

MONITORING RETURNED ASSETS

A TOOLKIT FOR CIVIL
SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

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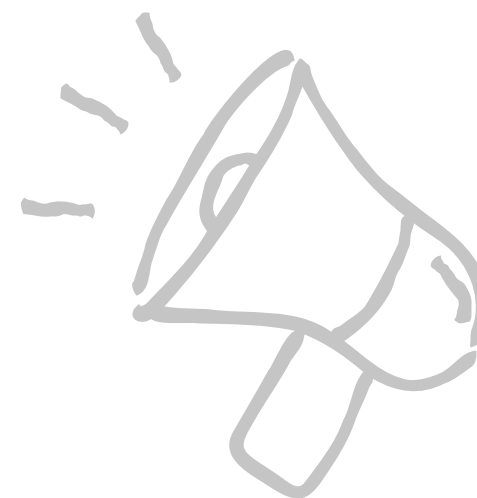
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INTRODUCTION

Efforts to recover, return, and responsibly manage the proceeds of corruption have gained increasing global attention in recent years. As more jurisdictions strengthen their asset recovery frameworks and as international cooperation expands, the question of how returned assets are used—and whether they truly benefit the public—has become more central to anti-corruption work worldwide.

Civil society organisations (CSOs), although historically operating on the margins of asset recovery, have been increasingly recognised as essential actors in promoting transparency, accountability, and public participation in asset return processes. A particular and growing area of CSO work has been in monitoring the return itself – both formally as part of restitution processes and independently of them.

This toolkit has been developed to support CSOs in this monitoring role. Its purpose is to provide civil society with a clear and practical foundation for understanding the asset return landscape and how civil society monitoring can help enhance transparency, accountability and participation. It does this through exploring emerging experiences and suggesting concrete methods to carry out the effective monitoring of returned assets.

The toolkit is structured across three parts. **Part 1** introduces the core concepts that shape asset recovery and return. It outlines the policy frameworks of these processes, examining both international instruments and regional or civil society-driven standards. It also provides an overall introduction to the topic of civil society engagement in the monitoring of recovered assets. Finally, this part provides a brief analysis and illustrative examples of how national laws can facilitate civil society engagement in asset monitoring, particularly through mechanisms such as access to information and structured avenues for citizen participation.

INTRODUCTION

Part 2 provides detailed examples of civil society experiences in monitoring returned assets and draws out key lessons to learn from them. It analyses both formal and informal models of civil society involvement, distinguishing contexts in which CSOs are explicitly recognised in the governance structure of asset return mechanisms from situations in which CSOs act independently. It then identifies factors that shape the feasibility and scope of monitoring efforts, including the legal environment, access to information, institutional openness, operational capacity, and the broader civic space. Finally, by synthesising diverse examples—from large-scale international returns to domestic confiscation processes—it distils common challenges, lessons and practical insights that can guide future monitoring efforts.

Part 3 is a structured toolkit designed to help CSOs plan and implement monitoring of recovered and returned assets. This part translates the lessons learned into practical guidance, offering step-by-step considerations for initiating monitoring activities, assessing organisational capacity, mapping stakeholders, and analysing risk. It also outlines key legal and institutional frameworks that can support monitoring efforts and serve as advocacy entry points for broader reform. It then presents concrete tools and methodologies for different types of monitoring, including case-based monitoring, institutional monitoring, and financial tracking, and provides additional considerations. Finally, this part ends with a list of further resources to support continued learning, collaboration, and capacity building among organisations entering or expanding their work in asset monitoring.

INTRODUCTION

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to develop this toolkit combines several sources. It draws on a review of international and national policy frameworks, including international and regional conventions, principles, and policy instruments relevant to asset recovery and return. It incorporates interviews with practitioners, experts and CSOs that have engaged directly in monitoring recovered assets, bringing first-hand experience to the analysis. It further relies on case studies and published literature documenting successful and challenging examples from a variety of jurisdictions. Finally, it integrates insights from CiFAR's own long-term work supporting CSOs in asset recovery and return across multiple regions.

This toolkit does not prescribe a single model for CSO monitoring, as contexts, capacities and engagement opportunities vary widely, but rather aims to provide civil society actors with a structured reference that can be adapted to specific circumstances. By combining practical evidence and actionable tools, the toolkit seeks to strengthen the capacity of CSOs to contribute meaningfully to transparency and accountability in the return and use of recovered assets, ensuring that these resources ultimately serve the public good.

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ASSET RETURNS AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

PART 1: ASSET RETURNS AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY



In this part, we introduce the concepts and processes of asset return and monitoring, along with the legal and policy frameworks that guide them and the mechanisms through which civil society can engage in asset return monitoring. Finally, we briefly analyse and provide illustrative examples of how national laws can facilitate civil society engagement in asset monitoring.

1.1. INTRODUCING ASSET RECOVERY AND RETURN

What is asset return?

Asset return is the **legal and administrative process by which assets illicitly acquired through corruption or other crimes are recovered and repatriated to their rightful owners**. In practice, for the recovery of assets located in jurisdictions different from where they were originally stolen from (international asset recovery), this means transferring these assets from the destination country - country where the assets are located - to its source country or directly to individuals, communities or entities who were the prior lawful owners and who were potentially harmed by the crimes.^[1] In cases where assets are confiscated in the same country where the crime took place – so-called domestic recovery – the transfer will often take place by the same authorities that seized them but can also be directed towards victim or affected community confiscation.

In most international cases, asset return is a negotiated process between the destination and source or origin country. Within the framework of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), the source or origin country would usually obtain a confiscation order within its national court system, before requesting the destination country to initiate its own proceedings to confiscate and transfer the assets. If the funds consist of embezzled public funds or if the requesting country can show prior ownership, then the UNCAC requires ownership.^[1] However, in most cases, it is challenging to prove direct connection to public funds and therefore confiscation will be subject to a negotiated return.^[2]

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Domestic institutions play key roles at each stage. The source country typically involves law enforcement or anti-corruption agencies to investigate and make the formal request for repatriation. Its courts or prosecutors may also confirm state ownership of the assets.

The destination country normally freezes and confiscates the proceeds under its own law, then cooperates in handing them over. In some cases, civil society and the media are included as third party, and when not, support transparency and accountability in each step of the process.^[4] In some returns processes, international partners and agencies such as the World Bank provide technical assistance, oversight or support in the process. It may also be the case that civil proceedings are initiated in one or both jurisdictions, or that the source country directly brings a claim in the destination country. Settlements may also be agreed with the individuals suspected of stealing public funds.

For the purposes of civil society monitoring the different types of return bring differences in how returns are carried out and in information availability and so it is important to become acquainted with how cases are proceeding when taking steps to monitor return processes.

