

Guidance on Forming National Partnerships on Citizen Data

2026



Collaborative on Citizen Data

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This work is a product of the Collaborative on Citizen Data and its development was co-led by the International Civil Society Centre (ICSC) and the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21).

About the Collaborative on Citizen Data

The United Nations Collaborative on Citizen Data is a global, multi-stakeholder initiative working to strengthen the production and use of citizen data. It brings together national statistical offices, civil society organisations, research institutions, human rights institutes, and regional and international partners to promote more inclusive, accountable, and effective data systems.

Launched at the 4th UN World Data Forum in 2023, the Collaborative responds to growing demand for greater coordination, trust, and innovation in how citizen data is produced and used. It builds on mandates from the United Nations Statistical Commission and provides a platform to share knowledge and experiences, foster collaboration across different communities, identify conceptual and methodological gaps and capacity needs, and inform the development of guidance.

For more information, visit the [website](#).

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Translations

If you wish to create a translation of this publication, please reach out to the Collaborative on Citizen Data, as we might be able to cooperate. If you create an unauthorized translation, please add the following disclaimer along with the citation above: “This translation was not created by the Collaborative on Citizen Data”.

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Abbreviations & Acronyms

BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
CCJ	Colombian Commission of Jurists
CD	Citizen Data
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DANE	Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics)
DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
DIHR	Danish Institute for Human Rights
DNT	Denotified and Nomadic Tribe
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HRBAD	Human Rights-Based Approach to Data
ICSC	International Civil Society Centre
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
KNBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
KSDS	Kenya Strategy for the Development of Statistics
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
NHRI	National Human Rights Institute
NSDS	National Strategy for the Development of Statistics
NSO	National Statistics Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PARIS21	Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SQAF	Statistical Quality Assurance Framework
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VNR	Voluntary National Report

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Executive summary

Governments, national statistical offices, civil society organisations and other stakeholders increasingly recognise that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling human rights commitments requires more inclusive and responsive data systems. While official statistics remain the foundation of national data systems, they do not always fully capture the realities, experiences and priorities of all population groups, particularly those that are underrepresented, marginalised or difficult to reach.

Citizen data can help address these gaps. Generated through initiatives that actively involve people and communities in the production and use of data, citizen data can provide locally grounded, timely and relevant insights that complement official statistics. There are many citizen data initiatives, whose main goal it is to raise awareness of an issue that the concerned citizens deem relevant. Such initiatives do not necessarily have the goal to have their data become part of official statistics. Nevertheless, across many countries, citizen data has already contributed to improved development monitoring, stronger accountability, increased visibility of underserved populations and more informed public decision-making. With this guidance, we aim to look at these initiatives, aiming to utilise their data for official purposes.

However, the value of citizen data cannot be fully realised through isolated initiatives alone. Collaboration is required between institutions that produce, use and govern data. National partnerships on citizen data provide a practical mechanism for such collaboration. They create opportunities for governments, national statistical offices, civil society organisations, national human rights institutions, academia and other stakeholders to jointly identify data needs, develop appropriate methods, strengthen quality assurance, build trust and increase the use of evidence in policy processes.

This document provides practical guidance for country-level actors seeking to establish, institutionalise and sustain national partnerships on citizen data. While focussing on the national level, the guidance also sheds some light on the role of international development actors as supporters and intermediaries of such processes. Drawing on international experience and country practice, it outlines enabling conditions, key steps, governance arrangements and entry points for collaboration between National Statistical Offices (NSOs), ministries, civil society organisations (CSOs), national human rights institutions (NHRIs), academia and others.

It recognises that there is no single model that suits every country and every context. Partnerships may range from informal collaboration and pilot initiatives to more formal structures such as technical working groups, relying on memoranda of understanding and institutionalised coordination mechanisms. Successful partnerships typically evolve over time, beginning with a concrete problem or data gap and expanding as trust, experience and demonstrated value grow.

The guidance highlights several key lessons:

- Start with a clearly defined policy question, reporting need or data gap: begin your partnership with practical problem-solving, before moving to institutional design.
- Bring together a manageable group of stakeholders with complementary roles and expertise.
- Establish clear but proportionate governance arrangements.
- Integrate quality assurance, ethics and meaningful participation throughout the data lifecycle.
- Focus on generating visible results that demonstrate value for all partners.
- Link citizen data initiatives to national priorities, planning processes and reporting mechanisms.
- Invest in long-term sustainability through institutionalisation, capacity strengthening and sustainable financing.

The guidance provides a step-by-step pathway for practitioners, covering the identification of entry points for collaboration, stakeholder engagement, legal and institutional considerations, governance arrangements, data production and validation, dissemination and policy uptake, and strategies for sustaining partnerships over time (for a brief summary of these key steps, see the checklist in Chapter 6). It also includes tailored recommendations for national statistical offices, government agencies, civil society actors, academia, national human rights institutions and development partners (see Chapter 5).

Ultimately, national partnerships on citizen data are not an end in themselves. Their purpose is to strengthen national data ecosystems so that they become more inclusive, trusted and responsive to the realities of the people they serve. By creating structured pathways for collaboration between official and non-official data actors, countries can make better use of diverse sources of evidence and strengthen their ability to deliver on national development priorities and the commitment to leave no one behind.

1 Objectives and Target Audience of the Guideline

This guideline offers practical guidance for countries seeking to establish, institutionalise and sustain national partnerships on citizen data. Drawing on international frameworks and lessons from country practice, it explains the enabling conditions, core steps, governance arrangements and practical entry points that support collaboration between relevant actors.

This guidance is primarily intended for National Statistical Offices (NSOs), line ministries and other national and local government agencies, civil society organisations (CSOs), national human rights institutions (NHRIs), academia, and other actors engaged in the production, use or stewardship of data. These stakeholder groups play complementary roles within national data ecosystems:

- NSOs contribute statistical expertise, quality assurance mechanisms, established methodologies and the mandate to coordinate and steward official statistics.
- Line ministries and other government authorities define policy priorities and can drive the uptake of citizen data into policy planning and service provision priorities. They might also be producers of official statistics within their resort.
- CSOs and community-based organisations contribute community access, local knowledge and evidence produced at the local level by citizens and communities.
- NHRIs help bring citizen data to governments' attention and contribute to ensuring data processes uphold human rights principles and support monitoring and accountability.
- Academia and research institutions contribute methodological expertise, analysis and capacity strengthening.
- International organisations and relevant global platforms (like the UN, PARIS21, etc.) can help provide funding, technical assistance, and enable the integration of citizen data and community evidence into global policy discussions.

Bringing these actors together through structured partnerships at the national and local levels can help improve the availability, quality, relevance and use of data for sustainable development and ensure that a wider range of perspectives are reflected in decision-making.

The guidance's overall aim is hence to help country actors move from ad-hoc engagement toward more structured, long-term partnerships that enhance the relevance, credibility and impact of official statistics—ensuring that data systems better support inclusive and sustainable development.

By outlining roles, governance structures, quality standards, and mechanisms for participation, the guideline helps countries unlock the value of citizen data for policymaking, improve the inclusiveness of national data ecosystems, and ensure that the perspectives of communities (especially those often under-represented in traditional data sources) are systematically integrated into evidence-based decision-making.

How can different stakeholders use this guideline:

While readers are strongly encouraged to engage with the report in its entirety, the following sections may serve as useful entry points for stakeholders seeking to understand the relevance of this work to their specific roles and interests. In addition, the checklist at the end of the document provides a practical overview of the key points and recommendations discussed throughout the report.

If you are...	...and you want to...	Recommended sections
National Statistical Office	Understand your role in the citizen data ecosystem	Section 1.3.1
National Statistical Office	Establish or strengthen partnerships with civil society	Chapters 2 and 3; Section 5.1
National Statistical Office	Assess and validate citizen data	Chapter 4; Section 5.1
National or local government authority	Understand your role in the citizen data ecosystem	Section 1.3.2
National or local government authority	Use citizen data in planning, SDG monitoring or reporting	Sections 3.1 and 4.3; Section 5.2
Civil society organisation or community-based organisation	Understand your role in the citizen data ecosystem	Section 1.3.3
Civil society organisation or community-based organisation	Engage government and NSOs around citizen data	Chapters 2 and 3; Section 5.6
National Human Rights Institution	Understand your role in the citizen data ecosystem	Section 1.3.4
National Human Rights Institution	Promote a rights-based approach to citizen data	Section 3.6; Section 5.4 (b)
Academic or research institution	Understand your role in the citizen data ecosystem	Section 1.3.5
Academic or research institution	Support partnerships through methods, validation and analysis	Sections 2.2 and 4.2

Development partner, donor or UN agency	Understand your role in the citizen data ecosystem	Sections 1.3.6
Development partner, donor or UN agency	Support or convene a national partnership process	Sections 2.2 and 3.5
Other stakeholders	Start a new partnership around a data gap or policy challenge	Chapter 3
Other stakeholders	Understand different partnership models, risks and enabling factors	Section 2.1, 2.3

Reading logic:

- Introduction of actors and their core role → **Section 1.4**
- How do partnerships work? → **Chapter 2**
- How do I establish a partnership? → **Chapter 3**
- How does collaboration work around data? → **Chapter 4**
- What should I do in my role? → **Chapter 5**
- Step-by-Step Checklist (relevant for all stakeholders) → **Chapter 6**

1.1 The Value of Citizen Data

Citizen data can be broadly understood as data originating from initiatives in which citizens are engaged at one or more stages of the data value chain, for example, in setting priorities, designing tools, collecting information, validating findings, interpreting results, sharing evidence or using it to influence decisions.¹ In this sense, citizen data is not defined only by who ‘owns’ a dataset, but also by whether people are meaningfully engaged² in the production and/or use of that data relating to their lives.

Citizen data can meaningfully complement official statistics. It can fill information gaps on the experiences of groups often underrepresented in traditional data collections, provide timely and locally grounded insights on a broad range of phenomena such as community health, environmental issues, social inequality, mental health and discrimination, local level climate change impacts and resilience, and more. Citizen data can enhance coverage, increase trust and accountability, and strengthen policy relevance when used alongside official data.³ Civil society

¹ Collaborative on Citizen Data (2025): Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data

² Meaningful engagement in the context of the Copenhagen Framework on citizen data means engagement that goes beyond perfunctory consultation and demonstrates (i) inclusive participation, (ii) transparency about purpose and constraints, (iii) shared influence over decisions, and (iv) visible feedback loops showing how input affected outcomes.

³ PARIS21 (2025) "Data driven policymaking? The politics, people and practices behind gender data use"

actors producing or engaged in citizen data initiatives are critical to address areas of “statistical silence” and deepen insights on gender inequalities. Collaboration between public institutions and non-state actors is therefore essential.

A powerful example of the relevance of Citizen Data comes from the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) ⁴:

Entry Point:

In Colombia, Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) has used citizen-generated and independently verified data to document killings of human rights defenders and social leaders, creating an alternative evidence base that complements and scrutinises official information.

Who was involved:

CCJ, human rights defenders and social leaders, civil society organisations, the Office of the Attorney General, and other public institutions involved in criminal investigations.

What they did:

CCJ maintained a public registry and systematically analysed the progress of criminal investigations. By comparing independently generated evidence with official information, CCJ was able to identify significant gaps between officially reported case-resolution rates and the reality of stalled or unresolved investigations.

What made it work:

This evidence helped create a more informed dialogue between civil society and public institutions. Through follow-up working groups with the Office of the Attorney General, civil society organisations were able to question official figures, highlight patterns of impunity and advocate for greater transparency in case-tracking systems.

Outcomes and lessons learned:

The process contributed to increased institutional scrutiny, improvements in information management and greater recognition of civil society as a legitimate data partner. The experience illustrates how independently generated data can reduce information gaps, strengthen accountability mechanisms, build trust through evidence-based dialogue and create incentives for institutions to improve their own practices.

Citizen data is in alignment with global commitments:

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁵ places the principle of Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) at the centre of global development. Similarly, core international human rights treaties require states to monitor implementation through periodic reporting. This brings particular attention to population groups that have been historically invisible or misrepresented in data

⁴ Collaborative on Citizen Data (2026): Tracking the killings of human rights defenders and social leaders in Colombia to push for institutional accountability

⁵ UNDESA (2015): The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

and whose rights are unevenly recognized and protected, including women and girls, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, children and youth, LGBTQI++, and ethnic minorities.

Meeting these commitments requires data systems that are inclusive, credible and capable of representing realities that may not be fully captured by conventional surveys or administrative records. For example, with its 234 unique indicators, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) present a significant challenge for resource-constrained National Statistics Offices and governments. Citizen data can help address these gaps by providing additional, locally grounded and often more timely information, particularly on populations and issues that are underrepresented in official data. When used alongside official statistics, such data can improve the evidence base available to policymakers, enabling a more targeted, responsive and equitable planning of policies and public services.

1.2 What is a National Partnership on Citizen Data and why is it relevant?

A national partnership on citizen data is a *formal or informal* collaboration that connects public institutions and non-state actors to jointly generate, validate, disseminate, advocate for or use citizen data. Its purpose is to provide a structured space for dialogue, build trust between official and non-official data actors, develop shared methods and safeguards, and support the generation and use of citizen data as a complement to official statistics and other public evidence systems. These partnerships typically operate through joint technical working groups, data quality assessments, shared methodological guidance and coordinated reporting.

Through these mechanisms, citizen data can be more systematically recognised, integrated into official statistics and national monitoring systems, or used as a complementary input to national development processes.

Ultimately, such partnerships have the potential to strengthen national data ecosystems by making them more inclusive, responsive and better able to capture the experiences of populations that are often underrepresented in traditional data sources. This can only work if involved country actors collectively own their data work, developing a shared sense of responsibility.

Partnerships can also create value beyond the immediate use of citizen data. Through regular interaction and collaboration, they enable mutual learning, knowledge exchange and capacity strengthening among all partners. Even where citizen data are not ultimately integrated into official statistics, the process can improve understanding of different data approaches, strengthen technical capacities and foster longer-term relationships across the national data ecosystem.

1.3 The Citizen Data Ecosystem

National partnerships on citizen data bring together a diverse range of actors who each contribute different mandates, expertise, resources and perspectives. Understanding these roles is important for identifying potential partners, clarifying responsibilities and building effective collaboration arrangements. The following sections describe the key actors that commonly form part of a national citizen data ecosystem and the value each can bring to a citizen data partnership.

