VNR Lab 2025 report: Shrinking civic space - practical guidance for bridging the divide between civil society and government

Background

A VNR Lab was convened by the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies on the 22nd of July, 2025, at the UN Headquarters. The Lab was part of the 2025 High Level Political Forum (HLPF).

The Global Forum presented findings from its new research project, *From Local Realities to Global Goals*, on the challenges faced by whole-of-society engagement mechanisms in evolving political contexts and offers practical guidance for bridging the gap between government and civil society.

The challenges were brought to life by Global Forum members who shared experiences from several VNR-presenting countries. Participants heard about the key role that multi-stakeholder engagement mechanisms are playing to mitigate these challenges.

Report

Speakers reported back as follows on the eight challenge areas that have been identified in the Global Forum research.

1. Operational and capacity constraints

Across several countries, operational challenges are limiting the effectiveness of civil society organisations (CSOs) in contributing to the SDGs. In the Philippines, many CSOs are struggling with unstable funding that affects their institutional capability to implement sustainable development programs and comply with burdensome regulatory environments. The country is also on the watchlist for anti-money laundering, prompting stricter banking regulations that affect financial flows to CSOs.

International donor funding is decreasing. The recent pre-termination of USAID grants has led to the closure of projects and the termination of staff contracts working on SDG-related initiatives.

In Kenya, while the VNR consultation process is inclusive, CSOs must fund their own participation, placing a heavy burden on smaller, local groups who lack the resources to travel to meetings. Larger NGOs are not adequately resourced to build the capacity of smaller CSO to be able engage effectively in the process.

These constraints are being addressed in several ways. In the Philippines, efforts are being made to diversify funding through initiatives such as private sector partnerships on their ESG commitments and green finance mechanisms. With dwindling international donor funds, there is also a push to open up domestic financing channels, including government budgets to support local CSOs. In Kenya, an annual Multi-Stakeholder Conference has been held since 2018. This has created a consistent platform for engagement, learning, and resources mobilisation despite the financial barriers.

2. Policy misalignment and low government buy-in

There is often a disconnect between civil society efforts and government agendas, hampering alignment and uptake of sustainable development policies. In the Philippines, although legal frameworks for civic participation exist, consultations tend to be narrowly focused. Many CSOs prefer to align with government agencies that are relevant to their own mandates, rather than engaging in advocacy activities such as the SDGs that can provide long-term solutions and lasting impact. In Germany, a recent trend is for Federal Ministries to de-prioritise contact with civil society actors, focusing instead on ties with economic stakeholders. In South Africa, the government does not see data from civil society as legitimate, which reflects an underlying misalignment between state and civil society narratives on development.

Responses to this challenge are varied. In the Philippines, there are efforts to institutionalise localisation by embedding SDG targets in all levels of planning. Processes for VNRs and VLRs are treated as dynamic, iterative processes. These strategies are actively applied through digital platforms, donor-funded data projects, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms such as a Stakeholder Chamber.

In Germany, civil society groups focus on continuously explaining and clarifying their roles to the public and government. In South Africa and Kenya, CSOs are working to build trust over time with government stakeholders, and producing alternative VNR reports to provide independent perspectives on national progress. Kenyan actors are pushing for official inclusion of civil society reporting so that alternative progress assessments are recognised alongside state narratives.

3. Political turnover and fragility

Frequent political turnover undermines continuity in sustainable development programming. In the Philippines, political dynasties dominate both national and local levels, with elections held every three years at the local level, creating instability in long-term planning. This instability often results in abrupt shifts in priorities and undermines implementation. Similarly, in South Africa, the recent election cycle and the emergence of a Government of National Unity have introduced uncertainty and fragility, delaying the submission of the country's 2024/25 VNR report to the UN despite commitments to inclusive implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. Such shifts weaken participatory processes and make long-term collaboration difficult.

To mitigate the impact of turnover, some stakeholders emphasise the importance of building relationships with career civil servants and local officials who offer continuity beyond election cycles. Institutionalising programs and forming alliances with non-elected professionals who possess deep knowledge of the SDGs are seen as stabilising strategies. Germany, which continues to report on the SDGs, credits its strong participatory architecture, which includes government, official multistakeholder groups, academia and civil society as a buffer against political disruptions.

4. Fragmentation / duplication of effort between development actors

Fragmentation and duplication are common challenges across the development sector. In the Philippines, geography plays a role in this fragmentation. As an archipelago composed of thousands of islands, coordination among actors is inherently complex. Civil society organisations often form around specific themes or issues, leading to overlaps and unaddressed gaps.
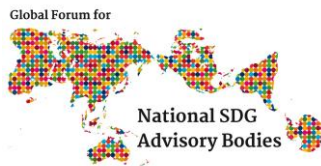
In many countries, ideological divides and competition for scarce resources further hinder unified approaches to SDG implementation.

