INTRODUCTION TO THE FORUM

The Africa Forum on Civil Society and Governance Assessments, organised by UNDP, will reflect on African experiences with governance assessment, with a specific focus on civil society’s involvement in such initiatives. It is an opportunity for development practitioners, civil society and research institutes from Sub-Saharan Africa to share knowledge and experiences to enhance future contributions by civil society to various governance assessment initiatives. UNDP is co-convening this event with four leading partners and civil society and governance experts, i.e. Trust Africa, CIVICUS, CONGAD and African Governance Institute and UNDP country representatives. Scheduled for 10-12 November 2011 in Dakar, Senegal, this three-day forum will seek to demonstrate, with specific tools and country experiences, how a more effective involvement by civil society actors in governance assessments, both as ‘producers’ and ‘users’ of governance data, can promote democratic governance, through increased accountability and more inclusive participation.1

UNDP believes that the success of development and democratic governance depends on both a robust state and an active, capable and healthy civil society. Only a strong and capable civil society can play a collaborative rather than competitive role, be an interlocutor with governments and other partners and also play a watchdog role in the development process. Civic engagement is especially key to the work of UNDP in strengthening responsive, responsible and more accountable governance institutions and practices. A strong and capable civil society requires access to information, ability to gather and use evidence to inform its policy proposals and overall engagement with government. One of the most fundamental pre-requisites of democratic and accountable governance is access to accurate and current data. In this respect governance assessment tools and data are indispensable to effective civil society engagement. Similarly, governing institutions can benefit from informed and independent civil society assessments that provide reliable studies of the status, structure and impact of civil society and its various formations.

Governance indicators can, amongst other things, help identify institutions, processes and practices that detract from the rights of citizens or perpetuate unfair and sub-standard provision of services to marginalized and vulnerable groups. Governance assessments are also good for benchmarking and setting governance standards for critical institutions that promote and protect human rights, democracy and accountability. A participatory assessment process has the potential to provide opportunities for civil society groups to influence governance and policy processes, and to hold the government to account on its commitments. Governance assessments will in the long term strengthen citizen voices and participation in the governance process, including, for example, by evaluating the health and vibrancy of civil society as part of governance indicators.

1 The forum is being organized with support from the UNDP-France Trust Fund.
Africa has undergone several socio-economic changes over the past decade, which are having an important impact on the demands for accountability and democracy across the continent. The combination of a young (currently, over half of Africa’s population are under 25 years), increasingly well-off and urbanised population (one in three Africans are now middle class, i.e. living on $2-$20 a day), and the impressive spread of mobile phones and internet access, has led to the emergence of what poverty researchers call a ‘catalytic class’, whose expansion triggers internally driven, self-sustaining, political and economic change.

As a matter of fact, the language of transparency and accountability has gained a new momentum in a continent where secrecy and impunity have traditionally dominated the political system. Early indications seem to suggest that young, middle class Africans have an interest in accountability because they pay more taxes, and because most of them are young entrepreneurs who look for open and fair business conditions. Moreover, as a result of a significant drop in public sector employment, they no longer see their loyalty and interests tied to the status quo.

However, similar changes in other regions have shown that while middle class aspirations can be a force for positive change, they may also produce conditions for elite capture, leaving out the marginalized and those who have little ammunition to deal with government. This brings to the fore a number of critical considerations related to the breadth of ‘voices’ included in these new accountability mechanisms, and the extent to which the interests served by such evidence-based advocacy are aligned with the interests of vulnerable groups.

Against this backdrop the regional forum will address three broad themes:

1. **African governance assessments in which civil society is involved in partnership with government**, inclusive but not limited to: national governance ‘dialogues’, national governance monitoring systems, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), the monitoring mechanism established by the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, the Southern African Gender Barometer, the AU Monitor, State of the Union reports, toolkits for assessing specific institutions, such as Parliaments and Human Rights Commissions; Afrobarometer’s public attitude surveys; and the UNECA governance reports;

2. **The involvement of civil society in Africa in assessing the civil society sector**, including – but not limited to – the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) and the ‘next generation’ of home-grown civil society assessments;

3. **Assessments initiated by civil society independently from government**, with a particular focus on initiatives which make use of information and communication technologies for large-scale citizen engagement, inclusive but not limited to: budget tracking, social audits of service delivery, and the wide range of social accountability tools in Africa which use ICTs for the collection and dissemination of governance data.