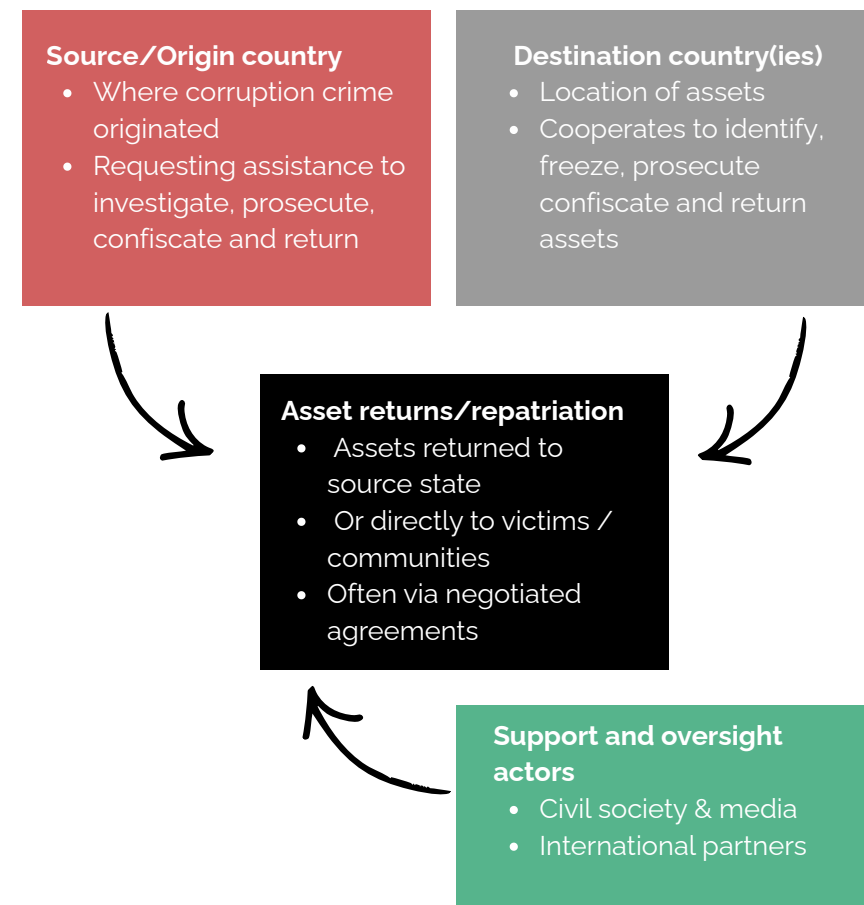


Figure 1: asset return actors

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What is asset return monitoring?

An important role that civil society plays in asset return for public accountability is monitoring the return process. Monitoring of asset returns can be broadly defined as the oversight, tracking and evaluation of the process of return and of the use of returned assets. The aims of this are usually to ensure that confiscated assets are effectively repatriated, disposed of or used for their intended purpose, and that the process itself is transparent, accountable and free from abuse.^[5] It is recommended that returned assets be managed transparently, with clear records and accountability at every stage.^[6]

Civil society and other non-state actors play an important role of oversight and monitoring, from independently assessing returned funds to serving on monitoring boards alongside government officials and international partners.^[7]

International legal and policy frameworks relevant for asset return and monitoring

International and regional legal instruments provide for the effective recovery, return and monitoring of assets. Key frameworks define the principles and processes by which illicitly acquired assets are repatriated and managed. Increasingly, principles have also included the role of civil society and the need for CSO engagement.

I. The UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC)

The UNCAC is the primary global anti-corruption treaty and devotes an entire chapter (Chapter V) to asset recovery. Article 51 sets asset return as a fundamental principle, obligating State Parties to afford one another the widest measure of co-operation and assistance in returning assets to their lawful owners. Specifically, **Article 57** establishes the mechanisms for returning and disposing of confiscated property.

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Article 57(3) requires in cases of embezzled of public funds or of the laundering of embezzled public funds that funds are directly returned from the destination to the source country. In other cases – where the cases relate to other corruption offences under the UNCAC – then State Parties to the UNCAC should return the money when prior ownership or damage can be established. In all other cases, they should give consideration to returning source State and prioritise returning assets to their prior legitimate owners or compensating the victims of the crime. Finally, **Article 57(5)** encourages States to conclude case-by-case arrangements governing the final disposal of confiscated property.

II. The Common African Position on Asset Recovery (CAPAR)

The Common African Position on Asset Recovery is an African Union-developed policy instrument adopted in 2020 to guide continent-wide recovery and the reuse of illicit assets in Africa. The policy instrument is broken down into four key pillars and includes cross cutting issues.

- **Pillar 2** focuses on the recovery and return of assets and it generally calls on African States to simplify legal/technical procedures and hasten freezing, seizure and repatriation of illicitly acquired assets.^[8]
- **Pillar 3** contains provisions that speak to the management of recovered assets. It requires each State to establish clear policies and institutions to preserve returned assets, ensure transparency, including permitting monitoring the use of recovered assets by interested and relevant stakeholders, and use the funds for social and development projects. Pillar 3 also requires that, upon return, a government have the power to invest or dispose of assets and to direct proceeds into special asset accounts or funds.
- Finally, in **Pillar 4**, it recommends civil society and stakeholder participation, allowing and supporting voluntary initiatives and mechanisms that contribute to greater accountability in asset recovery.^[9]

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III. The GFAR Principles on the Disposition and Transfer of Confiscated Stolen Assets

The Global Forum on Asset Recovery (GFAR) was a global asset recovery meeting that took place in 2017.^[10] It established ten principles to guide state collaboration on returning stolen assets.^[11] GFAR's first principle calls for establishing strong partnership through regular dialogue, and Principle 2 urges shared interests and mutual agreements on return arrangements. These principles ensure that asset return processes reflect both countries' needs while being in alignment with UNCAC provisions.

GFAR Principles 4, 8 and 10, provide for transparency, accountability and civil society inclusion. **Principle 4** mandates that both transferring and receiving States guarantee transparency and accountability in the return process, including making information on asset transfers and administration public. **Principle 8** endorses the use of case-specific agreements, as provided for in Article 57 of UNCAC, to spell out how confiscated assets will be administered and monitored. **Principle 10** then requires the engagement of non-governmental stakeholders such as independent civil society organisations in designing and overseeing the return of proceeds. In practice, these principles have led to return agreements that include public reporting obligations and consultation with civil society.

IV. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Recommended Principles on Human Rights and Asset Recovery

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has framed asset recovery within a broader human-rights approach. The OHCHR Recommended Principles on Human Rights and Asset Recovery underscore that anti-corruption actions, including asset return, operate within existing human rights obligations^[12]

Principle 4 highlights the need to ensure the progressive realisation of economic, social and cultural rights through international cooperation on corruption and asset recovery. This ties the process of asset recovery to the advancement of human rights and development and supports a rights-based argument that returns serve the public good and support social objectives.