1.3.1 The Evolving Role of National Statistics Offices

Official statistics remain the backbone of national data systems and are guided by the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, which emphasise professional independence, scientific rigour, impartiality and transparency. At the same time, no national statistical system can realistically meet every demand for more frequent, more granular, more local and more participatory evidence through official data collection alone. Well-structured partnerships with civil society and other non-state data actors therefore offer an opportunity to improve the relevance and completeness of national evidence systems while upholding the integrity and credibility of official statistics.

These partnerships offer new opportunities for both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. National Statistics Offices can enrich their understanding of measured phenomena (e.g. hard-to-reach populations, complexity of poverty and exclusion measurement), work with partners to co-create quality assurance standards suitable to the unique contributions and constraints of citizen data, and learn how to integrate diverse forms of evidence, such as CSO data or qualitative information, alongside official statistics to scale up its use. NSOs can also benefit from stronger connections to communities whose experiences may be underrepresented in conventional data sources. Through partnerships with civil society and community-based organisations, they can gain insights into local realities, emerging issues and population groups that are difficult to reach through traditional statistical approaches, thereby building trust with these actors and contributing to more inclusive and representative evidence systems. At the same time, civil society actors can deepen their understanding of statistical standards and data collection methods, thereby improving the quality, credibility and usability of their own data.

As National Statistics Offices engage with the national statistical system incl. other producers of official statistics in various areas of statistical production and dissemination, partnerships with the wider data ecosystem through civil society also create opportunities to strengthen trust, expand meaningful participation and improve how data are used and communicated. Through more regular interaction, joint work and transparency in methods and decision-making, these partnerships can help build confidence in data processes, foster closer engagement between institutions and data users, improve the accountability of public institutions, and empower citizens and communities.

1.3.2 From data to policy with national and local government authorities

National and local government authorities are key actors in the citizen data ecosystem because they can translate evidence into policies, services, and actions that advance rights and improve people's lives. Citizen data provides governments with insights into community realities, priorities, and needs that may not be captured by official data sources, enabling more responsive and inclusive decision-making.

Local authorities, as the level of government closest to communities, are well positioned to engage communities and rightsholders in identifying priorities, assessing local conditions, and monitoring service delivery. Line ministries and other local authorities can use citizen data to inform policy development, resource allocation, and national monitoring frameworks, while creating enabling conditions for participatory data practices across sectors. Together, they can use citizen data to strengthen accountability, build trust, and ensure that public action better reflects people's needs and rights.

1.3.3 The agency and voices of civil society, communities and rightsholders

CSOs, communities and organisations representing them,, and rights holders are at the heart of citizen data because they are often best placed to identify community priorities and document realities that are overlooked by official data systems. Their close connections to communities enable them to generate timely, locally grounded evidence on lived experiences, service access, exclusion, discrimination, and human rights challenges, ensuring that data reflects the perspectives of those most affected by policy decisions.

Their participation in data production strengthens both data quality and human rights outcomes. By involving people in decisions about what data is collected and how it is used, citizen data can increase ownership, accountability, and the visibility of marginalised groups. Beyond generating data, civil society actors help mobilize participation, build trust, and translate evidence into advocacy and action, ensuring that data contributes to more inclusive policies, better services, and the realisation of rights.

1.3.4 The bridging role of National Human Rights Institutions

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), as independent state bodies, occupy a unique position in the citizen data ecosystem at the intersection of rights holders, civil society, national statistical systems, and governments. This enables them to collect and use data through surveys, consultations, and complaints mechanisms to advise public authorities; support community-led data initiatives; guide a human rights-based approach to data with NSOs; and identify human rights gaps and patterns of exclusion. Many NHRIs maintain collaboration with NSOs to strengthen official data by supporting human rights indicators, improving data disaggregation, and better representing groups often overlooked in traditional data systems. These collaborations can be leveraged to help bridging, legitimizing and validating citizen data, and

connecting communities and civil society with NSOs and governments to strengthen monitoring, reporting, advocacy, and decision-making.

1.3.5 The methodological and community engagement expertise from Academia

Academia contributes methodological expertise, analytical capacity, and experience from citizen science to help ensure that citizen data initiatives are robust, credible, and participatory.

Building on established citizen science approaches that actively involve communities in research and knowledge production, researchers can work with communities, civil society, and public institutions to co-design methodologies, strengthen data quality, validate findings, and support inclusive evidence generation. Academia also plays an important bridging role by translating citizen data into policy-relevant insights, helping ensure that community-generated evidence informs research, decision-making, and public action.

1.3.6 International Organisations and other actors

Beyond the core actors, a wider range of stakeholders can help strengthen the citizen data ecosystem by increasing the visibility, use, impact, and sustainability of community-generated evidence. Media organisations can play an important role in communicating findings to broader audiences, raising awareness of overlooked issues, and supporting public accountability by bringing citizen data into public debate. Parliaments and elected representatives can use citizen data to better understand constituents' experiences, inform legislative processes, strengthen oversight of government action, and advocate for policy reforms based on community evidence.

International organisations and development partners, including the UN, regional organizations, and donors, can play an important enabling role by providing funding, technical assistance, capacity development, and platforms for knowledge exchange. They can also help promote common standards, support the integration of citizen data into national and international monitoring frameworks, and elevate community-generated evidence in global policy discussions. The general public contributes as both a user and beneficiary of citizen data, helping to increase civic engagement, strengthen demand for transparency and accountability, and build broader support for evidence-informed decision-making.

Together, these actors help create an enabling environment in which citizen data can influence public debate, improve policies and services, and contribute to the realisation of human rights and sustainable development.

2 Understanding National Partnerships on Citizen Data

Partnerships are needed because the data challenges they address cannot be effectively solved by a single actor. NSOs have the mandate, standards and convening power needed to produce and disseminate official statistics, but they often face constraints in timeliness, geographic or local coverage, disaggregation, and proximity to communities. CSOs, rightsholders and community-based organisations may have closer access to lived realities and more flexible methods. However, without structured collaboration with, for example, a national statistical institution, and alignment with official standards, evidence produced by CSO faces challenges in unfolding its full capacity and risks remaining fragmented, poorly documented, not widely trusted, or disconnected from decision-making cycles beyond the local and communal level. At the same time, NHRIs, and universities play an enabling role in citizen data, supporting its generation, validation, analysis, and uptake by decision-makers. A data partnership helps bridge those gaps by aligning policy questions, methods, quality expectations, ethics, interpretation and pathways into use.

In practical terms, partnerships can help address recurring challenges that individual actors struggle to tackle on their own. Experience from multi-stakeholder initiatives shows that they can reduce blind spots in national data systems, strengthen trust between state and non-state actors, reduce duplication of effort, improve consistency in documentation and quality, and increase policy uptake by involving intended users early in the process. Partnerships also create a more credible pathway for citizen data to contribute to formal or semi-formal monitoring and accountability processes. Partnerships ensure that underrepresented communities have a meaningful role in data collection, analysis, and use. Partnerships with National Statistical Offices, including awareness training of enumerators, for example on disability awareness, ensure that data are collected correctly and critical data are not missed.

By contrast, within a functioning partnership, the same evidence can move through a structured process: from a jointly identified problem to fit-for-purpose design, shared documentation and safeguards, dialogue on quality, joint interpretation, and a clearer pathway into planning, reporting or accountability processes.^{6 7}

2.1 Types of partnerships

In practice, national partnerships on citizen data can take different forms depending on context, level of institutional maturity, and the specific objectives they are designed to achieve.

⁶ GIZ / DIHR / ICSC (2021): Lessons Learned Report: Advancing Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships

⁷ Collaborative on Citizen Data (2025): Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data

Experience across countries suggests that partnerships rarely emerge fully formed. Rather, they tend to evolve iteratively over time, from informal collaboration toward more structured arrangements as trust, clarity of roles, and evidence of value increase.

It is therefore useful to think of partnership types as a *spectrum and process*, ranging from informal collaboration to formalised institutional mechanisms. Different models may be appropriate at different stages, and countries are generally encouraged to begin with the lightest practical structure that is still sufficient to produce a meaningful result.

2.1.1 Informal collaboration

This includes working arrangements that operate outside of official institutional structures or formalised written protocols. These can take many forms, including coalitions, ad-hoc technical working groups, peer-learning networks, multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms, pilot collaborations and communities of practice. While these arrangements differ in structure and purpose, they provide opportunities for stakeholders to build relationships, test approaches and generate evidence before deciding whether more formal arrangements are needed.

In many contexts, informal collaboration is the most effective starting point, particularly where:

- actors are still exploring common interests
- trust is still being established
- methods and approaches are being tested
- flexibility and rapid iteration are needed

Even without formal agreements, informal collaboration benefits from basic structure and individual partner roles. Experience shows that even light arrangements can significantly improve effectiveness, such as named focal points, a shared work plan, and a regular meeting rhythm. Also, the involvement of high-level staff at the beginning of a collaboration has proven to provide additional impetus to get the joint work going. Apart from the top management of the CSO, often it is the M&E officers or “data persons” who champion the engagement with the NSOs. Their unique skills facilitate dialogue with NSO statisticians, who can share the same language and pursue the collaboration at the technical level.

Communities of practice are one example of informal collaboration. Other examples include: pilot collaborations around a specific data gap or liaising with national umbrella organisations, such as organisations of persons with disabilities, informal technical working groups (e.g. on data quality), or periodic multi-stakeholder dialogues convened around national reporting processes such as SDG monitoring.

For instance, informal global and regional exchanges linked to the (formal) *UN Collaborative on Citizen Data* aim actors to:

- share tools and templates
- align around emerging standards
- build capacity before formal national partnerships are established

In practice, informal collaboration plays a critical role in building the foundations of partnership – including trust, shared language, and initial evidence of value – before more formal arrangements are introduced.

2.1.2 Formal collaboration

Refers to structured arrangements that define shared goals, roles, and procedures. This includes e.g. Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), technical working committees or data-sharing arrangements that are organised through Terms of Reference (ToRs), or other documented structures. Such arrangements become particularly important when:

- collaboration needs to be sustained over time
- roles and responsibilities require clarity
- (third party) data are expected to feed into official or policy processes
- there are any legal, statutory or other institutional requirements for a formal setup (see also chapter 3.5)
- issues such as confidentiality, ethics, and accountability need to be explicitly managed

In practice, formal arrangements help reduce ambiguity in collaboration. They clarify roles, responsibilities and procedures, making it easier for partners to understand who does what, when and how. Formal agreements also signal institutional commitment to the partners (and externals), demonstrating that the collaboration is officially supported by the participating organisations rather than relying solely on individual relationships or champions. In addition, they provide a more predictable basis for communication, review and decision-making. Thereby, they can help to further strengthen continuity, institutional memory and sustainability.

Malawi provides a useful example of how formal cooperation can help move citizen data collaboration from ad hoc engagement toward a more predictable working relationship.

Who was involved

The National Statistical Office and a civil society coalition (Leave No One Behind Partnership Malawi).

What they did

The partners used a Memorandum of Understanding to clarify roles, communication channels and joint responsibilities in relation to citizen data. The agreement supported collaboration on the development of national guidance for the use of citizen data and created a clearer pathway for applying citizen data in national SDG monitoring.

What made it work

Formalisation served here as a trust-building instrument. By setting out expectations in writing, the MoU can reduce uncertainty for both sides: the NSO gains a clearer understanding of the data, methods and organisations involved, while civil society actors gain a more predictable route for engagement with the official statistical system.

Outcomes and lessons learned

This helped to avoid one-off consultations and instead supported a more continuous relationship, allowing partners to agree on joint rules around data quality, documentation, policy relevance and SDG reporting. In addition, it also helped to integrate citizen data in the national statistical systems strategic plan (NSSSP) 2024-2029 as a resource mobilisation tool and provide a systematic integration into the national data sets.

Ecuador provides another example for a successful formal collaboration⁸:

Entry point

In Ecuador, civil society organisations had long collected data on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ communities, including discrimination, violence, mental health and access to services. However, much of this evidence remained fragmented and was rarely used in public decision-making.

Who was involved

Fundación Datalat and other civil society organisations, LGBTIQ+ communities, the Ministry of Women and Human Rights, and other government institutions.

What they did

To address the data gap, Fundación Datalat launched the CuirData initiative, which mapped existing data sources, generated new citizen-led datasets, and created offline spaces for dialogue among different actors in the data ecosystem. As evidence accumulated, government institutions became increasingly engaged. In 2024, Datalat signed a MoU with the Ministry of Women and Human Rights (renewed in 2026) to strengthen the production and use of inclusive data. The collaboration led to technical workshops, discussions on integrating sexual orientation and gender identity variables into administrative records, and closer cooperation between civil society and government actors.

What made it work

The creation of dialogue spaces, the accumulation of evidence over time, and the gradual engagement of government institutions helped build trust and support more formal collaboration. The MoU provided a structured mechanism for sustaining cooperation and advancing discussions on inclusive data practices.

These examples highlight that formalisation is less about legal complexity and more about creating shared expectations, solving technical challenges and enabling cross-institutional memory and working structures. Formal cooperation does not need to begin with a complex institutional architecture. A proportionate MoU can provide enough structure to clarify roles, sustain communication and create a credible basis for joint work between an NSO and civil society. Thereby, it helps partners agree on who convenes meetings and contributes technical inputs, how draft tools or guidance will be reviewed, and how civil society evidence may be

⁸ Collaborative on Citizen Data (2026): From Citizen Data to National Reform: Advancing Inclusive LGBTIQ+ Statistics in Ecuador

discussed in relation to national monitoring priorities. This can be particularly important where civil society actors are already collecting relevant data but lack a recognised channel through which that evidence can be considered by official institutions.

2.1.3 Moving along the spectrum

Countries rarely need to choose a single partnership model from the onset. Instead, partnerships often evolve iteratively over time. The different dimensions of a partnership, such as purpose, governance, documentation, etc., might even be at different stages within the same partnership.

The chart below illustrates examples of partnership evolution in data collaborations:

Dimension	Stage 1 — Exploratory	Stage 2 — Piloting	Stage 3 — Formalised	Stage 4 — Institutionalised
Purpose & mandate	General interest in working together; no agreed problem statement. Contact is personal rather than institutional.	One concrete data gap, policy question or reporting need agreed in writing. Scope deliberately limited to a single use case.	Shared purpose stated in an MoU or ToR. Scope covers a recurring workstream rather than a one-off pilot.	Purpose referenced in official work plans, the NSDS, national development plan or statistical law. Mandate survives changes of personnel and government.
Governance & roles	Ad hoc contact; no named focal points (but informal leadership of one or more individuals). Meetings convened on demand.	Named focal points and alternates on each side. Agreed meeting rhythm; simple notes and follow-up practice.	Signed MoU/ToR; documented roles; agreed or rotating chair. Decision-making and dispute-resolution rules written down.	Standing technical committee with written terms, hosted by the NSO (or co-hosted with other partners). Alternates for every role; public note-trail maintained.

