



U4 Guide 2020:1

Supporting civil society during the Covid-19 pandemic

The potentials of online collaborations for
social accountability

By Saul Mullard and Per Aarvik

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About U4

U4 is a team of anti-corruption advisers working to share research and evidence to help international development actors get sustainable results. The work involves dialogue, publications, online training, workshops, helpdesk, and innovation. U4 is a permanent centre at the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) in Norway. CMI is a non-profit, multi-disciplinary research institute with social scientists specialising in development studies.

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Keywords

Covid-19 - social accountability

Publication type

U4 Guide

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There are significant corruption risks during times of crisis. Civil society has an important role to play in ensuring funds to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic reach their destination. Donors and multilateral organisations should consider establishing digital accountability networks to support this effort. The current crisis presents challenges for civil society; however, there are also new opportunities for it to embrace digital civic engagement as an anti-corruption initiative.

Main points

- There are significant corruptions risk during times of crisis. Bottom-up accountability approaches are crucial for ensuring funds allocated for the pandemic reach their intended destination.
- It is tempting to view the current lockdowns and restriction of movement as a global paralysis. However, whilst challenging for civil society, the current situation may stimulate creativity and offer new opportunities for it as a watchdog.
- The present urge to participate, to share information and to organise assistance could be channelled into constructive support and alternative forms of civic engagement to combat corruption.
- Development practitioners can support civil society by drawing upon the many existing – but untapped – resources to mobilise digital civic engagement. By establishing digital accountability networks, there is potential to increase awareness of corruption risks, build new alliances and promote accountability initiatives.
- Online collaborations have the capability to contribute to anti-corruption initiatives. However, limitations and challenges faced by some countries include: poor technology infrastructures, lack of access to mobile devices or the skills to communicate, cyber security issues, misuse of data, and a reluctance to engage at a time when health is at risk.

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The current Covid-19 crisis poses several problems for development generally, not least in the health sector, and there are significant corruption risks during a pandemic. As the current pandemic takes hold around the globe, donors and multilateral organisations are planning large disbursements of funds to tackle the crisis. Yet there is concern that these funds are at risk of corruption that will seriously impact health outcomes. Amongst the host of accountability and anti-corruption measures available, the use of civil society organisations has become part of the mainstream practice of donors’ anti-corruption efforts. There are several ways in which civil society can be engaged in anti-corruption programmes that play to its perceived strength when acting as a watchdog.

Civil society has an important role to play in ensuring funds to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic reach their destination.

Civil society-led, bottom-up accountability (like any anti-corruption approach) is not a panacea. As with any intervention, it is important to consider the context, the capacity, the motivation of actors (civil society included) etc. However, civil society has had some success in playing crucial roles – from watchdog to informing citizens about their rights and entitlements – and improving service delivery and development outcomes. During the current pandemic, bottom-up accountability approaches are essential in ensuring funds allocated for pandemic responses reach their intended destination.

We understand civil society to broadly be the space between the public and private sectors, as stated in a 2019 UNODC report. Whilst such definitions can be found in numerous policy or practice documents, a closer look at aid financing to civil society is significantly biased in favour of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) rather than the civil society organisation (CSO). For example, an OECD report on aid spending to civil society fails to make a distinction between CSOs generally and NGOs (a specific type of CSO). Going as far to say that NGO ‘...can be used synonymously with the term civil society organisation (CSO).’

During the ongoing pandemic, civil society is facing several constraints on its ability to carry out its work, as a result of lockdown, distancing, and quarantine measures. Despite these challenges, bottom-up accountability approaches are crucial to ensuring funds for the pandemic reach their intended destination. NGOs, donors, and multilaterals can support such approaches by drawing on several examples of online civic engagement.

Six current challenges for civil society

There are wider risks related to the accountability of governments and private companies. In normal times, CSOs would be well placed to monitor and report on governments and private companies, as well as hold them accountable for their actions. The current crisis poses several challenges to the roles of civil society: monitoring, accountability, advocacy, and promoting citizens' participation.

