecting many individuals. In other, more usual cases, transparency about incidents and processes should protect the confidentiality of parties involved, to the extent necessary. Beyond this, the Panel would be interested to know whether additional lessons were drawn from other reported incidents during the reporting period.

FM	The response **fully met** the specific guideline.

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

For this reporting period, the response in this section focused on accountability towards staff.

Overall, we note that since responses to other sections have already unpacked and explained internal accountability dimensions in detail, that the response shared in this section could provide more information on other feedback received from staff during this period and whether they were addressed too. During the call between the Panel and the organisation, it would be great to discuss further around the Collective Management Forum and how it is currently supporting the organisation to un-silo itself.

Beyond that, it is great to see that racial equity remains at the top of the organisation's priority, with a key achievement being an increasing number of diverse leaders. The Panel would be interested in learning more about the drivers and processes that led to such an impressive increase in leaders' diversity - for example, are there peer-to-peer mentoring systems available? Or are there different approaches that CIVICUS is using to strengthen its recruitment approach?

Additionally, the report mentioned staff-led initiatives, further discussions and sharing around these practices would be useful to showcase how the organisation is approaching this strand of work.

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 report focuses on how CIVICUS listened, responded to and collaborated with its members, who are its primary stakeholders. The report presents the various initiatives and actions that CIVICUS carried out in response to its members' needs - such as the UNMute Civil Society Initiative, the Local Leadership Labs, the Crisis Response Fund, and the Digital Democracy Initiative. The range of initiatives and services that the organisation does for its network is impressive.
	With that in mind, while the report highlights activities like Membership Engagement Month (MEM), it offers limited insight into how feedback gathered through such engagement is being analysed and used to inform change. We would be keen to understand what CIVICUS has learned through MEM, what it plans to adapt in future cycles, and what motivated the initiative in the first place. This reflection would help illustrate a stronger "feedback to action" loop and show how member voices actively shape programming.
	Overall, while this section outlines a range of information about the activities being carried out, there has been little illustration of how the organisation is responding or closing the loop with its stakeholders after the fact. From previous reports and answers to other sections (as also defined by the Consultation Policy that was shared to us), we know that the organisation has channels available, but their use was not discussed further here. Therefore, it would be interesting to learn more about how the organisation follows up, monitors, and closes the loop on the range of actions being carried out with its members.
	Lastly, CIVICUS has stated a commitment to engaging marginalised groups, it would be valuable to learn more about the specific measures taken to ensure this inclusion is effective and resourced appropriately.
FM	The response **fully met** the specific guideline.

Key	Explanation
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.