Dimension	Stage 1 — Exploratory	Stage 2 — Piloting	Stage 3 — Formalised	Stage 4 — Institutionalised
Quality & documentation	No shared understanding of quality expectations. Citizen data methods largely undocumented.	Minimum checklist agreed and tested on at least one real dataset. One-page methods notes produced by data producers.	Citizen data quality criteria formally annexed to the national SQAf. Tiered minimum / advanced checklists in routine use.	Criteria jointly reviewed and revised on a set cycle. Validated datasets hosted on the official NSO platform.
Capacity & trust	Trust low or untested; limited mutual understanding of constraints. Little insight into each other's methods or mandates.	Two-way capacity exchange begun (e.g. NSO quality training for CSOs; CSO input on outreach and communication).	Structured training-of-trainers scheduled. Participation enablers budgeted: translation, transport, childcare, accessibility.	Capacity strengthening is a recurring line in the statistical work programme. Feedback loops to communities are standard practice.
Financing	In-kind time only; no budget attached.	Single workshop or short project grant, usually from a development partner.	Small dedicated budget line plus partner in-kind contributions. Coordination and administration costs explicitly identified.	Diversified financing: domestic budget line, pooled or co-financing models. Resourcing anchored in the NSDS.

Dimension	Stage 1 — Exploratory	Stage 2 — Piloting	Stage 3 — Formalised	Stage 4 — Institutionalised
Policy uptake & use	No identified decision moment or named policy user.	One policy user engaged; a decision window identified (budget cycle, VNR, sector review, census).	At least one citizen data product cited in a plan, monitoring note or service action. Joint interpretation sessions held with ministries and communities.	Citizen data routinely considered in planning, budgeting and SDG reporting cycles. Timely feedback to data producers is systematic.

How to use the matrix

- Complete it jointly, not separately. The value lies in the discussion where partners disagree about which cell they occupy.
- Expect an uneven profile. A partnership may be at Stage 3 on governance but Stage 1 on financing. Prioritise the two lowest dimensions rather than trying to advance everything at once.
- Revisit annually and at any change of focal point, and record the result in the partnership's decision log.

In practice, this progression allows stakeholders to “learn by doing”, testing collaboration on a manageable scale and at the pace acceptable to all partners before committing to more permanent arrangements.

This goes hand in hand with a key lesson emerging from many collaboration experiences, namely that partnerships should not be over-designed at the beginning. They should be built around a concrete problem and allowed to evolve based on demonstrated value. Yet, the initial collaboration benefits strongly from having clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the partners, in line with their individual capabilities and interests.

For example, a small pilot supported by an informal working group, e.g. focused on a specific data gap or policy need, can serve as a practical entry point in which partners work on specific deliverables suiting their strengths and available capacities. If the pilot generates useful results, partners can then formalise collaboration through an MoU, technical committee, or other institutional mechanism.

Examples:

Kenya provides a great example of how partnerships can move along the spectrum from informal to formal⁹¹⁰:

Entry point

CSOs persistently advocated with the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) for using citizen data as an alternative source to fill gaps in official statistics. As a result, KNBS opened up to the idea of expanding the national data ecosystem, working with civil society and taking over the role of a data steward themselves.

Who was involved

- Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS)
- Civil society organisations producing gender-related data
- Civil society umbrella organisations
- Development partners supporting citizen data initiatives

What they did

KNBS first sought to better understand the citizen data landscape. Rather than beginning with formal agreements, it distributed a survey through civil society networks to identify organisations collecting gender-related data. Using this "snowball" approach, KNBS mapped relevant stakeholders and invited them to a joint workshop. They found out that a larger number of CSOs were producing gender data, which was crucial because there was a lack of official data for specific gender-related monitoring indicators.

The workshop focused on understanding what citizen data already existed, how it was collected, and whether it could help address national data gaps. This collaboration led to the joint development of citizen data quality criteria, which were later incorporated as an annex to Kenya's Statistical Quality Assurance Framework (KeSQAF). As the collaboration matured, KNBS established a dedicated portal for citizen-generated data, created a Technical Working Committee on Citizen Data, and later signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the SDG Kenya Forum.

What made it work

The partnership evolved incrementally rather than trying to establish a complex structure from the outset. Stakeholders began with a clearly defined data gap, focused on practical problem-solving, and allowed governance arrangements to emerge gradually as trust and experience developed. The process combined technical dialogue, iterative quality assurance work, and visible outputs such as the citizen data portal and quality assessment framework.

Outcomes and lessons learned

Kenya illustrates how a partnership can move step-by-step from exploratory engagement to institutionalised collaboration. What began as a mapping exercise and workshop series gradually evolved into formal quality standards, dedicated working structures and longer-term cooperation mechanisms between the NSO and civil society actors.

⁹ Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2022): Kenya Statistical Quality Assurance Framework (KeSQAF)

¹⁰ Paris21 (2020): Reusing Citizen-Generated Data for Official Reporting: A quality framework for national statistical office-civil society organisation engagement

Cote d'Ivoire also provides useful insights in this context:

Entry point

Interest in citizen data emerged during preparations for the country's Voluntary National Review (VNR), when the National Statistical Office reviewed gaps in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) reporting.

Who was involved

- National Statistical Office of Côte d'Ivoire
- Civil society organisations
- Academic institutions
- Development partners

What they did

The National Statistical Office began by reviewing available SDG data and identifying areas where information was limited. The assessment showed particularly large gaps under the "Planet" pillar, including environmental and climate-related indicators.

Rather than launching a large-scale partnership immediately, the NSO undertook desk research to identify organisations already working in these areas. Civil society organisations and academic institutions with relevant expertise were then invited to participate in a workshop exploring the potential contribution of citizen-generated data.

At the same time, the NSO sought to create a longer-term basis for collaboration by including citizen data within the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics, thereby creating opportunities for future funding and engagement.

What made it work

The process began with a specific reporting need rather than a broad ambition to collaborate. By narrowing the focus to a clearly defined data gap, the NSO was able to identify relevant partners and create a practical basis for dialogue.

The decision to connect the initiative to the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics also helped position citizen data within a longer-term institutional framework.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The Côte d'Ivoire experience highlights the importance of starting with a well-defined policy or reporting challenge. It also demonstrates how strategic planning processes can create opportunities to move from exploratory engagement towards more sustained forms of collaboration.

2.2 Roles of partners and the value of intermediary institutions

In any partnership, some roles are played by the core actors themselves, and others are performed by intermediary institutions. In the context of this guidance on data partnerships,

core actors typically include the NSO, relevant line ministries, CSOs or community-based data producers.

Around this core, intermediary actors often perform bridging functions that make the partnership more workable, inclusive and resilient. While these roles may appear technical, they involve practical tasks that help partners understand one another, stay engaged, and use evidence more effectively. Intermediary roles may be fulfilled by CSO umbrella bodies (if not part of the core team of the partnership already), NHRIs, universities, think tanks, or trusted external conveners. In lower-capacity settings, one organisation may initially play several of these roles at once.

The table below illustrates typical roles within a national data partnership including the intermediaries, the functions they perform, and examples of early practical tasks. The roles presented are an illustrative framework developed for this guidance, drawing on country experiences from citizen data partnerships and broader literature on multi-stakeholder collaboration.¹¹

Role	What it does	Typical institutions	Example of an early practical task
Matchmaker	Connects data producers, users and validators who might not otherwise work together.	CSO umbrella body, NSO partnership focal point, trusted convener	Brings together one ministry, a group of relevant CSOs and the NSO around a specific data gap.
Knowledge Translator	Helps translate community priorities into research questions (early in the process), or policy recommendations (after analysing data). Translates official standards into practical guidance.	University, NHRI, thematic institute	Turns a local concern into one or two measurable research questions / recommendations / indicators linked to a planning process.
Convener	Creates and sustains a safe and trusted space for dialogue, troubleshooting and decision-making.	NSO, UN Resident Coordinator, global partner institution, CSO umbrella body, NHRI	Set meeting rhythm, agenda, minutes and follow-up responsibilities.
Quality broker	Helps partners document methods, metadata and	University methods unit, NSO methods team, data lab	Review one pilot dataset against a

¹¹ See for example:

- Wageningen University and Research: Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Guide and Tools
- Partnership Brokers Association: Resources

	minimum checks so data can be fairly assessed and reused.		short, agreed checklist.
Rights and ethics guardian	Ensures participation, non-discrimination, privacy, transparency and accountability are actively protected.	NHRI, safeguarding focal point (to be appointed by partners), legal partner	Review consent language, grievance pathways and inclusion measures before fieldwork starts.

Intermediary institutions are important not because they replace core actors, but because they provide continuity, translation, neutral facilitation and institutional memory across diverse partners. Experience shows that these functions are critical for maintaining momentum through regular convening, knowledge management and dispute resolution, while also reducing the risk for dependence on individual champions.

In some other cases, for example in the context of global-national collaborations, intermediaries might also take on a role as provider (or broker) of financial and technical support for a national data partnership. This can be essential to kick off the work of a new partnership in the first place, and to sustain it for a certain amount of time until it matured enough to sustain itself. For example, the International Civil Society Centre serves as a global level hub and broker of both financial and technical support for several national citizen data coalitions. It supports them by brokering funding with external donors, and enables a knowledge exchange between the country coalitions, making them benefit from their mutual progress and learnings.

In essence, next to being matchmakers, knowledge translators, neutral conveners, quality brokers or ethics guardians, intermediaries can even take the role of a catalyzer, playing a key role in the early establishment phase of a partnership.

Kenya provides useful insights on the role of national level intermediaries:¹²

Entry point While civil society organisations and grassroots networks were documenting violations against human rights defenders at the community level, the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), an independent state institution, was preparing its report <i>The Right to Defend Rights</i>, which assessed the enabling environment for human rights defenders to operate safely in Kenya. Who was involved KNCHR, the Social Justice Centres Working Group, local human rights defenders, and grassroots organisations documenting violations at the community level. What they did Through a partnership with the Social Justice Centres Working Group and local human rights
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¹² DIHR (2026): Holding the line: Human rights in a changing world

defenders, KNCHR leveraged its mandate to serve as an intermediary between community-generated evidence and national human rights monitoring processes. By verifying, analysing, and incorporating grassroots data, KNCHR transformed fragmented accounts of threats, intimidation, killings, and enforced disappearances into evidence that informed national reporting, advocacy efforts, and policy recommendations.

What made it work

KNCHR's intermediary role helped bridge the gap between community-level documentation and national human rights monitoring processes. At the same time, collaboration with KNCHR strengthened the Social Justice Centres Working Group's documentation capacity, enabling more secure, systematic, and consistent recording of violations and facilitating the use of this evidence in national monitoring and advocacy efforts.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The partnership demonstrated the mutual value of citizen-generated data. Grassroots organisations gained greater national visibility for their evidence, while KNCHR gained access to otherwise unavailable information from affected communities. The collaboration strengthened pathways for accountability, illustrating how partnerships between national institutions and grassroots actors can enhance the reach, quality, and impact of human rights monitoring.

Bangladesh illustrates the value of intermediary actors in making a national citizen data partnership workable:

Who was involved

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), BRAC representing a national civil society coalition, the International Civil Society Centre, the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, and the United Nations Statistics Division.

What they did

A partnering agreement was signed between the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), BRAC, representing a national civil society coalition, and the International Civil Society Centre, with the aim of overseeing the development of a national citizen data toolkit and delivering targeted training and capacity-strengthening activities to support the integration of citizen data into the statistical system.

The approach helped create a joint space where national CSOs can learn what documentation, metadata, quality checks and safeguards are expected by official actors, while BBS and government partners gained insights on the types of evidence already being produced outside the official system. Further, they gained a deeper understanding of the ways in which citizen data is collected, what makes it valuable, and what its limitations are.

What made it work

The International Civil Society Centre and the UN Resident Coordinator's Office served as important intermediaries in this context, leveraging their global background to support national actors in overcoming institutional distance and uncertainty. Both the United Nations Statistics Division and the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, though not officially part of the signed agreement, also played an important role by leveraging their long-standing relations

with government and in particular BBS, which was crucial for getting the collaboration started.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The partnership demonstrated how intermediary actors can help create trust, facilitate dialogue and strengthen mutual understanding between official and non-official data actors. It also highlighted that citizen data partnerships are not only about integrating new data sources, but also about creating opportunities for mutual learning and capacity strengthening across the national data ecosystem.

Lastly, **Colombia** provides useful insights on the role of intermediaries¹³:

Entry point

As part of its *Data in Action* strategy, the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) sought to strengthen the capacity of communities to generate, analyse and use their own data.

Who was involved

The National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), community organisations, youth networks, Afro-Colombian organisations, universities and local leaders.

What they did

DANE implemented its Autonomous Citizen Data Workshops under the Data in Action strategy. Through a series of workshops, participants learned to identify local challenges, design data collection tools, analyse findings and translate evidence into community action. DANE provided training materials, technical support and methodological guidance, while communities defined their own priorities and questions.

What made it work

The approach combined DANE's statistical and methodological expertise with community ownership of the process. By acting as a convener, facilitator and capacity builder, DANE created a trusted space for collaboration between communities and public institutions.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The initiative strengthened trust and collaboration between public institutions and data producers and reinforced the ability of communities to engage in evidence-based decision-making. The experience illustrates how a National Statistical Office can play multiple intermediary roles within a partnership, serving simultaneously as a producer of official statistics, a convener, a capacity builder and a bridge between communities and national data systems.

2.3 Common risks and enabling factors

Every partnership will face context-specific opportunities and risks. It is therefore useful to consider risks and enabling factors together, rather than as separate checklists. The aim is not to

¹³ Collaborative on Citizen Data (2026): *Data in the Hands of the Community: How Autonomous Workshops are Transforming the Use of Citizen Data in Colombia – From Everyday Experience to Collective Action*

eliminate all risks before collaboration starts, but to design a partnership architecture that makes them visible, manageable and reviewable over time.