1. Asymmetry of power between the executive and accountability mechanisms

In some contexts, the legitimacy of executive power may increase. It is the executive that is largely responsible for setting policies and an agenda for action to deal with the crisis. Executive rhetoric that emphasises that now is a time for action may resonate with the public. This could make it more difficult for both vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms to carry out their functioning and gain momentum.

2. Restriction of movement prevents activities that require meeting physically

This is particularly the case for civil society's social accountability role, as most social accountability tools require engaging local communities to come together to participate in initiatives. This is not possible when social distancing measures are in place. Community meetings, social audits, and group sessions – the mainstays of most social accountability initiatives – are difficult to achieve under strict distancing or quarantine measures. Similarly, demonstrations or protests are hindered by such measures.

3. Access to information

In some communities, lockdowns also prevent access to information if this access was previously available from work, an educational institution, a library, or an internet café. Thus, the ability to engage digitally is reduced to access via mobile phones.

4. Online services are costly in countries which impose 'social media' taxes.

As education, faith-based gatherings, and social interaction have moved online due to lockdowns, there is a strong pressure to waive such taxes during the Covid-19 crisis. This has been exemplified by the protest against the OTT tax in Uganda.

5. Gaining momentum for civic initiatives is difficult

During times of crisis it can be very difficult to gain momentum and participants for a cause, as media and public orientation are focused on the emergency. Methods for reaching out have also moved online, which may reduce the potential for broader engagement.

6. Reduced space for civil society

Many governments around the world are implementing distancing and quarantine measures, and civil society networks warn of the potential for curbing civic engagement and restricting fundamental rights. For example, Hungary, Philippines, and Bangladesh have introduced emergency legislation that is being reported as an excuse to restrict human rights and further reduce the space for civil society. Similarly, according to CIVICUS, a global alliance of CSOs, internet restrictions are in place in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh.

Five opportunities for civil society during the pandemic

As 'half' the global population is under some form of lockdown or restriction of movement, it is tempting to view the current situation as a global paralysis. But seen differently, the lockdowns may stimulate creativity and offer new opportunities for civil society.

It is tempting to view the current situation as a global paralysis; but the lockdowns may stimulate creativity and offer new opportunities for civil society.

1. Potential to increase legitimacy of civil society

In recent years, questions have been raised regarding the legitimacy, accountability, and relevance of CSOs. A 2017 report by the Center for Strategic & International Studies provides examples of some of the challenges facing civil society. The current crisis may offer opportunities for CSOs to respond to some of these criticisms through building broader participation by a network of online reporters and activists with strong links to the communities in which they live. This may counter the tendency of NGOs to be driven by donor demands and the need to secure funding.

2. Potential for widespread engagement

The current situation has released an urge to participate, demonstrated by the hundreds of Facebook groups or crowdsourced mapping projects sharing information or organising assistance. Some of this engagement could be channelled into constructive support and alternative forms of civic engagement to combat corruption, if the framework to do so is created and made known to the right audience.

3. Increase in information

As ‘whole’ societies begin to interact digitally, information is more likely to be available online, either through official web portals and social media or distributed via closed networks. Tech giants have joined forces to, for example, filter out misinformation and remove advertisements for fake protection gear. Such interventions from the platform providers are of some help, but do not remove the need for the specialised skills needed to harvest and properly verify and validate information. There are NGOs engaged in such projects, and many of them are organised under the Humanitarian2Humanitarian network. In a global crisis, giant corporations, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google, gear up to be present and active. These networks facilitate information sharing and monitoring options, but only to a certain extent.

4. Building of new alliances

The current situation provides opportunities to engage with other types of civil society organisations beyond NGOs, such as churches, Scouting groups, professional associations (eg nurses unions), and other membership-based organisations. In the Philippines Textbook Count case, local Scouting troops were engaged to check the quality and quantity of textbooks and helped ensure that the books reached their

intended destination. In that case the Scouts were willing to engage, as their action corresponded with the service ethos of the Scouting Association and was directed at an educational aim rather than an anti-corruption one.