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Principles 7 and **8** focus on the allocation and use of returned assets. They highlight that the allocation of repatriated funds should be carried out in an accountable, transparent and participatory manner. Similar in some aspects to Principle 4, Principle 8 goes further to state that returned resources must be used in ways that realise human rights. It calls on States to channel recovered assets into development projects, social protection or other public goods that fulfil citizens' economic and social rights.

V. The Civil Society Principles for Accountable Asset Return

The Civil Society Principles for Accountable Asset Return were developed by a global coalition of civil society, and seek to directly embed transparency, accountability and civil society participation throughout the asset recovery and return process. **Principle 1** states that every step of an asset recovery case should be conducted transparently and accountably. Authorities are urged to publish, at the earliest opportunity, information such as case names, the legal basis for recovery, the types and values of assets involved, planned return timelines, negotiating frameworks, and roles for civil society. They should also disclose disbursement details including independent audits and spending reports in an accessible format.^[13] **Principle 2** states that all recovered assets should be traceable by the general public at every stage. In practice, this could mean ring-fencing funds in special accounts or independent mechanisms until the assets are fully disbursed.

Principle 3 states that civil society and victims' groups should be able to participate in identifying harm, proposing remedies, and deciding how returned funds are used. CSOs should be empowered to support the victims of the original corruption and monitor asset transfers, fostering transparency and accountability in the return.

Principle 4 states that any bilateral or multilateral return agreements should be made public and include CSO representation. **Principle 6** then goes on to call for independent monitoring mechanisms, including a public complaints procedure. To allow for effective oversight by civil society, **Principle 7** states that broad anti-corruption, procurement, judicial independence, and media freedom norms should be in place and where these are not in place, that alternative arrangements should be made to ensure accountability and transparency. Lastly, **Principle 10** mandates that a wide range of stakeholders be involved in deciding how the returned assets are ultimately used, to ensure the funds are actually used to the benefit of society.

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1.2. CIVIL SOCIETY EXPERIENCE IN ASSET MONITORING

Although globally this remains a relatively new area of civil society engagement, civil society has already been engaged in monitoring recovered assets through a variety of approaches.

The specific approach taken and experience civil society has had depend on several factors. These include:

- ➔ whether the confiscated assets are **physical** (such as buildings, vehicles, companies, or other property) or **financial**, in the form of money deposited in a bank account,
- ➔ whether the recovery process concerns assets already located within the country of origin (**domestic asset recovery**) or assets returned from abroad following an international process involving another jurisdiction (**international asset recovery**),
- ➔ the **predicate offence** involved and the type of proceedings instituted to recover the assets,
- ➔ whether the role of civil society is embedded or formalised into the return monitoring process or whether civil society is monitoring independently.

More operational—but equally important—factors also affect the type and scope of CSO monitoring. These include:

- ➔ the presence and enforcement of **laws** and other legal tools facilitating CSO engagement;
- ➔ the **accessibility of information** on the use and management of returned assets;
- ➔ the understanding and **technical capacity** of CSOs to engage in asset monitoring;
- ➔ the **openness, trust, and experience** of public authorities in cooperating with civil society; and the overall operating environment for civil society.

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In more restrictive or authoritarian contexts, the safety and security of CSOs involved in asset monitoring also become crucial considerations. Further factors to consider are looking at what exactly is being monitored. Broadly, monitoring can be divided into the following areas:

1. **Case-based monitoring:** monitoring the process of returning assets, including the concluding of case-based return agreements and the end use of assets related to specific cases. Case-based monitoring often involves following domestic or international court decisions, following negotiations or discussions to return or reuse confiscated assets and, during return and disbursal, monitoring whether assets are being used for their stated purposes. This can take place whether the return is through a specific mechanism or not.
2. **Institutional monitoring:** examining how public authorities, for example asset management agencies, anti-corruption bodies, and other government entities, manage recovered funds. This can involve observing and assessing the availability of information provided by institutions on managed assets and their disposal, and advocating for transparency, accountability, and efficiency in the general management of recovered assets.
3. **Financial monitoring:** CSOs can also monitor how transfers occur, ensuring that funds are deposited into a dedicated account or fund where required, that they remain traceable, and that any interest accrued during the return process is properly identified and accounted for. This is particularly the case when returned funds are transferred for general budgetary purposes rather than specific projects.

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Other areas of engagement related to asset monitoring, though not directly part of the monitoring process itself, can include:

- ➔ **Collecting and organising data** on recovered assets and their use, to promote transparency, expand public knowledge, and provide practitioners with useful analytical tools; and
- ➔ **Citizen engagement and awareness-raising** regarding returned assets, including involving citizens in monitoring activities and public campaigns that highlight how recovered resources are being used.

There are, of course, other key areas of civil society engagement around asset returns that are equally fundamental to ensuring transparency, accountability, and efficiency. These include advocating for legal and institutional reforms to improve the management of recovered assets or to formalise CSO participation; taking part in public discussions and consultations on the intended use of returned assets and the identification of beneficiaries; pursuing strategic litigation to support evidence gathering, obtain case information, or represent victims; and, in some cases, participating directly in the use and management of recovered assets.

While these activities are all vital, this toolkit focuses specifically on how civil society can—and does—engage in the monitoring of assets.

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1.3. WHAT DOES A SOLID LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CSO ASSET MONITORING LOOK LIKE?



Before delving into the practical steps and tools for CSO asset monitoring, we first want to discuss what a solid legal framework to facilitate CSO monitoring look like. The success of CSO-led asset monitoring depends on a variety of factors — including access to information, the openness of civic space and government institutions, security conditions, and the capacity of CSOs themselves.

This section considers the national and international legal instruments that establish the right to information, promote transparency and accountability in asset recovery processes, and create mechanisms or frameworks through which civil society can engage with state institutions. Understanding these frameworks is crucial for CSOs, both to identify existing entry points for engagement and to advocate for necessary legal and policy reforms that strengthen their monitoring role.

Alongside existing international instruments and principles that provide for transparency in asset returns and inclusion of CSOs - briefly analysed in Part 1 - civil society equally relies on other legal tools and mechanisms to participate in asset recovery, return and monitoring.

Beyond the mere existence of these laws, of course, their effective implementation and enforcement are essential to ensure they really support asset monitoring efforts.

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Generally, it is important to note that **the role of CSOs in asset recovery is rarely formalised in national legal frameworks**. References to CSO participation tend to appear only in negotiated bilateral memoranda of understanding or cooperation agreements, rather than in binding legislation, despite sustained advocacy efforts pushing for such inclusion. Therefore, they often result from negotiations and conditions imposed by jurisdictions prior to the return process rather than being included in national legal frameworks. Developments such as the 2022 UK Asset Recovery Framework, which, although not legally binding, encourages the participation of civil society organisations in asset recovery processes, including in returned asset monitoring^[14], nevertheless represents positive change towards more formalised roles for CSO monitoring.