Risk management list:

Risk	Early warning signal	Mitigation	Who owns it	When reviewed
Loss of momentum when funding ends, staff or leadership change, or the pilot closes	Meetings slip or are cancelled. One person is chasing all follow-ups. No output was delivered in the last quarter.	Name alternates with every role. Form a dedicated core team to keep things operational when the capacity of others is limited Keep a written decision log and meeting notes. Discuss sustainability and resourcing at inception, not at closure. Always schedule the next deliverable before the current one closes.	Convener with the NSO focal point	Quarterly, and immediately on any change of focal point
Power imbalances between official and non-official actors	Agendas are set unilaterally. Smaller CSOs silent in meetings. CSO inputs acknowledged but not reflected in decisions.	Rotate the chair; invite agenda items from all partners. Budget participation enablers: transport, translation, childcare, accessibility. Use an umbrella body or intermediary as broker to lower transaction costs for smaller organizations.	Convener and rights & ethics guardian	Annually, via the Partnership Health Check

Risk	Early warning signal	Mitigation	Who owns it	When reviewed
Low or uneven trust	Data requests met with delay. Validation experienced as audit rather than learning. Concerns raised bilaterally rather than in the group.	Frame validation as joint learning: co-develop criteria and test them on real datasets. Publish methods and the rationale for decisions. Open with a short status-quo note surfacing each partner's goals, limits and concerns.	NSO methods team and CSO coalition lead	Semi-annual qualitative pulse-check
Lack of clarity on what each actor can expect from the others	Tasks duplicated or dropped. The same points were renegotiated repeatedly. Partners describe the purpose differently.	Agree a one-page role map by function at inception. Use a proportionate MoU/ToR covering scope, roles, review points and communication rules. Put operational detail in annexes so updates do not reopen the agreement.	Convener	At each stage transition into the maturity matrix
Weak visibility of methods or metadata	Datasets submitted without methods notes. Reviewers cannot reconstruct sampling or coverage. The same documentation questions recur.	Apply a tiered minimum / advanced quality checklist. Publish an NSO validation cue-sheet stating exactly what documentation is needed. Have a quality broker review documentation before formal submission.	Quality broker (university methods unit or NSO methods team)	Each data submission cycle

Risk	Early warning signal	Mitigation	Who owns it	When reviewed
Over-reliance on individual champions	One name appears against most actions. Institutional knowledge sits in personal inboxes. Progress stalls during leave.	Name alternates for every role. Maintain a shared repository of notes, templates and decisions. Give the committee written terms so the mandate sits with the institution, not the individual.	Convener and each partner institution	Annually, and on any staff change
Frustration when results are slow or not recognized by decision-makers	Partners question the value of attending. Outputs produced but never referenced. No feedback returned to data producers.	Scope an early, visible deliverable: a jointly interpreted brief, an agreed checklist, or a contribution to a planning document. Co-design the decision moment and output format with the policy user from the outset. Secure an NSO commitment to timely feedback on submitted data.	Policy user (line ministry) and convener	Quarterly, against the light M&E indicators

Many of these risks arise when partners have different expectations about how the collaboration will operate. It is therefore important to establish a shared understanding of the practical arrangements that will guide the partnership. These include who is responsible for key decisions, how disagreements will be resolved, what level of documentation is expected, how external communication will be handled, and how evidence will be reviewed and fed into decision-making processes. When these arrangements remain unclear or are applied inconsistently, misunderstandings and mistrust can quickly emerge.

At the same time, both the wider partnership literature¹⁴, and the experiences of citizen data practitioners show that several enabling factors can significantly increase the likelihood of successful collaboration. These deserve at least as much attention as the risks and should be considered from the outset:

- **Start with a concrete problem:**
Focus on a specific data gap, policy process or reporting need, rather than a broad ambition to “collaborate more.”
- **Co-create the partnership from the start:**
Define a shared purpose, a realistic scope and one or two outputs that matter to all partners.
- **Ensure policy-grounding:**
Many resource-constrained NSOs may perceive the engagement with CSOs on data as an additional burden. Finding an entry for the partnership in the existing NSDS, national development plan or other official process will strengthen the incentives and legitimacy.
- **Seek for mutual benefits:**
Explore interest and possible pathways of mutual capacity building, which can be beneficiary for both sides: for example, while CSOs can most likely be interested in data quality assurance training from the NSO, they can as well offer a training to the NSO on effective communication or provide in-depth analysis of measured population/phenomena. The touchpoints of collaboration can be multiple.
- **Agree on lightweight but clear working rules:**
Establish focal points for specific outputs, meeting rhythm, note-taking practices, review procedures and decision-making responsibilities (e.g. establish rotating chair roles).
- **Use simple, fit-for-purpose quality and ethics checklists:**
Ensure that citizen data producers can realistically meet and document, since the classic statistical Quality Assurance Frameworks are not necessarily transferable 1:1 in the citizen data context.
- **Make participation meaningful:**
Budget for translation, accessibility, transport, childcare or other measures that allow diverse actors to contribute.
- **Invest in quick, visible results:**
For example this could be, a jointly interpreted brief, an agreed quality checklist or a

¹⁴ See for example:

- GIZ / DIHR / ICSC (2021): Lessons Learned Report: Advancing Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships
- Collaborative on Citizen Data (2025): Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data
- UNDESA (2017): Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data
- Australian Public Service Commission (2021): Getting stakeholder engagement right

contribution to a planning process. Experience shows that early outputs help build confidence and demonstrate value for further buy-in.

- **Resourcing and sustainability planning:**
Start with a small budget including basic communication activities like newsletters. Discuss financial sustainability as the process solidifies. Identify realistic sources of support (also for admin and coordination), including in-kind contributions, government resources, partner commitments or future fundraising opportunities. Avoid creating a partnership that depends entirely on short-term project funding.
- **Use shared frameworks where relevant:**
Such as the Copenhagen Framework¹⁵, the Cape Town Global Action Plan¹⁶, the human rights-based approach to data (HRBAD)¹⁷, or national quality references to create a common language and stronger mandate for collaboration.
- **Document and revisit lessons regularly:**
Conduct an annual review against the UNDESA/UNDP engagement criteria¹⁸. This allows the partnership to adapt over time, rather than losing momentum when conditions change.

¹⁵ Collaborative on Citizen Data (2025): Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data

¹⁶ UNDESA (2017): Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data

¹⁷ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018): A Human Rights-Based Approach to Data: Leaving No One Behind in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

¹⁸ UNDESA / UNDP (2021). What is a Good Practice: A framework to analyse the Quality of Stakeholder Engagement in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda

3 Key steps for establishing a data partnership

The previous chapter provided an overview of types of partnerships, roles, risks and enabling factors. In practice, however, the key question for data practitioners is not limited to ‘what partnership models exist?’. More importantly, prospective partners must ask themselves, ‘what is a relevant common entry point for our specific setting, and what are suitable next steps?’. This chapter aims to lead the reader through these considerations, step by step.

Before the technical collaboration begins, stakeholders may benefit from reviewing and agreeing on baseline aspects like:

- what is a commonly perceived problem / need / data or knowledge gap?
- what are common interests around that issue?
- how can our common interest translate to a concrete collaborative purpose and goal?
- who are additionally required partners to achieve this goal?

Finding a (jointly agreed) answer to these initial questions can be challenging, even for a small group of core actors. However, to ease the pressure of finding the ‘perfect partnership model’ for a specific situation, it should be emphasised that in many cases, partnerships are *iterative* and not prescriptive. This means they might evolve over time, starting as informal and rather loosely organised pilots before they develop more formal and statutory structures.¹⁹

Starting small:

In many contexts, it is advisable to begin with a small, problem-oriented pilot collaboration that demonstrates value and creates potential for scaling. A useful ‘minimum viable citizen data partnership’ may consist just of a few core actors: for example, the NSO and a CSO platform or coalition already generating relevant data. A basic configuration is often sufficient to test a specific use case and generate learning that can inform more sustained or formalised collaboration. Yet, clarity, transparency and defined roles matter because they mitigate institutional risk and align expectations across stakeholders.

Scaling up:

As the collaboration matures (or there are legal / institutional requirements for it), the partnership can be further formalised, including through memoranda of understanding, technical working committees, data-sharing agreements, etc.

In the next sub-chapter, we will first explore different possible use cases for initiating a partnership. We will then provide an overview of relevant practical steps to guide readers in nurturing and developing their collaborations. These steps range from identifying opportunities

¹⁹ GIZ / DIHR / ICSC (2021): Lessons Learned Report: Advancing Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships

for joint action and potential partners to considering the external legal and institutional setting. Finally, we will look at establishing formal working structures and implementation agreements.

3.1 Defining and revisiting the purpose of a partnership

Partnerships on citizen data can emerge for many different reasons. In some cases, they are initiated to address a specific data gap or reporting requirement. In others, the main motivation may be to strengthen relationships between actors, improve data quality, build capacity, promote accountability, or explore opportunities for future collaboration.

Importantly, partnership purpose is rarely fixed from the outset. While an individual or a small core group of actors may initially convene a partnership around a particular need or opportunity, the collective purpose often evolves as additional partners join the process and contribute their own priorities, capacities and perspectives. For example, a collaboration that begins with the objective of filling a specific data gap may later expand to include mutual capacity strengthening, quality assurance discussions, or even institutional reforms that support the longer-term use of citizen data.

The purpose of a partnership should therefore be periodically revisited and refined rather than defined once at the beginning and left unchanged. Regular discussions about the added value of the collaboration can help ensure that all partners continue to see a clear reason to engage and invest their time and resources.

Common Partnership Purposes:

While many partnerships combine several objectives, experience suggests that most citizen data partnerships tend to focus on one or more of the following purposes:

Partnership purpose	Typical objective
Mutual capacity strengthening and knowledge exchange	Share expertise, approaches and experiences between actors in the citizen data ecosystem.
Closing a specific data gap	Generate or access evidence that is currently missing, insufficient or difficult to obtain through existing systems.
Quality assurance and validation	Improve the credibility, documentation, comparability or usability of citizen data.
Integration into official statistics	Create pathways through which citizen data can contribute to official processes and decision-making.
Accountability, participation and dialogue	Strengthen transparency, representation and dialogue between communities, civil society and public institutions.

Different partnership purposes may require different levels of formality, stakeholder involvement and technical complexity. For example, a knowledge-sharing partnership may operate effectively through informal exchanges and communities of practice, whereas a partnership aiming to integrate citizen data into official statistics may require stronger governance arrangements, quality assurance mechanisms and formal agreements.

The steps described in the following chapters should therefore not be understood as a rigid sequence. Rather, partners are encouraged to treat them as a menu of considerations and adapt them according to the purpose, maturity and context of their collaboration.

3.2 Leveraging momentum and windows of opportunity

Citizen data partnerships are more likely to take root when they align with existing national processes and political moments. These windows of opportunity can generate the momentum needed to initiate collaboration. The OECD guide on “Exploring New Frontiers in Citizen Participation in the Policy Cycle”²⁰ advises considering time as a key factor in the policy lifecycle. At the same time, CSOs may consider that the work of NSOs often happens independently from the policy cycle, with the core statistical production, coordination, administrative management, often appearing opaque and misaligned with the policy content.

Strategic entry points include the revision of a National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) or of national statistical laws, the preparation of a Voluntary National Review (VNR), sector reviews, census cycles, major survey redesigns, or planning and budgeting processes where data gaps become more visible and the demand for complementary evidence increases.

For example, the VNR process creates a combination of technical need, political visibility and stakeholder engagement, which can make governments more open to integrating complementary data sources. Similarly, NSDS design or revisions can provide a formal opportunity to discuss the role of non-traditional sources, participation mechanisms and future quality arrangements within a nationally owned strategic framework.²¹

To translate these opportunities into action, a simple six-steps pathway can be used:

- (1) identify a policy question /data / knowledge gap and link it to a relevant process
- (2) map a small core group of actors (see also next sub-chapter)
- (3) agree a fit-for-purpose method and minimum documentation package
- (4) test, collect and review the evidence
- (5) jointly interpret the findings
- (6) feed the results into the relevant planning or reporting process.

²⁰ OECD (2025): Exploring New Frontiers in Citizen Participation in the Policy Cycle

²¹ Paris21: NSDS - Strategic planning for development data

This approach demonstrates that partnerships do not need to begin with broad or complex reforms. They can begin by solving one well-defined problem and build momentum based on demonstrated value.

3.3 Identifying relevant stakeholders for the collaboration

Effective citizen data partnerships emerge through iterative stakeholder mapping. Rather than trying to include every possible actor from the start, countries are advised to begin with a manageable core group before progressively widening the circle as the collaboration matures. A core group typically includes the NSO, a line ministry linked to priority sectors, and a small number of CSOs already producing relevant evidence. There is no ideal number of stakeholders. What matters is clarity of purpose, perceived added value for all partners to jointly work on it, and individual roles and contributions.

A practical way to structure stakeholder mapping is to focus on functions rather than institutions:

- who generates policy demand
- who contributes thematic expertise and/or relevant data
- who has relationships with communities
- who has access to policymakers
- who can support methods, quality and analysis
- who can safeguard rights and ethics
- who can help communicate findings
- who can mobilise resources or scale-up

A focus on functions rather than institutions also helps prevent the partnership from becoming administratively overwhelming before it has produced any shared value.

To make this more actionable, partners aiming to set up a national citizen data partnership can use the following step-by-step approach that is based in parts on insights from the broader partnership literature²², and on the experiences of partners of the Collaborative on Citizen Data:

(1) Jointly define the need/purpose

Start with a clear data gap, policy question or reporting need. This helps determine which stakeholders are relevant.

²² See for example:

- Australian Public Service Commission (2021): Getting stakeholder engagement right
- UNDP (2021): Engaging Stakeholders in Effective Collaborative Action
- GIZ / DIHR / ICSC (2021): Lessons Learned Report: Advancing Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships

(2) Map stakeholders by function

Identify actors based on what they contribute, not only who they are (see bullet point list above).

Bringing the policy units from line ministries into the collaboration could be a strategic move in the early stages, as they may have more initiative to close information gaps.

(3) Prioritise a core group

Select a small number of initial stakeholders who:

- have a clear role in the partnership
- are directly linked to the problem or policy question
- are willing and able to engage / make concrete inputs
- represent key perspectives (government, civil society, possibly academia/intermediary)

(4) Assess readiness and capacity

For each potential partner, consider: Do they have relevant experience or data? Do they have time and resources to participate? Do they require capacity support to engage effectively?

(5) Clarify roles early

Agree who is responsible for coordination and facilitation, data collection or provision, quality review or validation, communication and policy engagement

(6) Expand gradually

Once the initial collaboration produces results, additional stakeholders can be invited, for example other ministries, additional CSOs or community groups, media or private sector actors, funders or development partners.