UNDP will commission four sub-regional mapping reports – for Western, Central, Eastern and Southern Africa – to take the pulse of civil society’s involvement in these three types of assessment initiatives, and to help ground forum discussions in local context.

**Why a conference on governance assessments?**

Governance assessments and benchmarking have been an increasing priority for African policymakers, civil society groups and national development partners alike, especially in the last 5-8 years.

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2 According to industry estimates, there are more than 500 million mobile phone subscribers in Africa in 2011, twice as many as the 246 million subscribers in 2008.
There is an emerging consensus amongst all stakeholders on the need to better measure and account for development results. This trend is itself a reflection of an international consensus to the effect that an improved understanding of the quality of governance in a country is critical to deliver on the MDGs and in particular the eradication of poverty and inequality. Governance assessments represent a powerful tool in diagnosing governance deficits and identifying critical opportunities. Over the last decade, governments, national civil society organizations, international NGOs and development partners have invested in developing and executing governance assessments in nearly all countries.

This increasing demand for and interest in governance assessments has led to a significant growth in the production and use of governance indicators and indices within developing countries, as well as by international investors, donors, development analysts and academics. However, this growth has not been matched by the methodological adaptation that is necessary for the assessment tools to be relevant at the local level. This makes it difficult to translate research into action. Given the wide range of available tools and disparities in their application in the African region, this regional forum is a timely examination of current assessment practices in Africa. It is hoped that the forum will be a space for experience- and knowledge-sharing, identifying best practices and forging strategic and substantive partnerships.

UNDP has been an active participant in the international discourse and dialogue on governance assessments, emphasizing that such assessments should be more actionable and useful to national policymaking while at the same time promoting and strengthening national and local-level engagement in policy processes. For UNDP, the value of a ‘country-led governance assessment’ is that it serves as a critical accountability and transparency mechanism for governance performance. Democratic governance is more likely to be sustained if targets for how governments should perform are formulated by those who live within the political system or have the greatest stake in the outcome thereof. When local actors participate in the assessment process, it stimulates their demand for governance information, performance and accountability. For country-led assessments to provide more depth into a particular policy issue, UNDP emphasizes that they must integrate a focus on marginalized and vulnerable groups. For more information on UNDP’s support to country-led governance assessments, see this Practice Note.

A. African governance assessments in which civil society is involved in partnership with government

Over the past decade, governance assessments have become increasingly important tools in Africa for monitoring whether governments are failing or succeeding in terms of their commitments in such areas as diverse as legislation, government policies and international law. To date, much of the focus of African civil society and the development community has been primarily on assessments led by CSOs independently from government. As a matter of fact, a wide range of so-called ‘social accountability tools’ – such as public expenditure tracking surveys (PETS), social audits and community scorecards – have gained ground across the continent as means for civil society to hold governments to account.

Through the application of these tools, African people across the continent are increasingly providing regular feedback to their governments on the services they are providing – but is this feedback taken seriously by decision-makers, and leading to change? Are these civil society-led assessments helping to foster a conversation and an inclusive dialogue in society on the policies chosen and how well they work, or are they sometimes contributing to deepening the rift between government and civil society? Results are mixed in terms of whether these mechanisms can actually encourage governments to be responsive to public demands, and ultimately result in improved development and governance outcomes. In many cases, civil society’s enthusiasm in undertaking citizen-driven assessments has overshadowed a considerable lack of government engagement in the
process, thus limiting the impact of such initiatives, and sometimes further entrenching antagonistic relationships between state and non-state actors. Furthermore, several of these assessments are donor-dependent, and some even donor-driven, and thus poorly integrated into national policymaking processes.

