

# COUNTRY FOCUS REPORTS

## Frequently Asked Questions

This document compiles practical guidance and clarifications to support Network Members in preparing and delivering high-quality **Country Focus Reports (CFR)**.

After conducting two help desk sessions with Network Members, we gathered the **most frequently asked questions** and elaborated comprehensive answers to address these recurring concerns and provide clear, actionable guidance.

**For specific questions not covered in this FAQ, please consult your Network Facilitator.**



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## List of Questions

- **Are we required to strictly follow the provided methodology, or can we adapt it according to our country's context?**

The provided methodology is intended to ensure an objective assessment of the enabling environment, counteract potential biases, and provide coherence among the assessments conducted by Network Members.

Depending on the context, minor adaptations may be necessary to accommodate for the realities in a specific country (e.g. security constraints, language needs, cultural sensitivity). NMs may also use additional data gathering tools such as consultations or their own pre-existing monitoring tools to complement the methodology. Similarly, interviews with experts who are unable to attend the panel discussion may be conducted.

All additional data gathering should be conducted before the panel discussion to gather relevant insights, inform the assignment of scores and avoid the need for post-panel clarifications. Once the panel has discussed and the scores are shared with the consortium, no changes are permitted. Please note that any adaptations of the methodology will not be reflected in the standardized description of the research process in the CFR document. Please check with your NF beforehand.

- **Should the CFR assessment cover the past year, or should it focus exclusively on 2025?**

The assessment should cover information from the past year up to the date of the panel discussion. For example, if the panel takes place in April 2025, it should consider developments from April 2024 to April 2025. If a major development occurs after the scoring/drafting phase, it can be noted in the report.

The scores agreed upon during the panel cannot be changed, but there is space in the narrative section to briefly mention any significant events. Additionally, alternative tools such as Alerts can be used to flag such updates.

- **Can we request an extension for our report submission if we have limited expert responses or experience delays in organizing the panel?**

A well-thought-out composition of the expert panel and sufficient time for the panel discussion are essential requirements for the successful completion of the CFR. If you experience difficulties or delays in setting this up, please contact your NF.

- **How many panel discussions should be organized?**

The scoring of all dimensions should happen within a single panel discussion. The discussion serves for experts to debate and understand each other's perspective as a means of defining agreed-upon scores. Breaking this down into several workshops would mean that the panel composition may differ between workshops and that the assessment is conducted at different times, based on slightly different data. The entire assessment should therefore be concluded in the span of one panel discussion.

- **How long should the panel discussion be?**

There is no fixed duration for the panel discussion. Typically, it lasts around five hours, depending on the complexity of the issues being assessed and the number of participants. With a duration of five hours, the available time for a discussion of each dimension is 20 minutes.

With a well-facilitated and prepared/efficient discussion, this should be sufficient time to agree on a score for the respective dimension without draining the energy of experts with a panel discussion that is excessively long. If the time is not sufficient, facilitators are encouraged to reassure experts that their justification cards will be reviewed in detail by the NM and their contributions considered in determining a final score.

- **How much time do the experts need to prepare?**

Inviting the right experts is key! Then the time need to prepare is basically to be familiarised with the methodology – the rest is their focus of work. The time required varies depending on their familiarity with the process and expertise. Experts should read the methodology and the instructions for panellists in advance. They must complete the scoring card before the panel and submit it to the NMs.

Panellists are not required to carry out research prior to the discussion. Their role is to provide insights based on their expertise and experience. However, they may review existing reports and data to inform their assessments. The scoring card includes space for justification, where they should briefly explain their rationale and provide links to sources.

- **Can we pay an expert fee to panel participants?**

No, but per diems, accommodation, and transport costs may be covered. Experts are meant to be chosen for their existing work on a specific topic, and their contribution to the panel should be part of their regular role. Additionally, panellists will benefit from the exchange with other civil society actors they may not have regular contact with and from contributing their knowledge and expertise to the Country Focus Report.

Panellists also get to have another platform to raise their voice on a specific issues, inform the conversation and the outcome reflected in the CFR that will be use for advocacy proposes.

- **Does the government need to participate in the panel?**

Government participation is not mandatory. Remember that the report is to portray how the EE looks like from the civil society perspective. The process should remain independent to ensure an objective assessment of the Enabling Environment in which civil society operates. However, engagement with government and other stakeholders may be considered if it adds value to the analysis and does not hinder discussions.

- **Can our own organization be part of the panel?**

The expert panel should consist of civil society representatives from outside of your organisation. We encourage that you use the panel discussion as an opportunity to invite a diverse group of experts, including civil society representatives outside of your regular networks. This ensures a diversity of opinions and a broad alliance of civil society that can carry the findings of the report forward.

As a NM you have the opportunity to provide experts with sources, make final decisions on the scores, and to draft the narrative of the report. Your expertise and opinion will be essential since the beginning of the process until these final steps of the report.

- **Should the facilitator be external to the organisation?**

An external facilitator is often preferable, as it allows NMs to focus on data collection and note-taking for the country focus report. However, the facilitator can be from the NM's organisation if there are enough people to handle the NM's responsibilities during the discussion.

- **Q11: How is the Principle 1 score determined/narrative drafted?**

The score corresponds to the most recent CIVICUS Monitor score. Scores from 1 to 100 are rebased to our 1 to 5 scale, 1 representing the least enabling category (Closed) and 5 representing the most enabling category (Open). In the narrative section of the CFR report, you have the opportunity to provide additional context, drawing on research and examples. Additionally, other sources at national, regional or international level can be used by NM when drafting the narrative of this principle.