(7) Remain realistic but proactive

Naturally, the nature of the partnership can accelerate or slow down for an undefined time. Accept that not all constraints of your partner are known to you, and remain open to various collaboration opportunities that can come your way. For NSOs in Low-Middle Income Countries the funding schemes are often dependent on external support, which can be inconsistent over time.

At the very beginning of a collaboration, it is advisable to avoid including actors with unclear roles or contributions, very large groups that are difficult to coordinate, and stakeholders that are included only for representation without a defined function.

In many contexts, umbrella bodies or networks play a critical coordinating function. They can reduce transaction costs for NSOs, harmonise approaches and provide a single-entry point for engagement, while enabling smaller organisations to contribute in a structured and manageable way.

Colombia provides a useful example in terms of the strategic identification and involvement of stakeholders²³:

Entry point

As part of its Data in Action strategy, Colombia's National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) used a deliberate stakeholder engagement approach to pilot its Autonomous Citizen Data Workshops.

Who was involved

Through an open call, organisations representing Afro-Colombian organisations, youth networks, universities, community associations and local development actors were selected to participate.

What they did

DANE identified and engaged a diverse group of actors based on the functions they could contribute to the emerging citizen data ecosystem. These stakeholders brought complementary strengths to the process, including community outreach, thematic expertise, local knowledge, technical capacity and advocacy experience.

Communities helped define priorities and generate data, academic institutions supported learning and analysis, and DANE provided coordination, training and methodological guidance.

What made it work

The workshops showed the value of working across sectors and focusing on the roles different actors can play. By bringing together actors around locally identified challenges and shared objectives, the initiative helped establish a broader and more inclusive citizen data ecosystem.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The initiative helped establish a broader and more inclusive citizen data ecosystem while laying the foundations for future collaboration.

3.4 Assessing any legal, institutional or policy considerations

Legal and institutional contexts shape what kinds of collaboration are feasible. In some countries, national statistics laws restrict the use of non-NSO data for official purposes, while others are simply silent on collaboration with civil society. In certain contexts, public agencies may also be required to engage only with other government agencies or formally registered entities. Understanding these conditions early helps partners design arrangements that are both realistic and institutionally legitimate.

At the same time, legal reform is not a prerequisite for starting collaboration. Partnerships can begin by working within existing mechanisms, such as technical working groups, umbrella

²³ Collaborative on Citizen Data (2026): Data in the Hands of the Community: How Autonomous Workshops are Transforming the Use of Citizen Data in Colombia – From Everyday Experience to Collective Action

bodies, advisory arrangements or pilot projects, to test approaches and demonstrate value. Some line ministries might use CSO data in their informal processes, and the NSO may attempt to support these existing channels of collaboration with capacity building on quality assurance. Evidence from such pilots can provide practical evidence to inform later updates to laws, regulations or statistical strategies.

Bangladesh provides useful insights in terms of assessing the legal and institutional environment:

Entry point

In Bangladesh, there is a traditional legal distinction between:

- *official statistics* produced or validated through NSO procedures and recognised for government planning; and
- *non-official data* (e.g. CSO, academic and other third-party data), which may influence discussions but has no systematic route into national reporting or planning processes.

Who was involved

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), BRAC and the International Civil Society Centre.

What they did

Following the signing of a technical collaboration MoU between the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), BRAC and the International Civil Society Centre, a joint process was agreed leading to the development of a national toolkit on citizen data assessment and integration. The goal of the toolkit was to assess how citizen data can be systematically assessed and, where appropriate, used within official planning, SDG monitoring and the National Statistical System, without compromising the integrity of official statistics while operating within the existing legal framework.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The toolkit and its follow-up process see BBS increasingly in the role of a data steward and trust broker, rather than acting as the primary data producer.

Concrete suggestions have been made that are currently being reviewed by BBS and government, aiming to establish a more permanent infrastructure for the use and integration of citizen data into the national statistical system. These include:

- Setting up a joint technical committee headed by BBS
- Developing a simplified data-sharing and partnership framework between BBS and citizen data-producing CSOs
- Creating a permanent multi-stakeholder citizen data platform for regular dialogue and collaboration between BBS, CSOs and other stakeholders
- Building a national registry/inventory of citizen-generated data initiatives
- Developing an interoperability architecture linking different data sources and types
- Considering citizen-data provisions within the ongoing Statistics Act amendment
- Anchoring the initiative in the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) with sustainable domestic funding

Looking at the above example, it becomes clear that a useful practical distinction is between what is *legally required* for data to be formally designated as official statistics, and what is

already possible from an *institutional perspective*, speaking e.g. of setting up structures for collaboration, validation, documentation, dissemination and policy use. In many contexts, there is significant scope to work with citizen data in a complementary way without requiring immediate legal changes.

Relevant institutional factors to be assessed include data ownership, liability, confidentiality, political sensitivity, communication protocols and funding responsibilities. Agreeing clear and proportionate arrangements for governance, ethics and accountability can significantly reduce perceived risk and make collaboration more feasible from the outset.

As practical guidance in this context, it is recommended to consider the following points when assessing legal and institutional barriers and opportunities to a data collaboration:

- Check what the national statistics law allows regarding non-official data
- Clarify whether formal agreements (e.g. MoUs) are required
- Identify any restrictions on data sharing or publication
- Agree early on roles related to data ownership, consent and liability

3.5 Establishing a functioning working structure

Effective partnerships require more than shared intent. They depend on a functioning working structure that enables coordination, decision-making and continuity. Without effective communication channels and agreed ways of working, even well-intentioned collaborations can lose momentum or fail to deliver results.

The aim is not to create complex systems from the outset, but to establish a structure that is clear enough to guide collaboration and flexible enough to evolve as the partnership matures. The recommendations below are based on experiences from country-level citizen data partnerships and overarching recommendations drawn from the multi-stakeholder collaboration literature.²⁴

India provides a useful example in terms of applying a functioning working structure²⁵:

Entry point

In Rajasthan, India, a citizen data initiative led by Wada Na Todo Abhiyan worked with Denotified and Nomadic Tribe (DNT) communities to document development challenges that were largely invisible in official statistics.

²⁴ See for example:

- Australian Public Service Commission (2021): Getting stakeholder engagement right
- Partnership Brokers Association: Resources
- Wageningen University and Research: Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Guide and Tools

²⁵ Collaborative on Citizen Data (2026): 'Citizen Data Isn't Just Numbers': Building Youth Changemakers through Evidence in Denotified and Nomadic Tribe Communities

Who was involved Young people from DNT communities, local leaders, support organisations, and a central coordination team from WNTA and its partners.
What they did Rather than relying on external researchers, the initiative established a simple but effective working structure built around community volunteers, local leaders and support organisations. Young people from DNT communities helped identify priorities, design survey questions, collect data and validate findings, while a central coordination team provided training, technical support and quality assurance throughout the process.
What made it work The collaboration included clear roles and responsibilities, regular communication, capacity-building activities and community consultation workshops, creating a shared process for data collection and decision-making.
Outcomes and lessons learned Findings were then used to develop household-level action plans and support access to social protection schemes for underserved families. The experience illustrates how even a relatively simple working structure, combining local ownership, defined responsibilities and ongoing coordination, can help partnerships move from data collection to tangible results while building trust, skills and long-term engagement among participants.

3.5.1 Setting up a basic working structure (early stage)

At the early stages, a simple and practical working structure is often sufficient. The following elements are particularly important:

- Nurture positive relations and dialogue, communicate consistently and transparently and listen to understand motivations, capacities and limitations:**

Use short bilateral conversations or a brief "status-quo note" to help partners understand each other's goals, strengths, limits and concerns before work begins.
- Set basic coordination arrangements:**

Identify focal points (and alternates), agree on a meeting rhythm, and establish simple notetaking and follow-up practices.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities:**

Ensure each partner understands their contribution (e.g. data production, facilitation, quality review, policy engagement).
- Keep the structure light but stable:**

Use short written notes (e.g. meeting summaries, role descriptions, decisions) to ensure continuity beyond individuals.

- **Use facilitation and peer exchange where possible:**
Light facilitation, shared templates and structured exchange can help move from general interest to concrete collaboration.²⁶

3.5.2 Formalising roles and responsibilities (evolved stage)

As the partnership evolves, or in case the legal/institutional background demands for it, more formal arrangements may be required. This is particularly the case when the collaboration becomes more regular, involves sensitive data, or feeds into official or policy processes.

Formalisation does not need to be complex. Practical options include Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), Terms of Reference (ToRs), or short cooperation agreements.

When formalising roles, consider:

- **Keep agreements proportionate and practical:**
Define scope, roles, responsibilities, confidentiality, ethics and communication procedures without overcomplicating the partnership document.
- **Avoid over-legalisation at early stages:**
Overly complex agreements can slow progress and discourage participation. Formalisation should support collaboration, not replace it.
- **Use annexes for operational details:**
Work plans, contact lists or quality checklists can be included as annexes to allow updates without revising the main agreement.

3.5.3 Agreeing on an implementation and accountability framework (when required)

In addition to roles and coordination, partnerships benefit from a shared understanding of how decisions will be made, and how work will be carried out – especially in case external funding is available and the partners need to adhere to reporting duties. This can be referred to as an implementation and accountability framework.

This framework does not need to be technical or comprehensive. It should provide practical guidance on how the partnership operates in relation to a specific pilot or workstream and should be guided by human rights principles

Key elements include:

- **Agree on decision-making and oversight arrangements:**
Clarify who is responsible for decisions, how disagreements will be addressed, and how progress and responsibilities will be monitored. Where external funding is involved, partners should also agree on reporting requirements and accountability mechanisms.

²⁶ GIZ / DIHR / ICSC (2021): Lessons Learned Report: Advancing Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships

- **Clarify the use:**
Define the intended use of the citizen data to guide methodological choices.
- **Agree on methods and documentation:**
Select fit-for-purpose data collection and documentation approaches.
- **Define quality and review processes:**
Establish how data will be checked, documented and validated to support learning and reuse, drawing where relevant from national or international frameworks and adapting such guidelines to reflect the unique contributions and constraints of citizen data.
- **Arrange a joint setup for data use:**
Agree how findings will be jointly interpreted and translated into action, e.g. through interpretation sessions with ministries, local authorities and communities.
- **Ensure meaningful participation:**
Apply human rights principles such as participation, inclusion, non-discrimination, accessibility, transparency and privacy throughout the process (as detailed in 3.2)
- **Address ethics and data governance explicitly:**
Clarify consent, data protection, communication and accountability arrangements.
- **Use tiered or simplified tools that are accessible where possible:**
For example, minimum and advanced checklists to ensure participation remains feasible for smaller actors.

3.6 Embedding your data partnership in a rights-based approach

Successful citizen data partnerships require more than the right mix of informal and formal collaboration mechanisms. They should also be built on human rights principles that ensure the meaningful participation of rightsholders and communities, promote inclusion, protect individuals from harm, and strengthen accountability. Establishing these foundations from the outset helps create trust among partners, improves the quality and legitimacy of the data produced, and increases the likelihood that the evidence generated will contribute to positive change.

Reviewing the earlier described steps, the following considerations should be made to ensure your data partnership is applying a rights-based approach²⁷:

- **Defining a shared purpose:** your partnership purpose should not only represent an added value to a small core group of actors involved. It must be grounded in communities' and rightsholders' priorities and linked to relevant national processes

²⁷ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018): A Human Rights-Based Approach to Data: Leaving No One Behind in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

- **This means: identify and engage community stakeholders and rights holders early** as equal partners in the process and include them in responsibility and decision-making arrangements.
- **Apply the principles of participation, inclusion, and non-discrimination** throughout the partnership, e.g.:
 - Map affected and excluded groups.
 - Remove barriers to participation.
 - Create safe and accessible engagement spaces.
 - Adapt methods to community needs.
 - Monitor inclusion and address gaps throughout the process.
- **Agree on ethical safeguards**, including informed consent, privacy, and data protection.
- **Co-design data collection and documentation methods** with communities to ensure relevance and trust.
- **Establish data quality and validation processes** that are transparent and participatory.
- **Ensure accessibility and transparency** about how data will be used and shared.
- **Create feedback mechanisms** so communities and rightsholders can review findings and influence decisions.
- **Plan for action and accountability**, including how evidence will inform reporting, policy, advocacy, or service improvements.

A human rights-based data partnership is ultimately about more than producing better data. By bringing together communities, CSOs, public institutions, NHRIs, academia, and other stakeholders around shared principles and objectives, these partnerships can strengthen trust, amplify underrepresented voices, and ensure that evidence contributes to tangible improvements in people's lives. When designed inclusively and ethically, citizen data partnerships can help bridge gaps between communities and decision-makers, turning data into a tool for participation, accountability, and the realization of human rights.

3.7 Sustaining the momentum, throughout the process and long-term

Sustaining citizen data partnerships requires moving deliberately beyond short-term pilots and project-based collaboration toward structured integration within national systems. Pilot initiatives are essential for testing methodologies, refining validation criteria and building trust between stakeholders. However, without institutional anchoring, such initiatives risk remaining fragmented, donor-driven or peripheral to official decision-making. Long-term impact depends on embedding citizen data within established policy and planning frameworks so that collaboration becomes part of routine statistical practice rather than an exception. PARIS21's guidelines emphasise that sustained reform requires alignment with national statistical planning processes and clearly defined institutional responsibilities²⁸.

²⁸ PARIS21 (2017, updated 2023): Guidelines for National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS)

Policy relevance is central to sustainability, and achieving it requires intentional engagement with line ministries from the outset. In the experience of the data collaboration in Kenya (referenced multiple times throughout this paper), citizen data gained traction when ministries were involved early in defining priority indicators and reviewing methodologies, ensuring that the data responded directly to sectoral reporting and service delivery needs. When ministries co-define the problem, citizen data are more likely to inform budgeting cycles, sector reviews and national reporting obligations²⁹. Similarly, policy uptake can increase when citizen data initiatives are explicitly linked to government decision-making processes rather than positioned as parallel advocacy tools. In practice, this means aligning citizen data outputs with sector priorities, demonstrating how they fill identified gaps, and presenting findings in formats that support operational and policy decisions.

Embedding citizen data partnerships within formal national processes further strengthens durability. This may include integrating collaboration mechanisms into NSDS implementation plans, sectoral data strategies, Open Government Action Plans, or climate reporting frameworks such as Biennial Transparency Reports. Formal inclusion clarifies roles, legitimises collaboration and creates continuity across political and institutional cycles. When citizen data are recognised within national planning instruments and statistical frameworks, they are more likely to receive institutional support, dedicated resources and long-term ownership, ensuring that partnerships evolve from experimental pilots into stable components of the national data ecosystem.