Other relevant legislation however plays a key role in practically making CSO monitoring of recovered assets possible. Below is an overview of different kinds of laws and policy tools that are important for CSO monitoring of returned assets and can therefore serve as advocacy objectives for CSOs looking to foster and enable the inclusion of CSOs in this process.

➔ **Transparency and access-to-information laws** are some of the most important tools that can facilitate asset monitoring, if well implemented. Such laws not only enable citizens and civil society to request and obtain information but also oblige state institutions to proactively publish data, including on recovered assets. CSOs can leverage these access-to-information laws to advocate for or compel the publication of cooperation agreements, case updates, asset inventories, and reports on the allocation and use of recovered assets.

Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act in 2011 made civil society use of access to information in asset recovery possible by establishing a legally enforceable right for any person or organisation to obtain public records without showing personal interest, imposing clear disclosure duties and timelines on public institutions, overriding secrecy law. This allowed CSOs such as SERAP to compel disclosure through litigation when authorities failed to release this kind of information.^[15]

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Switzerland's Freedom of Information framework (Federal Act on Freedom of Information in the Administration) grants any person the right to request access to official federal documents and obtain information about their contents without needing to show a particular interest, obliges authorities to disclose such documents unless specific exceptions apply, and thus enables civil society to obtain administrative records relevant to asset recovery processes (such as restitution reports and transparency commitments) and monitor compliance with asset return transparency commitments. The Act however exempts documents that are part of ongoing criminal investigations, judicial proceedings, or mutual legal assistance cases from disclosure.^[16]

Despite the growing number of countries adopting legislation on transparency and access to information, analysts note that the effective use and enforcement of these instruments remain limited in many regions and areas^[17] Also, confidentiality of individuals involved, and the sensitivity of ongoing cases often limit the information that can be shared with citizens and civil society.^[18]

Asset recovery laws - understood as a single or collection of legal instruments governing the various stages of the asset recovery process - can also play an important role in strengthening transparency and accountability. These laws typically include the establishment and mandate of asset recovery bodies, rules for managing recovered assets and provisions regulating bilateral mutual legal assistance. These laws can be enacted as comprehensive legislative "packages".

Nigeria's 2022 Proceeds of Crime Act obliges relevant agencies to maintain a central database and inventory of all seized and recovered assets, including details on their location, value, condition, and legal status, creating a legal basis for transparency and enabling civil society to monitor the management and use of recovered funds. However, the implementation of these provisions according to CSO assessments, remains weak.^[19]

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Italy's legislation on the social reuse of confiscated assets for example, discussed in Part 2, clearly embeds the principle of transparency in the management and use of confiscated assets, enabling CSOs to both request information and obtain it.

France's 2022 new legal asset recovery framework incorporates transparency and accountability principles for the restitution of “biens mal acquis” (illicitly acquired assets) by requiring that information on the transfer, administration and use of returned proceeds of corruption be made publicly accessible and subject to civil society oversight, including publication of restitution terms and involvement of independent actors, in line GFAR-inspired standards.

The **United Kingdom's** Framework for Transparent and Accountable Asset Return, published in January 2022, is the first country-level policy that explicitly sets out how proceeds of corruption and other criminal funds should be returned in a transparent and accountable manner by recommending the publication of memoranda of understanding and other agreements governing asset returns and the recording of all returned assets, and by inviting civil society engagement in monitoring their use.^[20]

➔ **Other asset recovery policy tools.** Governance documents regulating the functioning of asset recovery agencies, such as Terms of References or Guidelines, if publicly available, may also include transparency, accountability or integrity requirements that can be used by CSOs to request information and hold these institutions accountable.

Mozambique and **Kenya's** regulations establishing asset recovery agencies assign these bodies comprehensive responsibilities to collect, record, analyse, and manage detailed statistical data on seized, frozen, and recovered assets, maintain inventories and case records, coordinate and share information with national and international authorities, and ensure proper reporting on the status, disposition, and management of recovered assets within their respective institutional frameworks.^[21]

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- ➔ **Parliamentary commissions** may also be useful to CSOs: their oversight mandate can demand detailed reporting from relevant agencies and increase transparency on recovered assets. For example, see the **UK parliamentary Committee of Public Accounts** 2016 report on 'Confiscation orders: progress review'.^[21]
- ➔ **Laws on victim compensation** can contribute to stronger asset recovery oversight by establishing clear procedures for identifying, allocating, and distributing recovered assets to those harmed by corruption and related crimes. By requiring authorities to document losses, verify claims, and publicly account for how recovered funds are used, these laws can introduce additional layers of transparency and auditing into the recovery process.
 - For an overview of existing laws regulating victim compensation, see **UNCAC Coalition's 'International Database on Corruption Damage Reparation and Legal Standing for Victims of Corruption'**.^[23]
- ➔ **Public procurement laws** can also empower CSOs to hold governments to account. Laws requiring transparent procurement processes mean that contracts funded by returned assets should be open to public scrutiny. If these various mechanisms of safeguarding and inquiring on utilisation of funds fail, and where local laws grant legal standing, CSOs or victim groups can even intervene in court or appeal decisions to highlight public interest concerns in an asset recovery case.^[1]
- ➔ **Public Participation Laws** can also help civil society organizations and citizens to participate in asset monitoring by allowing them to attend hearings, submit comments, and participate in decision-making processes related to public resources. This may include provisions that require authorities to consult stakeholders, disclose relevant data, and respond to public inputs, thereby enabling systematic monitoring of the management, restitution, and use of recovered assets.
- ➔ Finally, **whistleblower protection laws** are another instrument that can strengthen CSO monitoring by safeguarding individuals who expose corruption, misuse, or mismanagement of recovered assets. By ensuring confidentiality and protection from retaliation, these laws foster an environment where insiders can safely share information. In practice, such laws can lead to the disclosure of evidence irregularities in asset return agreements, or misuse of funds once assets are recovered - information that is often inaccessible through official reporting channels.



2

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY- LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING

PART 2: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY-LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING



Relying on interviews and publications of key civil society organisations as well as on CiFAR's experience in supporting civil society over the past years, in this part we explore the different experiences and approaches that civic actors have gained in monitoring the process of asset recovery in its final phase, which include 1) the processes leading to asset returns and 2) monitoring assets that have been transferred to the state of origin, or the implementing agencies in national recoveries, and are already being disbursed or used by the state or other actors.