Instances in which CSOs conduct assessments *in partnership with government* have also been making headway in recent years, though they have been less systematically documented. The evidence base generated by such initiatives is jointly produced by government and civil society, and used as a mutually agreeable basis for dialogue on governance deficits, and as an input for revising and correcting policies. While the APRM clearly is the epitome of this new wave of ‘collaborative dialogue’ about governance in Africa, less attention has been paid to the wide array of other such hybrid initiatives, and to the important lessons that can be learned from these ‘experiments’. This is an area that needs further understanding and stronger alignment with existing deliberate collaborative mechanisms.

The mushrooming field of monitoring tools and compliance mechanisms for sub-regional and regional frameworks provides an opportunity for such collaborative arrangements. Examples of such mechanisms include the periodic reports submitted by governments to the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights to track country progress in implementing the African Charter, the State of the Union reports (CSO-led assessments aimed at engaging the African Union on the performance of African Governments), the AU Monitor (an information-sharing platform aimed at enabling African CSOs to engage constructively with the African Union and its organs), and assessments of country progress in implementing gender protocols (e.g. the Southern African Gender Barometer). Similarly, a growing number of regional and sub-regional toolkits are used to monitor the implementation of freedom of information legislations, as well as the performance of parliaments and human rights commissions, amongst others. While civil society certainly has a key – and sometimes leading – role in these assessments, the fact that the official commitments they seek to monitor were initially made by states requires the active involvement of state actors in such assessments.

When it comes to impact, the value of including government actors in assessments of governance is increasingly recognized by civil society. There is also a growing consensus amongst CSOs on the value-added of building ‘assessment networks’ not only with decision-makers, but also with other stakeholders who can be partners during the assessment process, including universities, national statistical offices, parliamentary committees, M&E units of relevant ministries, oversight institutions such as the auditor-general or the anti-corruption commissions, and so on. While some of these actors can assist CSOs in their monitoring work, others – sometimes called ‘gatekeepers’ – may not be directly involved in monitoring, but can assist in getting access to information, to other stakeholders and to opportunities for presenting findings.

In the wake of these developments, and a decade into the implementation of the APRM, the time is opportune to undertake a critical review of CSOs’ roles as ‘producers’ and ‘users’ (or ‘transmitters’) of governance data, and to shed light on strategies that work – not only for gathering and analyzing evidence, but also for ensuring that this evidence and data is interpreted into useful information and used for knowledge that leads to change.

Broadly speaking, the potential for CSOs to influence policy through governance assessments will hinge upon three key factors: the quality and reliability of the data collected; the legitimacy and representativity of the stakeholders involved, and the strategic use of evidence in policy processes. The first day of the Africa Forum on Civil Society and Governance Assessments will seek to investigate these three aspects, with a particular focus on the experiences of CSOs in Africa.
experiences with assessments done in partnership with government. What are some of the ‘field-tested strategies’ used by CSOs to conduct high-quality research when monitoring governance, applying a balanced mix of quantitative and qualitative data collection tools? How can CSOs ensure that this research captures the ‘right’ voices, through the application of methodologies well-tailored to all relevant stakeholders, including marginalized, or ‘hard-to-reach’ groups? What approaches have been successfully used by CSOs to turn evidence into recommendations, and to use this evidence to influence decision-makers?

B. The involvement of civil society in Africa assessing the civil society sector

Meanwhile, governance assessment methodologies also encompass tools to measure the performance of civil society. UNDP has examined the global landscape of such tools in its 2010 Users’ Guide to Civil Society Assessments. Such tools can broadly be divided into two groups: those that aim to evaluate the ‘civil society sector’ as a whole – i.e. assessing the spaces for civil society in relation to the state and market – and those that evaluate the performance of individual CSOs. To date, the most comprehensive and most widely used of such tools has been the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI). UNDP has since 2004 supported the implementation of the CSI in 27 countries (including 11 in Africa, i.e., Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania and Zambia). While the CSI has generated an invaluable internationally comparable dataset on civil society, a ‘third generation’ of home-grown civil society assessment tools is emerging, which are specifically tailored to local contexts.

The findings from these assessments and other similar initiatives point to a civil society, and CSOs in particular, operating in a state of heightened volatility and flux. The conditions for CSOs include low levels of popular trust in public institutions, with correspondingly low levels of public participation in formal processes and their own persistent structural weaknesses, including in financial and human resources. These problems are exacerbated by newly challenging economic and political conditions. Such conditions inhibit the ability of CSOs to serve the public, achieve influence over policy and even sustain their operations.