Other key steps to foster the sustainability of your partnership include:

- **Measure what matters (light M&E)**
Track inclusiveness (who's at the table and who benefits), trust (qualitative pulse-checks), policy uptake (where CD informs plans, budgets, or services), and local ownership (community feedback and co-lead roles). Use the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) / UNDP engagement framework³⁰ to assess inclusion/participation/accountability and adapt partnership tips from the "Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships"³¹ report.
- **Embed governance resilience**
Create simple standing committees or technical groups with written terms, alternates for each role, and a public note-trail. This cushions political change or staff turnover and keeps institutional memory. (This mirrors structures used in the "Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships" project and in MoUs like Bangladesh's technical committee.)
- **Plan financing beyond pilots**
Use a mixed funding approach: member contributions such as in-kind time and venues, government resources e.g. small budget lines, and targeted fundraising. Anchor this in

²⁹ idem

³⁰ UNDESA / UNDP (2021). What is a Good Practice: A framework to analyse the Quality of Stakeholder Engagement in implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda

³¹ GIZ / DIHR / ICSC (2021): Lessons Learned Report: Advancing Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships

the Cape Town Global Action Plan’s³² emphasis on multi-stakeholder partnerships and resource mobilisation. Also consider co-financing approaches, as promoted for example by the World Bank³³ or the Global Partnership for Education³⁴, where (initial) external funds are combined with using a partner country’s institutions, human resources, procedures and tools as the foundation for ongoing collaboration. These mixed financing approaches are key in times of shrinking international aid, fostering country-level ownership, responsibility, accountability and coordination. An example could be to embed ongoing citizen data work into the National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) and thereby also tap into domestic resources.

- **Invest in capacity, communication, accessibility, and accountability**
Schedule short training-of-trainers on methods, metadata, privacy/ethics, and “data-to-policy” translation. Use open templates from the UN Collaborative where relevant. Share updates openly and log decisions for transparency. (OECD data-governance/ethics resources give practical principles to frame this.)³⁵ As an example: In Costa Rica, partners of the Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships process planned a multi-stakeholder SDG monitoring website to host official and non-official data, increasing accountability and reuse. Ensure data and data tools / platforms are accessible for persons with disabilities.
- **Document and spread learning nationally**
Create a national repository of good practices such as case studies, tools and templates. Countries in the Inclusive SDG Data Partnerships process used simple templates and, in Costa Rica, planned an open platform to visualise official and nonofficial SDG data—showing how documentation can flow into public access.
- **Long-term Financing**
While initial funding may come from development partners, long-term sustainability depends on diversified funding strategies, including integration into government budgets, pooled funding mechanisms, or co-financing models. Supporting CSOs’ statistical capacity development should be seen as an investment in the national data ecosystem rather than a standalone activity.
- **Sustained channels for citizen engagement**
Long-term engagement structures should facilitate ongoing citizen participation, not only during data collection or data exchange exercises. This may include permanent consultation platforms, periodic data dialogues, or community feedback mechanisms that ensure citizens remain active contributors to data-driven governance.

³² UNDESA (2017): Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data

³³ World Bank (2026): Building together: Why co-financing matters more than ever

³⁴ Global Partnership for Education: Alignment and Aid Effectiveness

³⁵ OECD (2021): *Good Practice Principles for Data Ethics in the Public Sector*

4 Citizen Data Co-Production and Reuse

Partnerships are often tested most visibly during the data production or reuse stages of the data value chain. In practice, the most likely achievable goal will define the primary nature of the partnership. Whether simply knowledge exchange on a specific topic (e.g., building on the expertise of CSOs in one subject matter or population), validation and reuse of CSO data or joint design of a data collection mechanism, these “outputs” will lay foundations of the partnership. It is important to be considerate of joint priorities but also respective constraints and mandates to build trust, design incentives and ensure the sustainability of the partnership. In some countries, NSOs may perceive data partnerships with non-state actors as reputational risks, depending on the perception of NGOs by the government. In case of data reuse, the institution chooses to testify over the sufficient quality of a dataset they were not engaged to design nor implement. It is important that the non-state actors understand this challenging positioning of the NSO.

When civil society actors share data with the NSO for further reuse, or when NSOs and CSOs co-design a data collection instrument, an important boundary between state and non-state data is being crossed. Reuse of CSOs data requires significant preparedness from the NSO, including frameworks for partnerships and data quality assurance. Moreover, experts suggest the need of developing “a social license” for the re-use of citizen data since it was produced for purposes beyond those for which they were originally designed.³⁶ Consent often does not work particularly well in the context of secondary and subsequent uses, especially when future uses cannot be anticipated at the point of collection. This also connects to digital self-determination: the importance of empowering individuals, groups and communities to have meaningful agency in determining how data about them are accessed, interpreted and used.

On the other hand, Indigenous data represents a particularly important dimension of many countries’ evolving data ecosystem. The particular status of indigenous peoples’ groups can give them a stronger social mandate since questions of data quality cannot be separated from questions of jurisdiction, self-determination and governance.³⁷

The below country example therefore presents data production, validation and use as an illustration of how partnerships work in practice rather than as a standalone technical manual.

Kenya offers one of the most complete examples in this guidance of how a citizen data partnership can move across the data value chain: from initial scepticism to quality assessment, to official dissemination and longer-term institutionalisation³⁸:

³⁶ Verhulst, Stefaan and Zahuranec, Andrew and Zable, Adam and Addo, Peter (2025): Reimagining Data Governance for AI: Operationalizing a Social License for Data Reuse

³⁷ Labillois, Tony (2026): Disaggregated Data in Canada: Leveraging Citizen Data to Complement Official Statistics, IPS paper

³⁸ PARIS21 (2022): Citizen-Generated Data for Sustainable Development Goals Reporting in Kenya

Entry point

The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) sought to operationalise alternative data sources as part of the 2019/20 - 2022/23 Kenya Strategy for the Development of Statistics. One idea was to look at data produced by non-state actors. KNBS worked with civil society partners and development actors to explore how citizen data could help address data gaps, particularly in relation to SDG monitoring.

Who was involved

Kenya National Bureau of Statistics

civil society partners known to KNBS, such as the SDGs Kenya Forum, Open Institute Kenya, GROOTS Kenya, Twaweza East Africa, the International Budget Partnership, development actors, such as the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, PARIS21, UN Women Eastern Africa, and the Kenya Human Rights Commission.

What they did

KNBS assessed its data gaps, using SDG indicators as a benchmark. Statisticians worried about the representativeness and accuracy of CSO data. Together with development partners, they coupled citizen data quality assurance with the design of the Kenya Statistical Quality Assurance Framework (KeSQAF). A special annex to the Framework included quality assurance criteria specific to “citizen-generated data (CGD)”. Rather than treating citizen data as automatically usable or unusable, the process created a structured way to assess whether such data were relevant, well documented, and methodologically sound. The criteria were tested and refined through workshops using real civil society datasets, allowing both KNBS and CSO partners to identify strengths, limitations, and practical improvements.

This process was important because it framed validation as a joint learning exercise rather than a one-sided audit. Civil society organisations gained a clearer understanding of the methodological standards needed for their data to be considered in official or policy processes. At the same time, KNBS gained better visibility into the citizen data already being produced across sectors and the potential contribution of those data to filling gaps in national reporting.

What made it work

Kenya’s experience shows the importance of institutional visibility as well as concerted efforts by development partners to support both state and non-state actors. While KNBS was receiving support for quality assurance, the CSOs were capacitated to improve their data collection standards (through guidelines on CGD production). KNBS involved a considerable number of staff members across various teams in the partnership-building process. A significant step occurred when KNBS published validated citizen data on a dedicated KNBS website, accompanied by documentation presenting the validation process.

Locating approved datasets within national statistical infrastructure helped signal credibility and increased confidence among policy users. It also moved citizen data from isolated project spaces into a more authoritative public evidence environment. The new initiative increased the visibility of KNBS at the international level and thus increased the institutional motivation to further strengthen the partnership with CSOs.

The example of Kenya shows that the integration of citizen data does not need to start with major legal reform. It can be initiated as a pilot by technical staff and begin with data gaps assessment and practical quality criteria, real dataset review, trust-building workshops and official dissemination pathways. When these steps are linked to national statistical planning, pilot collaboration can evolve into a recognised component of the national data ecosystem.

4.1 Data Collection Approaches

Citizen data collection approaches may include community-based surveys, participatory mapping, citizen science initiatives and digital reporting platforms. A wide range of CSO data collection methods is available online. These data collection methods recognise special conditions of communities and specific needs of data providers but also reflect the available know-how of the organisation that undertakes it. With some exceptions, these instruments cannot provide a nationally representative information, which is one of the key advantages of official statistics.

In case CSOs wish their data is used by the government, early engagement of the NSO and/or relevant line ministries or state agencies can enhance policy relevance and uptake of citizen data. The involvement of the NSO in co-designing citizen data collection tools with communities and CSOs improves relevance, inclusion and response quality, while standardised procedures enhance comparability and potential reuse. Similarly, when ministries are involved in defining priority indicators, reviewing methodologies and linking citizen data to service delivery monitoring or sectoral reporting needs, citizen data can move from being an advocacy tool to becoming a recognised complement within official evidence systems. However, it is important to bear in mind that citizen data initiatives may have their own priorities and not wish to align with the government's main interests.

Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, data protection, and safeguarding—must be integrated from the outset, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. Some examples of guidelines on and approaches to ethical data collection for CSOs include:

- [International Committee of the Red Cross, Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action](#)
- [Amnesty International, 2025 Data Protection Guidelines for Civil Society Organisations](#)
- [Easton-Calabria, E., & Allen, W. L. \(2015\). Developing ethical approaches to data and civil society: from availability to accessibility. Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, 28\(1\), 52–62.](#)

4.2 Quality Assurance and Validation

Quality and trust are fundamental to the successful integration of citizen data into official statistical systems. Early scepticism of NSOs toward citizen data centred on concerns about representativeness, methodological soundness and documentation of citizen data³⁹. In case of the latter, a comprehensive metadata documentation would allow NSOs to understand many of the quality aspects of citizen data. However, not all CSOs document studied population, applied definitions, period under scrutiny and the description of other data variables.

These concerns can be constructively addressed by recognising the distinct nature of citizen data, which is not produced for statistical purposes, yet represents huge value from the policy insight-point of view. NSOs worldwide are starting to adopt mixed methods of parallel indicators or data triangulation, which allow for a combination of statistics and alternative data sources. For example, a statistical measure would present the share of people affected by a given condition; whereas citizen data could complement it what the affected population considers important about the experience. There are numerous statistical products which can combine statistics and citizen data, such as Voluntary National Reviews or infographics.

Piloting citizen data against nationally agreed quality criteria and progressively aligning collection methods with the Statistical Quality Assurance Framework constitutes the most intuitive process for NSOs.

Key statistical quality dimensions typically include relevance, methodological soundness, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, and transparency. These are grounded in the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (FPOS). However, however assessing CSO data against these principles and standards can quickly yield their insufficiency for a direct reuse by NSOs, since citizen data is rarely produced for statistical purposes. Recent expert recommendations stipulate that these data should not be absorbed into the official statistical system without regard to their purpose and governance. This is because they arise from a particular relationship between people and civil society organisations and often depend on consent. Their value is therefore intrinsically grounded in the trust on which the data collection relationship is based. Instead of a direct integration, NSO can apply separate quality assurance methods and introduce a “dialogue” between traditional data sources and citizen data, by applying various forms of linkage, such as parallel indicators, triangulation, contextual interpretation or joint analysis.

At the same time, the Copenhagen Framework presents a set of principles of citizen data, which describe its uniqueness vis-a-vis FPOS, such as participation and inclusiveness or data sovereignty. It is important that these sets of principles are approached with equal attention. A joint piloting of national validation criteria on a limited set of indicators allows stakeholders to refine approaches before scaling up, and to add nuance and additional considerations relevant

³⁹ PARIS21 (2023): The Question of Quantity and Quality: How a Participatory Approach Turned Citizen-Generated Data into Official Statistics.

to the unique characteristics and constraints of citizen data⁴⁰. This heterogeneous “validation” process strengthens both credibility and institutional trust.

Validation should be framed as a collaborative learning process, not an audit. When CSOs are involved in developing and applying quality criteria, they can learn and improve their data collections in the future. At the same time, government officials can gain deeper insight into the data and the processes behind it so that they can better evaluate its usefulness for official purposes. Joint dialogue about quality assurance increases trust between stakeholders.⁴¹

Trust-building between National Statistics Offices and civil society organisations requires transparency, dialogue and shared ownership of the validation process. The NSO could take up the role of validating the quality of CSOs data, in case they would like to reuse it for statistical or non-statistical purposes. Rather than approaching data quality validation as a unilateral assessment or gatekeeping exercise, it should be designed as a joint learning process in which both parties refine criteria, clarify documentation requirements and address methodological gaps collaboratively. In countries where citizen data quality criteria were co-developed, piloted and progressively aligned demonstrates how structured validation can simultaneously improve data robustness and deepen institutional trust.

4.3 Data Dissemination and Use for Impact

The location and visibility of where citizen data are hosted play a critical role in determining their uptake and legitimacy. Data that remain on isolated project websites or internal CSO platforms or not accompanied by a communication campaign may struggle to influence policy, regardless of their quality. Similarly, for NSOs, the actual reuse of citizen data is very often not communicated by the NSO, who don't recognise the value of participatory approaches yet. Exceptions exist, however. In Kenya, a significant turning point occurred when the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) established a dedicated webpage for validated citizen data and published approved datasets on its official platform⁴². Hosting these data within the national statistical infrastructure, signalled institutional recognition and credibility, which substantially increased confidence among ministries and policymakers and elevated citizen data from the margins to the mainstream of official evidence.

Effective dissemination and use of citizen data can benefit from deliberate coordination between NSOs, local and national governments, NHRIs, academia, and civil society actors. As mentioned previously, there are advantages to engaging government staff from the outset so that in the event of co-creation indicators are co-defined and aligned with sector priorities,

⁴⁰ Labilloy, Tony (2026): Disaggregated Data in Canada: Leveraging Citizen Data to Complement Official Statistics, IPS paper

⁴¹ As of September 2026, the Collaborative on Citizen Data develops guidance on quality assurance that is aligned with the UN NQAF while respecting the principles of the Copenhagen Framework. The document is meant to enable CSOs and NSOs to have a common approach to quality and practical steps for implementation.