This part is divided into two sections:

- a) an assessment of the **different approaches to civil society engagement** in recovered asset monitoring;
- b) a reflection on **lessons learned and recommendations** from these experiences for other CSOs wishing to engage on asset monitoring

2.1. INTRODUCTION

As discussed in Part 1, the importance of transparency and the role of civil society are increasingly recognised in asset recovery processes. Today, most international recovery arrangements have provisions that includes principles and practices on transparency and integrity or on the role of domestic CSOs in monitoring or otherwise contributing to recovery mechanisms.^[25]

Although the path towards the full recognition of the role of CSOs in international recoveries has not been straightforward, with some recent cases seen as setbacks by civil society, the international community has begun to recognise CSO participation as an essential principle in asset return, as seen in the GFAR principles.

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In cases where the role of civil society has not been formally recognised, especially at the national level, anti-corruption and asset recovery agencies nevertheless often rely on CSOs to support legal reform or participate in monitoring as a credible stakeholder.

At the same time though, publicly available information, especially on domestic recovery cases, is still insufficient: access to information on recovered assets probably remains the biggest challenge in the involvement of civil society and informing citizens about how their assets are being used.

Generally, the practice of monitoring recovered assets in a structured and continued way is quite new to civil society globally. Only in two countries has civil society had a more structured, long-term experience in monitoring asset return – Italy and Nigeria, as we will see. In other countries and regions, experience of civil society has been more recent, although equally important.

Several reasons exist for the relatively newer involvement of civil society in recovered asset monitoring:

- ➡ In recent years many **more asset recovery cases** globally have started advancing more intensively to the return stage, both domestically and internationally; the impact of recovered assets has therefore started to emerge, inspiring more returns.
- ➡ **Anti-corruption bodies and governments** have started equipping themselves with tools and resources to manage assets, while relevant asset recovery laws have been adopted and new dedicated agencies created, opening more space for CSO engagement;
- ➡ Authorities have started **publishing information** on recovered assets. This can be seen in many areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, but also in the Global North, for example in the European Union, UK, Switzerland or in the US.
- ➡ **Strengthened international cooperation** or restitution agreements, providing for CSOs to engage in monitoring and oversight.

At this crucial juncture it is therefore important that civil society can effectively respond to changes in the global asset recovery landscape by having the tools necessary to monitor asset returns.

PART 2: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY-LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING

2.2. BEST PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES IN CIVIL SOCIETY-LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING

To assess past and existing examples of CSO engagement in asset monitoring, we have opted to structure this part to look at different forms of CSO monitoring using one key criterium: the presence or absence of a formal recognition and involvement of civil society in the asset monitoring process. The purpose of this is to identify best practice and lessons from CSO monitoring both when CSOs are **formally involved in a return process** and when they **are acting independently** outside it. This factor and the CSO experiences described here span across the three CSO monitoring areas identified in Part 1 – case monitoring, institutional monitoring and financial monitoring. We have aimed to ensure geographical diversity and different levels of experience as well as areas of engagement by the organisation in the examples covered.

Experiences of formalised CSO asset monitoring

An increasing number of recently signed bilateral and multilateral agreements to return the confiscated proceeds of corruption now include provisions outlining a consultative or monitoring role for civil society in asset return processes. These provisions range from clearly defined responsibilities to more general acknowledgments of the importance of civil society's involvement.

International return processes that formally recognize civil society's role can generally be grouped into two categories: those in which this role is **integrated into the governance structure** of the asset return mechanism, and those where monitoring of the asset return is **external to the return mechanism** but explicitly assigned to civil society.

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Integrated role of civil society

Integrated CSO asset monitoring occurs when the oversight role of civil society is embedded within the recovery mechanism negotiated between the returning governments. In such cases, civil society is incorporated into the governance and/or oversight structure responsible for managing the returned assets. This arrangement is typically found in what CiFAR refers to as “third-party” or “independent” international asset return mechanisms, which establish management and oversight structures external to the jurisdictions involved. These mechanisms are negotiated between different states and often involve international organisations, such as the United Nations or the World Bank, to oversee the disbursement and management of the returned funds^[26].

This model presents significant opportunities, including stronger oversight and anti-corruption mechanisms that operate independently of the governments involved, while also facilitating the participation of civil society. However, such mechanisms can entail high administrative costs and demand considerable resources. Their successful establishment and implementation also depend on the strong political will of all parties, particularly when it comes to ensuring the meaningful involvement of non-state actors.^[27]

Two primary examples of integrated civil society involvement in international asset returns are found in the cases of **Uzbekistan** and **Kazakhstan**.

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A large corruption and money laundering case involving Gulnara Karimova, the eldest daughter of the late President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov^[28] involved the return of up to USD 1 billion in assets from Switzerland to Uzbekistan.^[29]

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The confiscated assets linked to the Karimova case are being repatriated to Uzbekistan through the “Uzbekistan Vision 2030 Fund” (Ishonch Fund), a UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund designed to ensure transparency, accountability, and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. The restitution framework was negotiated between Switzerland and Uzbekistan through a framework agreement concluded in 2020, followed by a second, legally binding agreement in 2022.^[30] These negotiations addressed conditions for the transparent and accountable use of the returned assets. Notably, after the conclusion of the 2020 framework agreement, Uzbek and international civil society actors were able to advocate for meaningful civil society participation and robust transparency and accountability provisions in the final restitution architecture.^[31]

The return has been structured in tranches in an attempt to ensure proper oversight and developmental impact.^[32] The first tranche, amounting to approximately USD 131 million, was formalized in the 2022 agreement, while the second tranche, worth around USD 182 million, was agreed upon in 2025.^[33]

According to the 2024 Annual Narrative Report, the Fund had allocated a total of USD 67 million across its two flagship projects, both aligned with Uzbekistan’s national reform agenda and the SDGs.^[34] Some of these projects featured:

- A health project of USD 43.5 million strengthening healthcare across 227 perinatal centres, aiming to improve newborn survival rates. It featured training for over 11 thousand healthcare professionals—and updated obstetrics and gynaecology and six newborn care protocols to standardize clinical practice. Procurement of essential medical equipment further aimed to enhance life-saving care delivery.
- An education project of USD 23.5 million aiming to advance quality and inclusive digital learning in Uzbekistan. Fifty schools were selected, three Teacher Training Centres were designated as Pedagogical Centres of Excellence, and trained 400 teachers, educators, and therapists in inclusive education methodologies, among other initiatives.^[35]

Part of the return structure includes a first-of-its-kind Civil Society Advisory Council (CSAC). The group is responsible for advising the management structure on the re-use of the assets, with the purpose of promoting interaction between the Fund and civil society in Uzbekistan and abroad, and to disseminate the results of programmes funded by the returned funds in Uzbek society.^[36] It includes representatives of Uzbek and international civil society from different fields, as well as academia.^[37]

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While a positive example of structured engagement of CSOs from the asset-origin country in the return process, it should be noted that the Civil Society Advisory Council's role remains formally consultative rather than a mandatory part of the Fund's decision-making process.^[38] As the initiative is still ongoing, a comprehensive assessment of its effectiveness and challenges will only be possible at a later stage.