CSOs in Africa are increasingly criticized by various stakeholders for their lack of rootedness in the continent. With political space and funds increasingly shrinking for civil society and civic engagement and with growing disconnect with its own constituency, CSOs in Africa now find themselves at a cross roads, being asked to ‘re-build’ from below or perish. This critique is mainly directed toward the “aided” and “organised” formations of civil society - often equated as NGOs - with distinctions emerging between civil society ‘of’ and ‘in’ Africa. These challenges stem from the weak material and economic base of indigenous organizations. Other complicating features of civil society in the continent are aid-dependent CSOs conforming with Western models, multiple affiliations of CSOs, and international connections of a few which result in asymmetric power relations.

The critique of CSOs in Africa is also fuelled by recent developments in the Arab states and the growing body of research worldwide that challenge our previous assumptions about how and where change occurs. It is increasingly apparent that engagement through local associations and social movements emerges as a more important source of change than previously understood.³

The second day of the forum will look closer into these challenges and draw from recent civil society assessments to discuss the ethical accountability of civil society in Africa. The forum will also examine the external challenges facing the sector i.e. the current debate on enabling space for civil society and civic engagement in Africa. The burgeoning landscape of new civil society assessment tools is emerging, which are specifically tailored to local contexts.

³ So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement (2010), John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett, IDS.
tools at global and local levels will also be critically examined, with a view to identifying ways to make such assessments more meaningful and valid locally.

C. Assessments initiated by civil society independently from government, with a particular focus on initiatives which make use of information and communication technologies

The potential of new social accountability tools which make innovative use of new technologies and social media is rapidly gaining traction in Africa. A case in point would be HUDUMA (meaning ‘service’) in Kenya, a mobile telephony and web platform designed to capture, appropriately channel and map citizens’ feedback reports on service delivery problems (via web, email, SMS), as they are forwarded to state officials for consideration and response. In as much as is a strategy initiated by CSO its focus is to promote constructive dialogue and a reliable real-time communications channel between service providers and beneficiaries.

ICT platforms for monitoring and assessing governance have been praised for their potential to democratize assessment and reporting processes, and to promote broad-based engagement by reaching out to ‘everyday citizen’ through digital media. Yet as with e-participation initiatives more broadly, inequalities of access and competences threaten to undermine participatory ideals by privileging the already wired, and failing to reach the already voiceless. In the African context, where internet penetration rates lag behind the rest of the world, failing to engage with marginalized groups due to technical limitations is a serious risk for governance assessments, both in methodological and political terms (i.e., risks of reinforcing inequalities of information and participation.)

Another concern with digital assessments is the lack of government engagement in such initiatives. If online reporting fails to feed into appropriate institutional channels for corrective action to be taken, what implications does this hold for the long-term potential impact of ICT-based assessment platforms? The third day of the forum will seek to identify best practices for securing fruitful collaboration between government, civil society and the private sector actors around the design and institutionalization of digital assessment initiatives. Some important methodological considerations will also be examined, notably with regards to ‘crowd-sourcing’ and its corresponding challenges of ensuring the quality and ‘actionability’ of data generated this way.

This regional forum is an opportunity to critically review these initiatives, to take stock of the experience and insights gained so far, and to identify concrete ways for enhancing civil society’s involvement in the design, implementation and follow-up of these various types of assessments.

FORMAT AND OBJECTIVES
The forum themes will be discussed through plenary sessions and break-out groups, with brief capacity development opportunities inserted throughout the programme to showcase innovative tools and assessment approaches. The format will be as interactive as possible in order to tap into the wealth of knowledge and experience that each participant brings and to maximize networking opportunities among participants.

The main objectives of the forum are:

- To ‘connect’ key actors who wish to advance civil society’s role in Africa in demanding that governments live up to their obligations, and that people have a say in how they are governed;
- To highlight the critical role of civil society in African governance assessment initiatives, particularly in the context of the APRM, and to identify specific ways to enhance the involvement of civil society in both the production and use of governance data;
Concept Note: Africa Forum on Civil Society and Governance Assessments

- To take stock and critically reflect on African experiences in conducting civil society assessments, and to provide recommendations on how to make them more relevant and valid locally;
- To introduce selected social accountability tools and provide a ‘reality check’ from field practitioners on how best to use them, with a specific focus on innovative tools which make use of new technologies and social media.