This shows that membership groups may be more willing to support Covid-19 social accountability initiatives because they relate to a health emergency rather than ‘corruption’ – an issue which is often highly politicised in many contexts. These different forms of CSOs often have good communication structures and can engage different people in the monitoring and oversight of Covid-19 responses. Reaching out to these organisations for wider mobilisation can occur through existing local NGO partners that may have broader links with unions and membership organisations. Donors can also liaise with their own domestic unions which may have international links. For example, the Norwegian Nurses Organisation conducts capacity building programmes with nurses’ unions in Rwanda which are funded via a framework agreement with NORAD (the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation). Building new alliances and networks can help civil society organisations to break down silos and create new synergies between organisations, which can prove useful in emergencies such as the current pandemic.

Some success has also been achieved in reaching out to faith-based organisations, religious leaders, and customary authorities to mobilise action against corruption. See U4’s work on the potentials of customary authority. For example, Integrity Watch Afghanistan’s work with clerics has shown some potential for success, and the Global Anticorruption Blog makes a similar case for engaging religious leaders. This is particularly important when public opinion surveys show high degrees of public trust in religious leaders. Many religious leaders are turning to alternative methods of communicating with their congregations and could use these opportunities to help spread information relevant to accountability. For example, information about free testing or new health services.

5. Exploring platforms for digital civic engagement

Civic engagement and accountability have moved online. There are many resources that development practitioners can draw upon to mobilise digital participation, and engage civil society as watchdog.

There are several examples of how civic engagement and accountability have moved online, with many untapped resources to draw upon to mobilise digital participation.

These provide different ways in which development practitioners could engage and support the watchdog function of civil society.

Examples of digital civic participation

Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have seen an increase of 50% in messaging and a doubling of video calls in certain markets during the coronavirus crisis. Hundreds of social media groups have been created. Many of them monitor the local spread of the virus; others organise neighbourhood assistance. Most of them will probably communicate to their own group of supporters. But some platforms are dedicated to and have a history of crowdsourced monitoring and could be tapped into for accountability purposes.

As violence erupted in Kenya after the disputed results of the 2007 presidential elections, the Ushahidi (witness) mapping platform was created to document the ongoing violence. The crowdsourcing tool has since been deployed for collaborative mapping of needs during and after disasters, for documenting harassment and abuse, or for simply identifying issues in a local neighbourhood. More than a decade since its creation, the platform has given rise to a plethora of similar approaches which have proven practical for civil society reporting.

After the Covid-19 outbreak, more than 200 instances of crowdsourced maps on the Ushahidi platform have been launched. In the UK, 'Frontline PPE' provides information about availability of personal protective equipment (PPE). In Spain, 'Frena La Curva' publishes requests for help or offers to collect food or medicine.

1, 2

In Kenya, Sudan, and Brazil, the maps cover the spread of the virus, as well as the different assistance and services available. These are spontaneous deployments, initiated as an immediate response to the current crisis. More systematic use of the crowdsourcing platform also exists.

1. (Footnote added after first publishing) *Frena la curva* has spread to 16 countries in Europe and Latin America. An interview with the organisers published on the Ushahidi blog points to precise and transferable, practical reflections over what drives a successful civil society engagement. Using already established, trusted networks, designing the project with a simplicity for all participants to quickly get up to speed and to be open for changes in priority as the project moves forward, are three of the key messages.

2.

A customised setup of the Ushahidi platform, named Uchaguzi (election), has been deployed in many countries for crowdsourced monitoring of elections. The concept contains a full set of guidelines covering the process: from planning the event and training the participants, to security measures and what to look for during elections. The Uchaguzi methodology enables recognition of the monitoring abilities of the crowd, and how to verify that information and then convert it into a response.

When donors plan for interventions during the current crisis, civil society could in some cases be included to monitor whether the support reached its target. By providing guidelines and pre-defined setups for such deployments, the quality of such interventions could dramatically increase.

