



“We know more than you think we do”: Raising voices of marginalised communities on the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals

“I would tell people in power to listen to our ideas and take us seriously! Stop ignoring us! Appreciate the young people, we know more than you think we do.”

Stella Mwangi, young activist in Nairobi.

The SDGs aim to leave no one behind, reaching those farthest behind first. For this to happen, people who are marginalised – including women, young people, people with disabilities and people from ethnic and religious minorities – must participate. They are best placed to know what their problems are and what might be workable solutions. Moreover, the process of participation can itself create solidarity and get people into a position where they can start to make the changes they want.

Despite this, engagement of citizens in the SDGs is so far happening in only a very patchy way, and mostly not reaching the most marginalised people. Although some governments have put in place laudable initiatives to engage citizens, including involving citizens in national SDG implementation mechanisms or conducting national consultations, these do not go far enough to meet the goal of ‘leaving no one behind’.

Building on existing work, ActionAid and our partners undertook a research and accountability project during 2017 and 2018 to listen to the voices of marginalised communities on the implementation of SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 8 on youth employment and decent work, and SDG 16 on accountability and participation, corruption and non-discrimination. Citizens developed Charters of Demands, highlighting what they wanted their governments to do to implement those goals.

Project methodology

Six step for citizen-led accountability on the SDGs.



Where did the project take place?



Citizens' voices

Citizens engaged in the research called for a range of initiatives - from stronger institutional responses to violence against women, to more targeted and inclusive vocational training, and initiatives to reduce corruption and engage citizens in policymaking.

5 GENDER EQUALITY



Goal 5: "Our concern is allocation of the highest office to women that were not given priority in government. Although three were appointed, more should also occupy other sensitive positions in order to have gender balance." – Female focus group participant from Gudum Sayawa, Bauchi, Nigeria.

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



Goal 8: "Labour rights are not respected much because people – in as much as they know labour rights exist – don't know where to report violations to. I think the government should look into this because it's affecting the future leaders of tomorrow – the youth." Pauline, activist from Sesheke, Zambia.

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



Goal 16: "Public resources, like ambulances and fire engines, should be used for their purpose." Kilifi Citizens' Charter of Demands.

Strengthening participation in the SDGs

"If the authorities come and walk shoulder to shoulder, they can hear the voices of the individuals... Individuals have their own opinions, by connecting with them loopholes can be identified and solved." – Poly Aktar, Bagerhat, Bangladesh.

where citizens are given the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them, participation itself brings many benefits. It clarifies each community's proposals at a level of fine detail, brings people to a position where they can hold decision-makers accountable, and provides a forum where change to cultural norms can begin. It can also strengthen citizen's sense of agency.

Key lessons for citizens' participation in the SDGs



Build understanding:

accessible information on the SDGs, how they are being implemented, and how citizens can participate should be shared widely, including with marginalised groups.



Be initiated early:

citizens should be engaged in SDG implementation and monitoring as early as possible, not left to comment after decisions have been made.



Prioritise marginalised groups:

marginalised communities face barriers to engaging with consultation or implementation processes – their participation must therefore be deliberately sought as a priority.



Be transparent:

information on who is being consulted, on what, and why, should be publicly and freely available to all – for example, through websites and dissemination through local governments.



Engage with diverse movements:

participation of diverse groups based on age, gender, location, sexuality etc should be facilitated, as well as engagement with a diverse range of civil society actors, including people's movements and not only established formal NGOs.



Respect citizens' agency, capability and knowledge:

citizens are taking their own actions to implement the SDGs and have their own solutions – efforts to engage citizens in the SDGs should respect their agency and be open to implementing their solutions.

Strengthening funding for basic services

Citizens who participated in the research called for stronger public services, including:

- Street lighting and safe transport services to improve women's safety in industrial areas
- Childcare, nursing homes and health centres to reduce women's unpaid care work
- Social protection and cash transfers to support those living in poverty
- Better trained law enforcement, to address violence against women
- Loans, grants, seed funding and other support for businesses led by young people and women
- Vocational training for young people and people with disabilities

Citizens also called for reduced corruption and greater accountability in the delivery of these services.

Currently, essential public services are often insufficient in developing country contexts, partly because democratic participation and accountability mechanisms need to be stronger, but also because there is not enough available finance. Furthermore, the current global trend in many areas is for increasing private provision and financing of essential services. This trend is likely to reduce rather than increase the ability of marginalised communities to hold duty-bearers to account.

Recommendations

- **A primary measure of countries' progress in delivering the SDGs should be whether young people's, women's and all citizens' voices and experiences are included in planning, implementation and monitoring.** Country Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) and SDG Reports should be required to report on this.
- **National processes to develop strategies and monitor SDG progress (for example via the VNRs) should prioritise the voices of marginalised people and people living in poverty** based on (for example) age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic status.
- **Governments should develop strategies to implement the recommendations of local and national citizens' groups on SDGs 5, 8 and 16** as presented in this report (and citizens' recommendations as facilitated through other processes).
- **National governments should ensure resources and power are redistributed to local levels** – including to those in marginalised, economically disadvantaged and remote areas – and be accountable to community members at local level.
- **Governments and the international community should focus on ensuring public financing for the SDGs,** increasingly through domestic resource mobilisation (expanding tax bases in a progressive way and allocating spending to priority services), as well as through donor contributions and international action to set and enforce new tax rules.
- **Publicly financed solutions that are publicly delivered should be the priority for SDG delivery, and mechanisms to deliver on the SDGs through private sector partnerships must ensure that the fundamental human rights of marginalised communities are central.**

ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

International Registration number: 27264198

Website: www.actionaid.org
Telephone: +27 11 731 4500
Fax: +27 11 880 8082
Email: mailjhb@actionaid.org

ActionAid International Secretariat, Postnet Suite 248, Private Bag X31,
Saxonwold 2132, Johannesburg,
South Africa.

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