⁴² Kenya National Bureau of Statistics: Citizen-Generated Data

ensuring that outputs respond directly to policy needs and reporting cycles. At the same time, citizen data would benefit from partnering with data amplifying institutions, such as NHRIs or academia, who can help transform citizen data into actionable evidence. NHRIs can use it in human rights monitoring, reporting, and engagement with governments, while academia can analyse, interpret, and communicate findings in ways that increase their visibility, and policy relevance.

Dissemination strategies for citizen data could be synchronised with key policy or legislative moments—such as budget planning, sector reviews or national planning or reporting processes—and ensure that validated data are published on credible and authoritative platforms. At the same time, CSOs should be supported in communicating findings in accessible formats, translating technical results into policy-relevant narratives. For example, when ministries are involved early and dissemination is strategically planned, citizen data are far more likely to influence decision-making and resource allocation.

5 Where-To-Start: Advice for different stakeholder groups

5.1 For National Statistics Offices

It is critical that NSOs establish basic lines of dialogue with the CSOs. Engagement may begin with informal dialogue, technical presentations or participation of CSOs in national data events such as the NSDS or VNR process.

The participatory entries could include:

a) **National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS)**

The NSDS is particularly important. It is a nationally owned, multi-year strategy that defines priorities, coordination mechanisms and investments for strengthening the statistical system. Anchoring citizen data initiatives in the NSDS increases legitimacy, clarifies roles and improves sustainability beyond individual projects⁴³.

CSOs, including community organizations, advocacy groups, academia, and professional associations, play key roles throughout the NSDS lifecycle:

1. During the Design & Consultation and the Preparation & Roadmap Phases:
NSDS development must be participatory, bringing together all data users and producers, including CSOs. This can happen in the context of participatory consultations: participatory development is a core value of NSDS, with multiple stakeholders—including civil society—working together to shape the strategy. This can also happen in the context of needs assessments and defining statistical priorities. In such processes, CSOs contribute crucial perspectives on:

⁴³ PARIS21 (2017, updated 2023): Guidelines for National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS)

- Data needs for underrepresented and marginalised populations, including women, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, migrants, LGBTQI populations, older persons, and other groups.
 - Social, environmental, and gender-related issues
 - Accountability and transparency concerns
2. In Governance and Coordination Structures:
Civil society can participate through:
- Advisory groups
 - Themed working groups (e.g., education, health, gender, disability, age)
 - Stakeholder coordination committees (e.g., Major Groups and Other Stakeholders)
3. In the Implementation of Statistical Activities:
CSOs may be engaged in:
- Data collection for specific domains (e.g., community-based surveys)
 - Outreach for hard-to-reach populations
 - Capacity-building partnerships
 - Dissemination and public communication of statistics
4. In Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback Processes:
Civil society contributes to:
- Monitoring implementation progress
 - Providing feedback on the quality and relevance of official statistics
 - Advocating for improvements in transparency, access, and accountability

The NSDS lifecycle includes a strong emphasis on results-based management, which can benefit from independent civil society monitoring.

b) National Statistical Quality Assurance Framework

A National Statistical Quality Assurance Framework (NSQAF) can play a critical role in enabling governments to reuse citizen data by providing a structured process for assessing, validating, and integrating non-traditional data sources into official decision-making and statistical systems. This example from Kenya pictures the journey towards developing specific criteria for citizen data

In 2019, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) began working to improve the country's data systems and fill important information gaps. As part of their first Kenya National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (2019/2020–2021/22), they planned to create a Statistical Quality Assurance Framework (SQAF) to improve the quality of

data produced by government institutions and to strengthen public trust in official statistics.

At the time, data produced by civil society organisations (CSOs) and other non-state actors were not seen as a priority. Government questioned whether citizen data could be trusted. However, with support from development partners, KNBS and interested CSOs decided to work together. They used this opportunity to develop special quality criteria designed specifically for evaluating CSO data. These criteria were then added as an annex to the Kenya Statistical Quality Assurance Framework (KeSQAf). To test these criteria, KNBS and CSOs reviewed real examples of CSO datasets during a series of workshops.

As KNBS saw how CSO data could help fill gaps—especially for missing SDG indicators—they continued to review data from more organisations. While many CSOs did not meet the required standards, the process highlighted two important lessons: first, that some CSOs needed stronger data documentation and clearer methodologies. Second, that citizen data already existed in several sectors and could be very valuable.

Over time, this step-by-step learning process led to more formal ways of working together. KNBS and CSOs created a Technical Working Committee on citizen data and signed memoranda of understanding to guide collaboration. The experience also helped improve KeSQAf and shaped the next Kenya Strategy for the Development of Statistics (KSDS II), which more explicitly recognised the role of citizen-generated data.

Overall, Kenya’s experience showed that integrating citizen data into official statistics does not require major legal changes from the start. It can be achieved gradually—through dialogue, support from development partners, pilot projects, and learning from each other.

c) When designing surveys

Early mobilisation of stakeholders is a critical step in the survey design process, ensuring that statistical instruments respond to policy needs and reflect the realities of diverse user groups. International guidance highlights that the relevance of official statistics depends on systematic consultation with users and stakeholders throughout the statistical cycle. The United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics specify that statistical agencies should have processes in place to “consult users, monitor relevance and consider emerging needs”. Similarly, the UN Handbook on the Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems emphasises that NSOs are expected to “identify and consult stakeholders regarding their interests, needs and obligations”, as part of meeting quality assurance requirements and managing relationships with data users and providers.⁴⁴ Additionally, the UN has produced

⁴⁴ United Nations Statistics Division (2021, updated 2025): Handbook on Management and Organization of National Statistical Systems

Guidelines to Make Surveys on Individuals and Households More Accessible⁴⁵ that recommends that accessibility is designed into every stage of a survey, from planning and budgeting to data collection and communication, so that persons with disabilities can participate fully and be accurately represented in the data.

Engaging stakeholders at the pre-design stage strengthens the legitimacy and public value of official surveys. Guidance from the UK Office for Statistics Regulation underscores that involving the public and users early in the design of statistical products enhances their acceptability and supports the development of statistics that better serve the public good. Evidence from community-engaged survey research also shows that early involvement of those closest to the issues being studied leads to improved identification of hard-to-reach populations, higher response rates and more accurate data, thereby increasing both methodological robustness and inclusiveness.^{46 47}

5.2 For Ministries and State Agencies

Ministries should view collaboration with CSOs on citizen data as a strategic part of building more inclusive and responsive policymaking. Official statistics and administrative data remain the backbone of public decision-making, but they do not always capture the experiences of groups that are underrepresented, difficult to reach, or affected by issues that are not routinely measured. For ministries engaging with CSOs is about improving policy relevance, strengthening trust in public institutions, and ensuring that the voices of marginalized groups are reflected in evidence-based decision-making.

Collaboration should begin at the design stage rather than after data have already been collected. Ministries can work with CSOs to identify priority policy questions, define indicators, develop questionnaires, and determine which populations should be included. CSOs often have close relationships with communities and can help ensure that data collection reflects realities that may otherwise be overlooked. Involving civil society from the outset also increases the legitimacy of the process and improves the likelihood that findings will be relevant for both policymakers and citizens.

Ministries should also actively explore opportunities to reuse citizen data that already exist. Ministries, supported by the NSO, can assess whether such datasets can complement official

⁴⁵ United Nations Statistics Division (2026): Guidelines to Make Surveys on Individuals and Households More Accessible: Specifying needs, designing and building surveys, and collecting data on persons with disabilities

⁴⁶ Office for Statistics Regulation (2025): Public involvement and engagement in official statistics: A toolkit for statistics producers

⁴⁷ Urban Institute (2021, updated 2024): Community-Engaged Surveys: From Research Design to Analysis and Dissemination

statistics, provide additional disaggregation, or offer insights into experiences and perceptions that are difficult to capture through traditional surveys.

Various stages of the policy cycle offer opportunities for such collaboration:

- a) Agenda-setting and problem identification - CSOs are frequently the first to detect emerging issues through their direct work with communities. Citizen data can reveal problems that are not yet visible in official statistics, particularly for marginalized groups, informal workers, victims of violence, migrants, persons with disabilities, or rural populations.
- b) Policy formulation and design - Citizen data can complement surveys and administrative records by providing contextual information on why outcomes occur and how policies might affect different groups.
- c) Implementation and service delivery - CSOs often collect information as part of service provision, community outreach, or monitoring activities. Where appropriate data-sharing arrangements exist, ministries can reuse these datasets to improve targeting, identify underserved areas, or adjust implementation strategies.
- d) Monitoring and evaluation - Citizen data can help assess whether policies are producing intended outcomes and whether specific groups are benefiting. It can also provide a channel for continuous feedback between government and citizens.
- e) Voluntary National Review (see box)

A Voluntary National Review (VNR) is one of the most practical entry points for integrating citizen data into official SDG monitoring. Led by government and involving ministries, national statistical offices, CSOs, and other stakeholders, the VNR process aims to assess progress towards the SDGs while identifying challenges and data gaps. Because the process is participatory and highly visible, it creates a unique opportunity to recognise and use citizen data alongside official statistics.

The VNR process often highlights gaps in traditional data sources, particularly in areas affecting marginalised populations. As governments seek evidence to report on SDG progress, citizen data collected by CSOs can provide timely, localised, and disaggregated information that complements official statistics. This makes the VNR an important opportunity for governments to explore data sources that might otherwise remain outside the official system.

The VNR also requires broad stakeholder engagement. Since CSOs are already expected to participate in consultations, they can contribute not only perspectives from communities but also the data they collect. This creates a formal space for governments, national statistical offices, and CSOs to discuss evidence, compare methodologies, and assess how citizen data can strengthen SDG reporting.

The high political visibility of the VNR further encourages innovation. Governments are often keen to demonstrate transparency, inclusiveness, and a commitment to leaving no one

behind. Incorporating citizen data can help provide a more complete picture of development progress while signaling openness to collaboration and complementary sources of evidence.

Importantly, the VNR offers a low-risk environment for testing the use of citizen data. Countries can pilot approaches, assess data quality, and build trust between official and non-official data producers without requiring immediate legal or institutional reforms. This allows governments and CSOs to gain practical experience before considering more permanent arrangements.

Where collaboration proves successful, the VNR can act as a catalyst for longer-term institutionalisation. It can lead to ongoing partnerships between national statistical offices and CSOs, the development of quality assurance frameworks for citizen data, and the inclusion of non-traditional data sources in national statistical and SDG monitoring strategies.

5.3 For Local Governments

Local governments can benefit significantly from citizen data because it often provides timely, detailed, and locally grounded information that complements subnational official statistics and administrative records. Data collected by civil society organisations, community groups, researchers, and residents can help identify emerging issues, monitor service delivery, understand neighbourhood-level needs, and reach population groups that may be underrepresented in traditional data sources. By incorporating these insights, local authorities can make policies more responsive, evidence-based, and inclusive.

To unlock this potential, local governments should establish citizen data partnerships based on trust, transparency, and mutual benefit. Such partnerships can involve data-sharing agreements, joint data collection initiatives, collaborative analysis, and participatory decision-making processes. Clear governance frameworks, respect for privacy and ethical standards, and regular dialogue help ensure that citizen data is used responsibly while creating value for both public institutions and communities. In turn, these collaborations can strengthen civic engagement, improve public services, and foster greater accountability and trust between citizens and local governments.

Most common areas of citizen data availability can be as follows:

- Service delivery - Community-generated reports can identify gaps in waste collection, public transport, road maintenance, water supply, or social services. Municipal departments can use these insights to prioritize interventions and monitor service quality.
- Urban planning - Participatory mapping initiatives and citizen observations can provide valuable information on mobility patterns, accessibility barriers, public space usage, and environmental concerns. This information can enrich local development plans.

- Environmental and Climate Action - Citizen science projects can generate data on air quality, biodiversity, noise pollution, flooding, or urban heat islands. Local governments can integrate these datasets into environmental monitoring systems and climate adaptation strategies.
- Social inclusion- NGOs and community organizations often collect data on vulnerable populations who may be underrepresented in official records, for example on homeless people. Such data can help identify inequalities and improve targeting of social programs.

Where to start:

- Pick one service issue (e.g., clinic access, water points, school safety) and a related planning window
- Co-design data questions with communities and service staff
- Commit to a public response (“what we will do by when”).
- What “good” looks like:
- A short action note with timelines and contacts
- A follow-up meeting reporting progress to communities
- Replication in a second service area or district.

The most effective approaches focus not only on collecting data, but also on creating mechanisms to analyze findings, communicate results, and implement responsive policies. When used responsibly, citizen data can strengthen public trust, improve service delivery, and support more inclusive and participatory local governance.

5.4 For Civil Society Actors

Civil society (grassroots organisations, national coalitions, social movements, CSOs) has a dual role in national CD partnerships: (1) producer and steward of data that captures lived realities often missed by official statistics. (2) defender of rights—ensuring data work respects participation, non-discrimination, self-identification, transparency, privacy, and accountability. Acting in both roles strengthens trust and policy relevance, and is central to inclusive, “leave no one behind” decision-making.

Start by mapping your role(s) along the data pipeline:

In diverse civic spaces (many actors, uneven resources), clarity about who does what, when, and how avoids overlap and gaps. Use a short, shared “role map” to agree responsibilities for each phase of the pipeline—agenda-setting, design, collection, processing/analysis, sharing/use, and learning—plus who safeguards rights and who brokers quality. Countries that did this early built momentum faster and avoided friction later.

1. Phase 1 — Set the agenda (before data collection)

Co-define the policy question with affected communities and intended users (ministry department, city unit, NHRI), so your data will land where decisions are actually made. A few listening interviews with each side can surface needs, constraints, and timing (e.g., budget cycles).

Scan existing evidence (official stats, administrative data, past CD) to avoid duplication, agree what your contribution will add (e.g., local disaggregation, service-access pathways, qualitative insights).

2. Phase 2 — Design (methods, ethics, roles)

Choose methods you can execute and document. Align with relevant national or international data standards and definitions to the extent feasible and appropriate given the project's objectives and resources. Keep a one-page plan explaining what you will collect, from whom, how, and with what limitations. This documentation is what allows others (including NSOs) to trust and reuse your outputs.

Build a human-rights-based approach to data (HRBAD) into the plan: how people will participate, how you will prevent discrimination and enable self-identification where relevant, what you will disclose (transparency), how you will protect privacy and handle grievances (accountability). Write consent language that people understand and that reflects these norms. Prioritize inclusive recruitment and active engagement of participants as key drivers of data quality. Create feedback loops linking participants in the initiative, data sources, and data users.