But even if the template for collecting inputs from the crowd exists, it does not always lead to the desired results. 'I Paid A Bribe' gained much attention when it launched. The idea was to visualise everyday corruption, and thereby encourage governments to prevent it or discourage public agents from taking bribes. Today, the project seems abandoned; its fate mirroring other initiatives based on the same concept. They didn't survive the question posed by Tiago Peixoto in his 2012 blog post 'I Paid a Bribe. So What?' Variants of 'Fix My Street' concepts have also had their time in the limelight. Some are still functioning, but most are not.

The OECD Open Government Data (OGD) philosophy encourages civil society reporting of corruption or mismanagement through their public websites. As governments are purchasing medical equipment or PPE on a large scale, openness around public tenders, and verification of business information on the bidders for those tenders, can be crucial to uncovering non-serious actors, preventing overpricing, and hindering the purchase of fake products by the public.

In Ukraine, tenders and bids are published on the open platform ProZorro, which is an e-procurement system 'created as a result of a partnership between business, government and the civil society.' The tenders and bids are closely monitored by civil society and interested parties, with their findings shared on the Dozorro website. The project facilitates a close monitoring of government purchases, and has become a model for open procurement.

An understanding of how civil society can be engaged in long-term anti-corruption and accountability initiatives, and how such tools should be designed, is now emerging. The combination of technology and crowdsourcing is another possible path. The GovLab case study (2017) of a Mexican initiative demonstrates how the full loop can be achieved: 'The public expects meaningful interactions that lead to measurable outcomes

and more effective policymaking and service delivery.’ The platform for citizen complaints is today integrated in [Mexican government services](#), and describes the steps in the process – from filing a complaint to resolving the issue. According to the 2019 [OECD report](#) which followed up on the Mexican integrity project, ‘Mexico has laid the foundations for a more co-ordinated approach to fighting corruption by creating a system that brings together key actors and gives a prominent role to civil society.’ But the committee that channels the inputs from civil society still ‘requires formal recognition as legal entity and regular funding.’

The UNICEF-supported platform [U-Report](#) uses a different approach to citizen reporting. The subscribers to the tool are asked to respond to SMS-surveys, which are then analysed and published online. This long-lasting project has more than 10 million subscribers in 66 countries. Normally, this platform is used to shed light on local challenges in the countries where it is established. Now, however, the platform is used for surveying youth’s perception of the Covid-19 pandemic in [Mexico](#), or to give advice from the pre-programmed [U-Report COVID-19](#) botthrough the most popular messaging platforms.

In 2014, the [Citizen Action Platform \(CAP\)](#), using the U-Report as its basis, was launched in [Uganda](#) by [Partnership for Transparency \(PTF\)](#) to monitor corruption, mismanagement, and maltreatment. By entering into a collaboration with U-Report, the CAP project could benefit from an established ‘crowd’ of reporters, and thereby join forces with a group already familiar with the reporting methodology. The project concluded after four years and, according to the final project report, resulted in increased awareness, and improved relationships between citizens, health workers, and local and central government authorities.

In [Zimbabwe](#), the local chapter of [Transparency International](#) uses social media and radio broadcasts to call for citizen reports on accountability issues related to the spread of the virus. People have reported on black market sales of food, politicisation of aid, unregulated increases in food prices, and police brutality.

Considerations for establishing digital accountability networks

The networks of information sharing and collaboration are already in place in many countries. Donors should consider creating awareness of the corruption risk, and tap

into these existing structures to engage civil society in monitoring funds allocated for the pandemic response.

The cases of digital civic participation are all based on some form of digital collaboration – from SMS-reporting to web-based monitoring and mapping. Participating in such activities will, in some countries, only be possible for the urban and connected part of the population. But deploying a combination of, for example, radio broadcasts and SMS responses could reach a far wider audience.