Since this principle does not require scoring, there is no need to dedicate time to it in the panel discussion, unless there is a disagreement with the scoring. However, if desired, panellists can discuss the state of fundamental civic freedoms to gather information for the narrative section of the report. Additionally, this section of the narrative can be drafted using information from the EE snapshots, alerts, and other relevant sources.

- **Can we assess other dimension than those listed in the methodology?**

The assessment in the Country Focus Reports is limited to the six principles that constitute the enabling environment. However, NMs may consider assessing additional aspects of these

principles not listed in the methodology as relevant in their specific contexts. These contextual nuances should be explained in the narrative of the report

- **Can a network member organise a validation session to review the draft report?**

You may organise validation sessions of the draft narrative report with the experts that participated in the panel discussion. This may serve to reflect the narrative analysis back to experts who provided the data and to build ownership of the report. However, no changes to the agreed-upon scores are allowed at this stage. If you decide to organise a validation session, make sure that you can maintain reporting deadlines.

If you want to hear additional perspectives apart from the invited experts, we recommend holding consultation sessions **only before** convening the panel, ensuring that these inputs inform the discussions and negotiations that will take place during the panel. After publishing the report, you may also organise dissemination meetings that serve to familiarise participants with the report's content.

- **How many sources do we need?**

The main sources of the scoring and the country focus report itself is the expertise of invited experts shared in justification cards/during the panel discussion, including their lived experiences. Experts should submit their suggested scores with respective justifications. As appropriate, they may include links to secondary data such as existing NGO reports, the baseline snapshot, EWM alerts, government data etc. In the draft country focus report, NMs should hyperlink sources to secondary data, laws that are mentioned or specific examples. The NF will review these and indicate where more sources are needed.

- **If we invite expert organisations that are headquartered in the capital but have offices in different regions, would they count toward the quota for organisations outside of the capital?**

Prioritise inviting representatives with direct, on-the-ground experience in the region. If this is not possible, organisations headquartered in the capital but with regional offices may count toward the quota, provided they can genuinely bring a regional perspective to the discussion. Please consult the NF for particular cases.

- **How do we facilitate finding a consensus when there are different opinions?**

A diverse set of experts is invited to ensure that the distinct realities of different contexts within one country or differing experiences of specific sub-sections of civil society are represented. This may lead to different opinions on the score to be assigned for a dimension.

The discussion should aim to facilitate a negotiation between experts that reaches a consensus on the best-fitting score, taking into account all differing realities. This discussion also ensures that experts exchange and learn about each others' lived experiences as civil society actors. If certain experts feel their viewpoint was not fully captured in the final score, ensure their concerns are noted and highlighted in the report's narrative.

This approach serves two purposes: it assures experts that their perspectives are valued and documented, and it helps identify specific situations that differ from the rest of the country and may require special attention or targeted interventions.

- **Do panellists need to score every dimension?**

The panel should consist of at least one expert per principle. All experts are expected to score all dimensions, even those that they do not have primary expertise in. In these cases, they do not need to provide justifications as elaborate as for the dimensions they have primary expertise in, but rather they should rate the dimension based on their experience as a civil society actor.

Additionally, encouraging experts to contribute something in each section of the justification card - even brief observations or questions - helps maintain their engagement throughout the session. This ensures all participants feel included in the conversation and prevents anyone from feeling like an outsider, while also providing valuable cross-sectoral perspectives that can enrich the overall assessment

- **Is it necessary to collect a signed attendance list for in-person panel discussions?**

For financial reporting purposes it might be needed to have an attendance list with the signatures of the participants, but different context carry different risk so please check with your NF.



## Lessons, hacks, and best practices from the first batch of CFRs

This section shares practical tips, hacks, and best practices from the experience of those who have already completed their first Country Focus Report or are currently in the process, to help streamline the work, improve facilitation, and enhance the quality of the final report.

### Before the panel: preparation is everything

- **Send materials early:** Share the guiding questions, methodology, and baseline info well in advance.
- **Pre-orient your panel:** Organise online sessions to clarify concepts like "enabling environment" and how to score.
- **Do research in advance:** review secondary data available and identify controversial issues that might come up during the panel
- **Simplify the language:** Methodology might be too academic for the panelist. Use accessible terms to improve understanding.
- **Digital scoring forms:** Use online survey tools (e.g., Google Forms) to gather individual scores and inputs ahead of the session.

### During the panel: facilitate with intention

- **Strong facilitation is critical:** The facilitator should guide discussion, manage time, and ensure all voices are heard.
- **Know the context:** Facilitators must be up to date on political events and Enabling Environment dynamics.
- **Set clear expectations early on:** Explain each participant's role at the beginning to keep the discussion focused and avoid unproductive or emotionally charged debates.
- **Use time wisely:** Review the scoring cards from panelist in advance. Focus discussion on dimensions with large score discrepancies. Lightly review dimensions where scores seem aligned.

## After the panel: create a narrative that complements the scores

- **Consolidated insights:** The CFR becomes a go-to reference, consolidating multiple sources in one place, offering diverse perspectives from the point of view of Civil Society.
- **Document silences:** The CFR is also a space to document experiences when there is no secondary data.
- **Local ownership:** The report reflects civil society voices - ensure it is locally relevant and not top-down.
- **Use the report to give nuance:** make sure to reflect diverging views within civil society.
- **Think Practically:** When drafting the CFR, consider the key message you want to convey and how the information gathered can inform decision-making by civil society, donors, multilateral bodies, international organisations, government actors, etc.