Formalise light expectations with public actors. Where possible, set up a short MoU or note with an NSO or line-ministry focal point to clarify scope, review points, and how results will be considered. The Malawi MoU and the Bangladesh MoU show feasible clauses and division of responsibilities.

3. Phase 3 — Collect

Train your team on good practices of data collection, consent, safe participation, and “do-no-harm,” and pilot your tool on a small scale to catch issues early (this step is standard in national toolkit pilots). Keep a field log for decisions and deviations. It will make your analysis more credible.

4. Phase 4 — Process & analyse

Use a tiered quality checklist:

- *Minimum:* complete records, basic consistency checks, clear variable labels, and a simple methods note that explains sampling/coverage and caveats.

- *Advanced*: reproducible analysis steps, basic uncertainty notes, and a metadata sheet (what each field means and how it was constructed).

This “tiering” is a proven way to make CD usable for policy and, where appropriate, for official monitoring.

Invite a “quality broker”—a university methods group, NHRI analyst, or NSO focal point—to review your documentation against national validation cues where they exist (e.g., Kenya’s KeSQAF gives practical criteria for accepting CD in official processes).

5. Phase 5 — Share & use

Prepare two products:

- *a technical note* (methods, documentation, limits) for data producers and reviewers
- *a policy brief* (findings, options, sequencing, rough costs/budget hooks) for decision-makers.

Co-interpret findings with communities and duty bearers so the “so what?” is shared. Partnerships that did this saw quicker uptake.

6. Phase 6 — Learn & iterate

Do a short after-action review using a simple engagement-quality lens (Were the right people included? Did they influence decisions? Was there accountability for follow-up?), and log what to improve next cycle.

Your minimum “documentation kit” (so others can reuse your CD):

- a 1-page methods note (what/why/how, sampling/coverage, limits).
- a consent statement and privacy note.
- a short metadata sheet (variable names, definitions, transformations).
- a basic quality checklist you completed (completeness, duplicates, obvious outliers, version/date of files).

These elements are repeatedly flagged as the difference between interesting CD and actionable CD.

Useful resources for these phases:

There are multiple guides on data collection and MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning) out there. Some examples include:

- **MEAL DPro Guide** - A widely used NGO sector standard for MEAL, including guidance on data collection, indicators, surveys, ethics, and data quality.⁴⁸
- **UNICEF Monitoring & Evaluation Handbook** - Practical guidance for civil society organisations on designing indicators, collecting data, ensuring quality, and using evidence for decision-making.⁴⁹
- **MEASURE Evaluation Data Quality Tools** - Comprehensive toolkit for assessing data quality, validation, routine data quality assessments, and strengthening data collection systems.⁵⁰
- **UNICEF Data Quality Framework** - Excellent framework for establishing principles of accuracy, reliability, timeliness, accessibility, and integrity in data collection and management.⁵¹
- **Abvius MEAL Guide for NGOs and CSOs** – A practical and up-to-date overview of implementing MEAL systems, including data collection processes and donor expectations.⁵²

Working with your NSO/line-ministry counterparts:

When it comes to working with authorities, experience shows that the following points can turn out to be enabling factors:

- Ask for a focal point (and alternate). Stable contacts reduce delays and knowledge loss. This is a common success factor in cross-sector partnerships.
- Co-plan the decision moment. Time your brief for the budget or planning window. Agree what form (table, map, narrative) the user needs and how to reflect uncertainty.
- Use national validation cues (where available) early, not at the end.

Country snapshots:

- In **Kenya**, the NSO’s quality assurance criteria as well as early CSOs champion practice (Twaweza East Africa and Uwezo⁵³) helped CD producers from civil society align documentation to what the NSO could reuse.
- In **Malawi**, the NSO and a CSO coalition signed an MoU to co-develop national CD guidelines, specify responsibilities, and pre-test tools—creating a clear path from pilot to national use.

⁴⁸ PM4NGOs: MEAL DPro Guide

⁴⁹ UNICEF (2017): Monitoring and Evaluation Handbook: A self-learning handbook to support data-led decision making in the civil society sector

⁵⁰ MEASURE Evaluation: Data Quality Tools

⁵¹ UNICEF (2021): Data Quality Framework

⁵² Abvius (2026): MEAL NGO: Complete Guide to Monitoring and Evaluation

⁵³ PARIS21 (2023): A Question of Quantity and Quality: How a participatory approach turned citizen-generated data into official statistics in Kenya

- In **Bangladesh**, the NSO, BRAC, and ICSC agreed on a technical committee, a national toolkit pilot, and training for CSOs—tying convening, quality brokering, and capacity-building together from day one.

Managing power imbalances and protecting rights:

- Name a rights and ethics guardian (can be your NHRI partner) who checks consent, inclusion, and safe participation throughout. This distributes responsibility beyond the methods lead.
- Budget for participation enablers (transport, childcare, translation, accessibility measures), and plan for feedback loops so communities hear how their input shaped outcomes. These practices keep participation free, active, and meaningful.

Risks to avoid (and quick fixes):

- Over-ambition: scope a focused pilot (3–6 months) with defined outputs and review points.
- Thin documentation: keep the minimum kit above. Ask a methods ally to review it.
- Weak policy uptake: co-design the policy window and format with the user. Don’t wait to the end to engage them.

5.5 For other partners

These partners stitch the data ecosystem together. They bring methods and peer-review, rights and safeguards, convening power, and resources.

a) Academia (universities, research institutes)

Where to start:

- **Offer a “methods clinic.”** Set up weekly office hours to review CSO tools and documentation (sampling notes, metadata, reproducible steps) and help align them to light national validation cues (e.g., where an NSO has a quality framework like KeSQA⁵⁴). This drastically reduces the gap between CD practice and official expectations.
- **Co-create reusable templates.** Publish short, practical templates (methods note, metadata sheet, basic quality checks) based on proven approaches for re-using CD in reporting.
- **Embed students and early-career researchers as “quality brokers” in CSO projects** (co-supervised with a policy user), producing paired deliverables: a

⁵⁴ Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2022): Kenya Statistical Quality Assurance Framework (KeSQA)

technical annex and a policy-facing brief. This pairing was a success factor across multi-country partnerships.

What “good” looks like:

- Documented, reproducible analysis for at least one pilot
- CSO teams using shared templates
- NSO or line-ministry focal points acknowledging that the documentation meets minimum expectations.

b) National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs)

NHRIs can help operationalize the Human Rights-Based Approach to Data (HRBAD) and embed practical safeguards and standards for participation, non-discrimination, self-identification, transparency, privacy, and accountability throughout the project. Here you can find a non-exhaustive list of action that NHRIs can take in the partnership.

Where to start:

- **Help identify priority human rights issues** and data gaps.
- **Co-design indicators and methodologies** using a human rights-based approach.
- **Review data collection tools** to ensure they are inclusive, ethical, and rights-sensitive.
- **Advise on informed consent, privacy, and data protection** measures.
- **Facilitate access to marginalized groups** and support meaningful participation.
- **Develop guidance** to support the operationalization of a human rights-based approach to data.
- **Provide training** on human rights-based approach to data and on safe and ethical documentation of violations.
- **Support data validation and quality assurance** processes.
- **Integrate citizen data into human rights monitoring and reporting** activities.
- **Use citizen data to inform recommendations** to government authorities.
- **Convene dialogue between communities, CSOs, NSOs, and government agencies** around the findings.
- **Support the uptake of findings by policymakers** and public institutions.
- **Receive and follow up on complaints or cases** identified through the data.
- **Disseminate findings through NHRI reports, submissions, and advocacy efforts.**

- **Monitor government responses** to issues identified through the data.
- **Help ensure communities receive feedback** on how their data has been used and what results it has achieved.
- *What "good" looks like:*
 - Evidence that impacted rightsholder groups meaningfully and safely shaped the process and outcomes.
 - Human rights principles are embedded throughout the data lifecycle, including with consent, privacy and self-identification practices.
 - Citizen data and evidence of human rights situation is credible and robust and recognized by public institutions. Policy briefs explicitly reference rights-based recommendations connected to the findings in the data and lead to concrete action that improves the realization of peoples' rights

c) Development actors (donors, UN country teams, foundations, international civil society organisations)

Where to start:

- Fund the glue. Small, flexible budgets for facilitation, translation, accessibility, and training-of-trainers often unlock sustained collaboration.
- Support light formalisation. Provide neutral help to draft MoUs/data-sharing agreements and set up technical committees, as seen in the Bangladesh partnership. This way, roles, quality, and safeguarding are clear.
- Align to national data priorities. Anchor support in country-owned plans for multi-stakeholder data ecosystems and the broader push to strengthen official and complementary data for the SDGs.

What "good" looks like:

- A funded convener role
- Short partnership charters in place
- Training delivered with local actors
- Visible links to national data strategies and SDG monitoring.

d) Private sector & technology partners

Where to start:

- Provide privacy-by-design tooling (secure storage, access control, audit trails) and lightweight dashboards, while following data-ethics principles of the

public⁵⁵ / development⁵⁶ / humanitarian⁵⁷ sectors (purpose limitation, openness where appropriate, accountability).

What “good” looks like:

- Documented consent flows
- Least-privilege access
- Transparent logs
- Plain-language explanations of any automated steps that affect analysis or visibility.

e) Media and communication partners

Where to start:

- Translate evidence into plain language, visuals, and local languages without exposing sensitive information
- Agree community review of key messages to avoid harm
- Report not only numbers but also how inclusion and accountability were ensured. This builds public understanding of trustworthy data partnerships.

What “good” looks like:

- Balanced reporting that protects privacy, credits contributors, and explains limitations
- Public follow-up on whether authorities acted on recommendations.

⁵⁵ European Commission: Data protection explained

⁵⁶ UNDP: Data Principles

⁵⁷ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2021): Data Responsibility Guidelines

6 Check & To Do List

This final chapter is meant to provide readers with a hands-on checklist, supporting them in the preparation of a citizen data partnership. The list includes the most relevant considerations and to dos that have been discussed throughout this paper.

A. Establish the Foundation

- ☐ Identify a specific knowledge or data gap, policy or capacity need, reporting requirement or other development challenge to address.
- ☐ Assess whether citizen data could provide policy-relevant complementary evidence.
- ☐ Identify existing windows of opportunity (e.g. NSDS revision, VNR process, sector review, census, survey redesign).
- ☐ Clarify the purpose, expected outcome and added value of the partnership.
- ☐ Consider whether an intermediary organisation could help facilitate collaboration.

B. Identify and Engage the Right Partners

- ☐ Map stakeholders based on their functions and contributions:
 - policy users
 - citizen data producers
 - community representatives
 - quality and methodology experts
 - rights and ethics actors
 - communication partners
 - resource and funding partners
- ☐ Start with a manageable core group rather than a large coalition.
- ☐ Identify focal points and communication channels for each partner.
- ☐ Explore mutual benefits and incentives for participation.

C. Assess the (Enabling) Environment

- ☐ Review relevant laws, policies and statistical regulations.
- ☐ Identify any requirements relating to:
 - data sharing
 - consent
 - ownership
 - publication

- liability
- privacy and confidentiality
- protection of sensitive personal data

☐ Determine whether formal agreements are required.

☐ Identify existing national frameworks and strategies that can support the partnership.

D. Build a Working Structure

☐ Agree with all involved stakeholders on a shared objective and initial scope of work.

☐ Define practical coordination arrangements, including:

- focal points
- meeting schedule
- documentation practices
- follow-up mechanisms

☐ Clarify roles and responsibilities.

☐ Decide whether collaboration should be informal, formal or phased over time.

☐ Create a simple work plan with realistic deliverables.

E. Establish an Implementation and Accountability Framework (required in particular when funding for data generation / project implementation is available)

☐ Agree on data collection approaches and documentation requirements.

☐ Define the intended use of the data.

☐ Establish procedures for obtaining informed consent and communicating how data will be used.

☐ Establish quality assurance and validation processes.

☐ Define decision-making arrangements.

☐ Define accountability mechanisms for responding to concerns, complaints, or unintended harms.

☐ Put in place appropriate safeguards on ethics, privacy and data governance.

☐ Ensure meaningful participation and inclusion throughout the process.

F. Produce, Validate and Use the Data

☐ Co-design data collection tools where appropriate.

- ☐ Document methods, metadata and limitations.
- ☐ Review data against agreed quality standards.
- ☐ Jointly interpret findings.
- ☐ Disseminate results through credible and accessible channels.
- ☐ Link findings to decision-making, planning, monitoring or reporting processes.

G. Ensure your Data Partnership is Embedded in a Human Rights-Based Approach

- ☐ Identify which rightsholder groups are affected by the issue the partnership is addressing.
- ☐ Assess barriers to their participation (e.g. language, disability, location, digital access, safety concerns).
- ☐ Ensure individuals and groups can self-identify in ways that respect their dignity, identities, and contexts.
- ☐ Establish mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation of rightsholder groups / define how they will be informed, consulted, and can provide feedback throughout the process.
- ☐ Assess risks of discrimination, exclusion, reprisals, or harm that may arise from participation or data use.
- ☐ Agree on principles for non-discrimination, transparency, accountability, privacy, and self-identification.
- ☐ Disaggregate data where appropriate to identify inequalities and groups at risk of being left behind.
- ☐ Validate findings with participating communities before final dissemination.
- ☐ Ensure your results dissemination uses accessible formats and languages suitable for affected communities.

H. Sustain and Institutionalise the Partnership

- ☐ Deliver early, visible results to demonstrate value.
- ☐ Monitor participation, trust, policy uptake and partnership effectiveness.
- ☐ Document lessons learned and good practices.
- ☐ Invest in ongoing capacity strengthening.
- ☐ Plan long-term financing and resourcing.
- ☐ Establish mechanisms to preserve institutional memory and continuity.

- ☐ Embed collaboration within national strategies, programmes or governance structures where appropriate.
- ☐ Maintain ongoing channels for citizen and community engagement.

Final Readiness Check

Before moving forward, can you answer **YES** to the following?

- ☐ We have a clear problem or data gap to solve.
- ☐ The right actors are involved – including affected communities and rightsholders – and have meaningful opportunities to engage throughout the process.
- ☐ Roles and responsibilities are understood.
- ☐ Legal and ethical considerations have been assessed.
- ☐ Data collection, analysis, and dissemination respect the principles of participation, transparency, non-discrimination, self-identification, privacy, and accountability.
- ☐ Quality and documentation standards have been agreed.
- ☐ There is a realistic pathway for data to influence policy or decision-making.
- ☐ We have considered how collaboration can continue beyond the initial pilot.

7 List of References

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