PARTICIPANTS
The forum will bring together civil society and development practitioners from an estimated 20 countries, along with UNDP and regional institutions. Speakers will include practitioners from civil society, leading analysts of African civil society and African governance assessment initiatives, governance experts and UNDP country representatives. The number of participants is expected to be between 50-65. The conference will be conducted in French and English.

Further information on the forum, the programme, co-organisers, panels and speakers will be made available on the OGC website at http://www.undp.org/governance/oslocentre.shtml.

OUTCOMES AND OUTPUTS
It is envisaged that this regional forum will lay the groundwork for longer-term engagement by UNDP on issues of governance and civil society assessments and social accountability with multiple actors, including civil society, research institutions, national governments and other development partners. The projected outcomes are:
- Increased information-sharing among and capacity development of civil society actors;
- Enhanced cooperation between a wide range of stakeholders involved in (or supporting) governance and civil society assessments across the region.

The forum will have the following main outputs:
- A summary report compiling the key lessons learned and recommendations from the forum on how to enhance civil society’s involvement in both the production and use of governance assessments, and recommendations on the future directions of participatory civil society assessments in Africa;
- Case studies on best practices of CSOs’ involvement in governance assessments, and of CSO-led assessments of civil society;
- A network of experts (to be added to the Governance Assessment Roster) which will be made available to UNDP Country Offices in the region to provide technical assistance to governance and/or civil society assessment initiatives supported by Country Offices.

BACKGROUND MATERIAL & KEY RESOURCES
- Four regional mapping reports compiling civil society assessments, governance assessments and social accountability initiatives in the four sub-regions of Southern, Eastern, Western & Central Africa, will be presented at the forum
- The Development and Use of Governance Indicators in Africa – A Research Overview, by IDASA & UNDP Oslo Governance Centre. The aim of this study is to better understand the building and functioning of national governance monitoring systems. In particular, it seeks to understand if governance indicators are used to inform decision-making.
- UNDP Users’ Guide to Civil Society Assessments (2010). The first full review of the current landscape of civil society assessments at global and local levels, providing wide-ranging stakeholders with practical knowledge of, as well as systematic guidance in developing new methods. The guide describes the scope of available methods and ways in which future assessments can further enrich our ability to understand the nature and impact of civil society.
• **Participatory Civil Society Assessments - Experiences from the Field** (2011), looks into UNDP experiences in five countries - Cyprus, Macedonia, Mozambique, Uruguay and Vietnam - in implementing the CIVICUS Civil Society Index.

• **The Future of Participatory Civil Society Assessments: A Conceptual Analysis** (2011), presents four forward-looking pieces by leading academics and practitioners in this field.

• **UNDP Guidance Note on Country-Led Democratic Governance Assessments** (2009). This Practice Note is based on the experiences of selected Country Offices and outlines the principal objective for UNDP’s engagement: to support national ownership and capacity development of national partners to be able to undertake and use governance assessments to enhance democratic governance.

• **UNDP Guidance Note on Fostering Social Accountability: From Principle to Practice** (2010). This guidance note details how the principles of social accountability are already an integral part of UNDP’s approach to human development. It provides an overview of definitions and the principles of social accountability and offers guidance on how to incorporate the practice of social accountability into programming, illustrated by examples of how it is currently being operationalized in different contexts and regions.


• **Bridging the gaps: citizens, organisations and dissociation, Civil Society Index summary report: 2008-2011. CIVICUS.** The report summarises findings emerging from over 2,000 pages of country reports in 30 different countries which implemented the Civil Society Index, and captures some startling findings. As well as recording an increase in the volatility of civil society space and challenges in government–civil society relations, the report brings to the fore an emerging and worrying disconnect between citizens, which are participating and taking action in informal and unstructured ways, and CSOs, who have not always been able to live up to citizens’ high expectations or offer meaningful routes to participation.