- Tech hubs are found in several countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Some of them are already deeply involved in local solutions for citizen collaboration and participation. However, during a lockdown, offices may be inaccessible, and staff may have less ability to work from home due to lack of equipment or connectivity reasons.
- The microsite platform Mahallah (community) has been released by one of the tech hubs in Kenya as a Covid-19 community response tool. Leveraging the local competence from such hubs may be a successful strategy to initiate participative accountability projects. In addition, local CSOs can be supported as partners in such projects by online engagement or via SMS-reporting for accountability. But, as a deadly virus threatens, or as food supplies become more urgent, the engagement for anti-corruption efforts can suffer.
- Radio stations are frequently engaged in projects where community awareness is important. Community and local radio programmes are broadcast in local languages, which helps to ensure the wider spread of information. For example, Farm Radio broadcasts in several countries, and is distributing information to local radio stations to share on how to tackle the spread of Covid-19.
- Coordination of grassroots efforts typically happens via low-bandwidth apps, such as WhatsApp or Telegram, which have options for sophisticated group structures.
- In Zimbabwe, the local chapter of Transparency International uses social media and radio broadcasts to call for citizen reports on accountability issues related to combatting the spread of the virus.
- Reaching out to local and national television channels and print media can be considered for spreading information more widely. In Nigeria, Nollywood movie stars and musicians are fronting campaigns to address misconceptions of the effects and handling of the infection.
- Telecom providers are normally very willing to be approached for support. Their ability to provide bandwidth, connectivity, or toll-free numbers can be of significant value.

Limitations of accountability using digital tools during the pandemic

- Lack of willingness to engage when health is at risk
- Not everyone has access to mobile devices, or the skills to communicate
- Poor mobile networks and comparatively expensive airtime in some parts of the world
- Cyber security of personal data (protection of citizens)
- Misuse of digital reporting
- Hard to reach places (lack of technology infrastructure)

Opportunities for accountability using digital tools during the pandemic

Available technology, paired with local creativity and the sense of urgency, is likely to trigger actions and projects with a great potential to solve challenges.

- As the whole world is affected, there is a global focus on mitigating the challenges. Good ideas can also travel fast.
- Available technology, paired with local creativity and the sense of urgency, is likely to trigger actions and projects with a great potential to solve challenges.
- Donors and NGOs should monitor events and possibly adapt good practices which may emerge.

How to support civil society anti-corruption and social accountability initiatives during the pandemic

In order to ensure that funds designated for Covid-19 responses reach their intended targets, and are protected from corruption risks, it is important that civil society is supported in its accountability and watchdog roles. Current distancing and quarantine measures in place in many parts of the world present both challenges and opportunities for civil society. Donors and multilateral organisations can help civil society in adapting to the new situation.

- Donors and multilateral organisations are in a position to have a dialogue with the tech giants to facilitate civil society monitoring of programmes, raise accountability and corruption issues, and promote citizens’ voices.
- Official data needs to be transparent.
 - Donors and multilaterals should urge governments to make official data open to public scrutiny. They should also consider existing standards such as the OECD Open Government Data programme.
 - Sharing information with local and national media (TV, print, radio, and online) regarding the aims and targets of aid spending will enable digital accountability initiatives to track and trace rollout of Covid-19 responses.
- Local CSOs may need guidelines, digital tools, training, and capacity building to:
 - engage in monitoring government support or actions during the pandemic
 - monitor private enterprises in their online behaviours related to the pandemic
 - support and train citizen journalists and other participants in monitoring and reporting.
- There is a multitude of small initiatives which will never gain momentum. Donors and multilateral organisations should endorse and coordinate some of these to improve the outcome of civil society engagements.
 - Fostering the building of networks, which include online initiatives and donors’ civil society partners, can help share information and learning about successful accountability initiatives.
- Engagement with non-NGO civil society organisations (through existing civil society partners, such as Scouting troops, sports clubs, religious organisations, community radio, and local media etc.) may increase the number of people reporting, and help to build wider alliances for accountability initiatives.
- Consideration should be given to low-threshold technologies, such as SMS-based reporting mechanisms, in places where the digital infrastructure is weak.
 - Forging networks with local and national media (TV, print, radio) can communicate regular updates on accountability initiatives, and public service information on the costs and availability of health services.

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