In general, it should be noted that the CSAC is not directly responsible for leading the monitoring of the end use of the returned assets. Rather, its role focuses on participating in the Fund's monitoring and evaluation processes and providing advice on implementation and impact. Within this framework, the Council's Terms of Reference outline the members' mandates, which include the ability to conduct on-site visits and interviews with project beneficiaries, as well as reviewing project and progress reports prepared by the Fund's Secretariat. The governance structure also requires the Fund's Management Committee to regularly provide the Council with reports, updates, and other relevant documents, while granting Council members the right to request additional information when necessary. Importantly, Council members are entitled to report concerns to the Fund's management structure, with the Management Committee required to respond and, where appropriate, take corrective action. The Terms of Reference also allocate limited financial resources to support monitoring activities, including reimbursement of travel expenses.^[39]

KAZAKHSTAN – THE BOTA FOUNDATION

A well-known international asset return case that embedded civil society's role in the management and oversight structure was the BOTA Foundation in Kazakhstan. This earlier case was the result of negotiations between Kazakhstan, Switzerland, and the United States, with the World Bank's involvement for the return of USD 115 million originated from criminal investigations in Switzerland over suspicions of money laundering in Kazakhstan and a bribery investigation in the U.S.^[40]

Through this agreement, the BOTA Foundation was established as an independent entity to manage and oversee the returned assets and integrated civil society participation across all key components of the process. International NGOs were responsible for project implementation;

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Kazakh CSOs participated in decision-making and governance through representation on the Board of Trustees, through which it was able to monitor the use of the returned funds.^[41]

The BOTA Foundation's mandate was to improve the welfare of vulnerable children and youth through targeted investments in health, education, and social services. The World Bank engaged the NGO IREX, in partnership with Save the Children, to establish and oversee BOTA's operations, aiming to ensure that the returned funds were effectively managed and used for their intended social purpose.^[42]

Through its programmes, the BOTA Foundation reached over 208,000 young people and disadvantaged families across Kazakhstan: 154,241 beneficiaries from 95,000 poor households were enrolled under its conditional cash-transfer programme; over 600 grants were provided to local NGOs; nearly 900 scholarships were given to disadvantaged youth to attend university.^[43] According to evaluation reports, the BOTA Foundation's work in Kazakhstan generated social, economic, and institutional impact. It significantly improved the welfare, health, and education of impoverished families across the country, contributing to the breaking of intergenerational cycles of poverty through targeted social protection and access to education. By investing in people, especially vulnerable children and youth, the Foundation strengthened the foundations for equitable growth and social inclusion.

Beyond direct assistance, BOTA played a pivotal role in institutional strengthening. Through its grant programs, it enhanced the capacity of hundreds of local NGOs engaged in social welfare, some of which went on to establish a national coalition for child and youth welfare.^[44]

The BOTA Foundation return framework was praised for its robust anti-corruption and integrity safeguards, its clear independence from government interference, its positive social impact in Kazakhstan, and its capacity for innovation and learning. However, challenges included the highly bureaucratic and costly nature of the Fund's operations, as well as the limited sustainability of the Foundation's achievements once the returned funds were fully spent.^[45]

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Regarding the role of civil society in monitoring the re-use of assets, this was primarily achieved through the inclusion of CSOs within the Foundation's governance body. This arrangement—combined with the Foundation's regular publication of activity reports—enabled civil society and the media to access information and oversee the overall use of funds. However, as in the Uzbekistan Vision 2030 return, civil society actors did not directly conduct field audits on the re-use of assets, as this responsibility was assigned to the World Bank.^[46]

While the overall BOTA Foundation model may be difficult to replicate given its specific political and institutional context, several of its best practices involving civil society offer valuable lessons for other settings. These include embedding CSOs within key decision-making and oversight structures to strengthen transparency, ensuring open access to information through regular public reporting, and maintaining robust anti-corruption and integrity mechanisms.

External but explicit role of civil society

Several international asset returns since the mid-2010s to Nigeria have included specific civil society engagement in return processes and asset monitoring through the formal designation of CSOs to lead or contribute to the oversight of returned funds. These arrangements have been typically established as part of Memorandums of Understanding negotiated between the jurisdictions involved related to the return.

The examples of this are found in a number of asset return cases to **Nigeria** — specifically, the “Abacha II” return of USD 322 million from Switzerland, the return of approx. USD 1 million from the US to Nigeria, related to former governor of Bayelsa state Alamiyeseigha, and the “Abacha III” return of USD 311 million from the United States and Jersey.

Another case that saw the explicit involvement of civil society in monitoring an international return was the 2021 return between **Moldova** and the UK returning approx. USD 602,000, also analysed below.

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Building on a decade of civil society efforts to strengthen oversight and transparency in asset recovery, the Nigeria cases represent a progressive effort to strengthen both the framework and the practical enforcement of transparency and anti-corruption measures in the re-use of returned assets, while establishing clearer rules for CSO engagement. However, this trajectory was not sustained in a most recent case—the return of the Abacha loot amounting to USD 52 million from the US in 2025—which featured weaker transparency provisions and excluded civil society participation that had been integral to the earlier cases.^[47]

Interviews conducted with CSOs and experts also highlighted insufficient provisions in the Nigerian legal and institutional system that would facilitate external and CSO monitoring of recovered assets, particularly in the management of domestically recovered assets. Notably, although the 2022 Proceeds of Crime Act mandates transparency in how funds are used, it does not require civil society participation. This is in tension with bilateral and multilateral agreements often concluded with Nigeria in international returns, which have included formal roles for civil society. Structural difficulties—such as the lack of a centralized asset-recovery agency, overlapping, fragmented mandates across 16 agencies, and lack of law enforcement capacity—have hindered accountability, leaving civil-society efforts growing but constrained by the sensitive nature of law-enforcement work.^[48]

NIGERIA - THE “ABACHA II” RETURN

This case saw the return of USD 322.5 million from Switzerland to Nigeria between 2017 and 2023. The funds were directed toward the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme of the Nigerian government, under the Nigeria National Social Safety Net Project designed to address key social challenges and poverty in Nigeria.^[49] The return mechanism was triggered by a court decision in Switzerland in 2014, linking the repatriation of the funds to the condition that the World Bank would monitor their reuse.^[50] Consequently, diplomatic negotiations led to a MoU signed between Nigeria and Switzerland, which explicitly assigned a monitoring role to civil society alongside the World Bank.