To address this, there is a growing effort to work simultaneously at local and national levels, ensuring alignment and coherence. Strengthening multi-level networks and platforms, such as the Philippines' SDG Stakeholders' Chamber and alliances with local governments, has proven critical to overcoming silos. By integrating actors from across the spectrum, countries can harmonise efforts, reduce redundancy, and ensure that even the most marginalised voices contribute to and benefit from SDG processes.

5. Gaps in representation and participation

Representation remains uneven across all contexts. In the Philippines, many disadvantaged groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, migrant workers, and rural populations, are still not adequately represented in national-level discussions. While civic participation frameworks exist, marginalised communities frequently rely on intermediaries to advocate for their interests. South Africa similarly faces challenges, lacking a formal structure to coordinate SDG implementation, which limits coherent and inclusive participation.

In response, strategies have emerged to build capacity for participatory governance. This includes providing training in data literacy and empowering local actors to contribute meaningfully to policy development. In the Philippines, efforts are underway to shift from token representation to genuine empowerment by building grassroots capabilities and ensuring local leaders have the tools to participate in governance processes.

In South Africa, the Civil Society Working Group (SAWG), established in 2017 following extensive consultations, represents a coalition of CSOs working across all 17 SDG goals. This group collaborates with government agencies such as the UN, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), and the National Planning Commission to ensure that participation is both structured and inclusive.

6. Ideological pushback

Civil society organisations are increasingly encountering ideological resistance that challenges their legitimacy and impedes their operations. In the Philippines, tactics such as red-tagging and yellow tagging persist, associating CSOs with insurgent groups and political parties, thereby delegitimising their work. Legal protections, such as the 2024 Supreme Court ruling, offer some safeguard reducing red tagging. Public trust continues to erode due to issues of corruption, worsened by disinformation campaigns and restrictions on media freedom. In many countries civil society is increasingly being accused of political interference, and such attacks are amplified by right-wing media. Public trust in NGOs has been steadily declining. Within government structures, ideological opponents of participatory approaches can single-handedly block programmes by refusing to authorise activities, even when legal mandates exist.

To push back against this delegitimisation, CSOs are reinforcing their transparency and accountability, emphasising their ethical practices and participating in assessment and accreditation processes. Legal frameworks are being leveraged to defend their operational space. Many are also working closely with champions inside government, supporting their initiatives with evidence and expertise. Others are designing innovative programmes that promote governance reform and actively seeking donor

funds for their implementation. Digital tools are playing an increasingly important role in this response, with platforms being used to visualise and share data in ways that build public understanding and trust.

In Germany, the Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) and the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development continue to engage constructively, representing an environment where non-state actors are treated as partners in development rather than an adversary.

7. Civic space closure and criminalisation

In several countries, civic space is narrowing due to regulatory overreach and criminalisation of dissent. In the Philippines, red-tagging was prevalent in the previous administration creating a climate of fear. This environment discourages civic participation and restricts the flow of ideas and collaboration.

Overly complex regulations, particularly those linked to anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering, disclosure requirements create significant compliance burdens, especially for smaller CSOs. In order to be recognised and allowed to work with government, organisations must first be deemed legitimate, a status increasingly hard to achieve given resource constraints.

In contrast, civil society in countries such as Germany continues to operate in an open environment with preserved freedoms of speech and assembly. Organisations are not sanctioned for speaking out and can participate in public debate without fear of any repercussions.

To adapt to these more constrained environments, many CSOs are professionalising their internal operations, investing in legal and financial compliance systems, and building the institutional muscle needed to navigate regulatory obstacles. They are also advocating for clearer, more enabling frameworks and participating in networks that help them stay informed and protected.

8. Collapse of public trust and democratic institutions

A recurring theme across contexts is the steady decline of public trust in institutions, including those tasked with delivering on sustainable development. In some countries, even actors within government have expressed concern about this erosion, reflecting a broader perception of democratic backsliding. This deterioration undermines both policy effectiveness and citizen engagement, as people become increasingly sceptical of the motives and capacity of both government and civil society.

In response, there is a strong call to sustain and institutionalise inclusive, multi-stakeholder mechanisms that go beyond one-off consultations. These long-term platforms can bring together government, civil society, private sector actors, academia, and local communities in ways that foster mutual trust and innovation. National dialogues are welcomed by civil society when they signal genuine interest in inclusive governance. Many stakeholders are ready to engage in such forums, recognising that their participation is critical to rebuilding public confidence and nurturing democratic cultures, particularly in younger or more fragile democracies.

Conclusions

The countries which have the most challenge are ones which have a complex environment characterised by operational constraints, policy misalignment, and civic repression. Even in countries

where the civic space remains relatively free and open there are headwinds to sustainable development such as ideological pushback from media outlets and political factions and loss of public trust in civil society organisations.

Participatory SDG structures, such as multi-stakeholder advisory councils and parliamentary groups, can mitigate potentially challenging trends. Collaboration, trust-building, and innovation are imperatives. Participants stressed the importance of maintaining a positive narrative around the benefits that sustainable development is delivering and the importance of a whole of society approach in making such development fair and equitable.