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The return saw the direct disbursement of cash transfers to nearly two million beneficiaries from poor and vulnerable households, which saw their social protection enhanced, according to CSO reports.^[51] The impact of the returned assets also aligned with sustainable development goals (SDGs) on poverty reduction and social inclusion. This included meeting basic household needs such as feeding and paying for children's school fees, as well as covering health-related expenses like hospital bills and medication. Beneficiaries also reported using the transfers to start or expand small businesses, engage in small-scale trading, and to pay rent, helping them stabilise their living conditions and support longer-term income generation.^[52]

The Nigerian CSO ANEEJ (Africa Network for Environment and Economic Justice) was selected to carry out this task with the agreement of the Nigerian government. The initiative was implemented with external funding initially from the UK and later from Switzerland, under the project "MANTRA – Monitoring Recovered Assets for Transparency and Accountability."^[53]

The MANTRA monitoring methodology aimed to ensure that the Abacha funds – USD 335.9 million, including accrued interest – were used for the intended beneficiaries. The methodology combined "upstream" (or "financial") monitoring, which tracked the flow of funds from the Central Bank of Nigeria to the National Cash Transfer Office, with "downstream" monitoring that verified payments to actual beneficiaries through spot checks and field visits. The programme final beneficiaries were identified through an existing Nigerian Social Register, a database of poor and vulnerable citizens developed with World Bank support. The managing agency drew names from this register to ensure fairness and to minimise political interference.^[54]

The project foresaw training of community-based monitors to use geo-location tools for data verification and collaborated closely with local NGOs, government agencies, and payment service providers. In total, the project was reportedly implemented in 36 states, engaging over 1,459 trained monitors. Through these efforts, the project verified payments to almost two million beneficiaries.^[55] ANEEJ reported that most beneficiaries used the funds for small-scale enterprises, education, and healthcare, resulting in some slightly tangible poverty reduction outcomes.^[56]

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The monitoring methodology also included a grievance and feedback mechanism to record and address issues reported by beneficiaries during the monitoring process. Beneficiaries could submit complaints related to payment delays, deductions, or irregularities through community monitors, local civil-society partners, and designated communication channels. Cases were reportedly documented and forwarded to the National Cash Transfer Office for review and follow-up.^[57] The challenges the CSO reported were mostly operational - including delayed or incomplete payments to beneficiaries, limited network connectivity affecting electronic verification, cash shortages during disbursements, and occasional security and coordination issues at payment sites. In some cases, beneficiaries also reported discrepancies in records and communication gaps between national and state offices.^[58]

During its regular reporting on the results of the monitoring, ANEEJ also produced recommendations aiming at improvements in the cash disbursement programme and at promoting transparency in the process with Nigerian authorities as well as among the media and citizens.^[59] One notable limitation of this experience was that the decision on how to use the assets was made solely by the Nigerian and Swiss Governments, without formal consultation of civil society. Civil society has also lamented the lack of an independent trust to manage the assets, which would have facilitated oversight on the return process^[60] and stressed that the disbursed cash transfers (reported at around N5,000-10,000 per household— roughly USD 12–15 at the time) were modest and unlikely to deliver sustained poverty reduction on their own.^[61] However, civil society mentioned that it was able to influence the process by ensuring the embedment of the role of CSOs in the monitoring phase of the return.^[62]

NIGERIA – THE ALAMIEYESEIGHA RETURN TO BAYELSA STATE

Another, smaller international recovery case where the role of civil society was explicitly recognized by the involved governments is linked to the late Bayelsa State governor Alamiyeseigha. The 2023 agreement between the U.S. and Nigeria, which facilitated the return of approximately USD 954,000 to Bayelsa State, includes provisions for independent civil society monitoring and public reporting to ensure transparency, accountability, and proper use of the funds.^[63]

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It is also the first case related to Nigeria where the assets are returned to the state of origin, rather than to the federal government.^[64] In order to include CSO monitoring within the process, the Nigerian government launched a call for expressions of interest detailing the roles and requirements of monitoring CSOs from Bayelsa State in 2023. As of the end of 2025, the selection process was still ongoing, with the NGO ANEEJ providing capacity building to civil society actors from the Bayelsa State to conduct independent monitoring in October 2025. This included carrying out a baseline survey to gather information on the status of the projects to be implemented.^[65] Ahead of the return, ANEEJ has also advocated for the funds to be invested in sustainable public projects, notably in primary healthcare infrastructure, to ensure that the benefits reach the local communities most affected by corruption.^[66]

NIGERIA - "TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT" (ABACHA III) RETURN

In early 2020 the Jersey, the United States and Nigeria governments signed a tripartite asset- agreement to return approximately USD 300 million in forfeited assets to Nigeria.^[67] This came after forfeiture proceedings identified the proceeds of corruption in Nigeria has been laundered through the U.S. financial system and deposited in Jersey bank accounts under Doraville Properties Corporation, a British Virgin Islands company. Subsequently, in 2014, a U.S. Federal Court ordered the forfeiture of these funds linked to corruption during General Abacha's regime.^[68]

The return framework negotiated between the three jurisdictions reflected international best practice principles on asset recovery and was structured around four pillars aimed at promoting transparency and accountability. This was likely linked to requests from asset sending jurisdictions to include such principles and mechanisms.^[69] The funds were allocated for three key national infrastructure projects: the Lagos - Ibadan Expressway, the Abuja - Kano Road, and the Second Niger Bridge.^[70] The implementing agency for these projects were the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority, Julius Berger Nigeria Ltd. and Reynolds Construction Company Ltd., together known as the EPC Contractors.

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The infrastructure projects resulted in the construction of the Second Niger Bridge linking major economic zones, the Abuja–Kano Road promoting intra-national connectivity from north to south, and the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway improving one of Nigeria's most important commercial corridors, which eased transportation for commuters.^[72]

The framework included the recruitment, nationally or internationally, of an independent civil-society organization as third-party monitor, as well as the appointment of an external auditor through the same process. The CSO CLEEN Foundation was selected for this role in 2021. The framework also required the quarterly publication of all financial and narrative statements related to the projects and established an oversight mechanism through a monitoring-management team that met quarterly, bringing together the government, the auditing firm, implementing agencies, and the CLEEN Foundation. The oversight team played a coordinating role in facilitating the release of financial documentation and ensuring that CSOs had access to project information, site visits, and opportunities to share their findings.^[73]

During its monitoring activity, the CLEEN Foundation used an approach that included procurement oversight, spend analysis, and engineering inspections. Regular project site visits were organized, often involving consultative meetings, physical inspections, and unannounced checks. It also used technology-based tools, such as a mobile application for real-time data collection from citizen monitors – aiming to enable local residents near project sites to serve as on-the-ground monitors – and an open-access website to provide public updates on project progress. The group held regular meetings with the Nigerian Ministry of Justice, the Sovereign Investment Authority – which was tasked with project implementation – and external auditors to review financial and implementation reports. A grievance and reporting mechanism was also established, aiming to allow citizens to report concerns or irregularities directly to CLEEN Foundation through an app, the project website, or during field visits, ensuring issues were logged, verified, and escalated to the relevant authorities for action.^[74]

The monitoring results indicated that the three infrastructure projects largely met their core objectives of improving connectivity and public infrastructure, although further oversight was recommended to ensure maintenance and long-term sustainability. The monitoring exercise also faced challenges, particularly with access and cooperation.

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Reportedly, contractors initially blocked site visits and withheld documents, citing security concerns, until the oversight team enforced full access. Because they were engaged before the asset-return funds arrived, many were unaccustomed to civil-society scrutiny and resisted releasing procurement records.^[75]

Some key differences from the Abacha II return from Switzerland included, beyond the differing nature of the funded projects: **(1)** a competitive international selection process for the CSO tasked with monitoring; **(2)** the earmarking of a portion of the recovered funds to cover the costs of monitoring activities, which experts consider an important step for enhancing the sustainability of external asset monitoring; **(3)** the establishment of an oversight team composed of representatives from the Nigerian, U.S., and Jersey governments, the Nigerian Sovereign Investment Authority, the monitoring CSO and the auditing firm; and **(4)** an explicit requirement for government agencies and auditors to provide CSOs with all necessary documents, with the oversight committee empowered to instruct agencies to release information in cases of non-compliance. This arrangement reportedly facilitated access to information throughout the monitoring process.^[76]

Civil society has also highlighted several shortcomings of this case, including—as in the earlier Abacha II case—the limited involvement of CSOs in decision-making on infrastructure projects, insufficiently robust dispute-resolution mechanisms for integrity issues, and a reliance on potentially inadequate local laws.^[77]

THE MOLDOVA - UK FILAT RETURN

In 2021, the UK and Moldova signed an MoU to return approximately GBP 456,000 (approx. USD 602,000), forfeited from the son of the former prime minister Luca Filat, to Moldova, with explicit provisions to channel the recovered funds into social assistance programs. Under the agreement, a local civil society organization, Keystone Moldova, was appointed to monitor the use of the returned funds and the delivery of social services.^[78]

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Keystone Moldova conducted structured monitoring over several phases. According to monitoring reports, the methodology included detailed document reviews, analysis of allocations of personal assistance units and on-site visits to social assistance structures across Moldova to verify that funds from the UK were correctly used to finance personal assistance services for people with severe disabilities.^[79] The monitoring plan covered 36 local units and included review of applicant registers, hiring documentation of personal assistants, budget analyses, and mapping of resource flows. Subsequent monitoring phases assessed not only the financial flows but also the quality and sustainability of services — through interviews with beneficiaries and staff, and via onsite observations and service-delivery checks.^[80]

The monitoring reports documented that the returned funds were used to hire personal assistants for a limited period, enabling the provision of essential support (personal care, household help, daily-life assistance) to vulnerable individuals with severe disabilities. The reports also highlighted structural challenges: delays in hiring, uneven distribution of assistants across local units, part-time or time-limited work contracts, concerns about continuity beyond the short-term funding window, and deficiencies in both the training of assistants and in compliance with established quality standards.^[81] The CSO-led monitoring also faced several operational challenges, including limited geographic coverage in rural areas, inconsistent record-keeping by local authorities, and difficulties accessing beneficiaries due to logistical or restrictions related to COVID 19. Variations in staffing, training, and reporting practices across districts also hindered consistent assessment, while time and resource constraints limiting the depth of observation and verification, according to reports. These factors made it challenging to ensure fully comparable and comprehensive monitoring across all service providers.^[82]

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Independent monitoring

In addition to the formal inclusion cases described in the previous section, several examples exist of civil society engagement in monitoring asset returns in a more informal manner. In many contexts, the role of civil society in monitoring asset recovery has not been formally recognised by state actors. In line with decades of experience in investigation, research and advocacy work on anti-corruption, transparency and related fields, CSOs in many countries have therefore embarked on a variety of actions to ensure that returned assets are used transparently, accountably and for the benefit of victims of corruption and citizens.

In this section, we look at some of these experiences, their contexts and draw some lessons that could be useful to strengthen the work of other CSOs. These examples cover civil society experience in independent monitoring from **Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Italy, Mozambique, and Nigeria**.

ANGOLA – MONITORING THE PIIM CASE

Angolan CSOs in 2024 undertook a first-of-its-kind initiative to monitor the use of returned public funds in Angola. In 2024, the “Platform for Transparency and Truth in the Recovery and Reuse of Recovered Assets” was established, bringing together four civil society organizations, committed to promote transparency by monitoring how recovered assets are managed, identifying beneficiaries, and tracking the allocation of funds.

The group’s 2024 monitoring activities focused on a retrospective analysis of the social reuse of assets recovered from a UK-Angola case, in which approximately USD 500 million embezzled from the Angolan Sovereign Wealth Fund was returned and subsequently reinvested in the “Integrated Municipal Intervention Plan” (PIIM). These recovered public funds were then allocated to finance social infrastructure projects across Angola’s 164 municipalities, covering sectors such as education, health, sanitation, and transport.^[83]

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The monitoring initiative covered four infrastructure projects across different municipalities, each overseen by a member of the civil society Platform. The methodology combined field visits, interviews with residents, local authorities, and contractors, and reviews of public records, legislation, and official documents. Tools included structured interview guides, community consultation questionnaires, document analysis grids, and photographic evidence. Data points were triangulated to assess two key dimensions: (1) transparency—tracking whether and how the recovered funds were allocated to PIIM projects, and (2) accountability—the extent to which planned projects were implemented and delivered tangible benefits to communities.^[84]

Expectedly, the main challenges related to widespread data and information gaps. Official government websites either lacked data or were non-functional, and requests for information from municipal administration and relevant authorities often went unanswered. Legal and bureaucratic barriers limited access to contracting and budgetary documentation. In several cases, monitoring teams faced contradictions between public statements and on-site observations, which complicated verification. The research also faced logistical difficulties in accessing project sites and communities, limited civic space for independent monitoring, as well as risks of security for some of the activists involved^[85].

Despite these challenges, the research was able to identify systemic problems in the implementation of PIIM projects, marked by persistent delays, insufficient public information, and weak institutional accountability. Project execution was frequently characterized by prolonged interruptions, inadequate oversight, and unclear financial management, with little evidence of effective monitoring by responsible agencies. Communities were rarely informed or consulted, resulting in widespread public distrust and minimal local participation in the management of funds intended to address urgent social needs.^[86]

The independent monitoring report was also used as a catalyst for wider change. The report was extensively promoted nationally and internationally, garnering press attention, and was used to advocate for transparency and dialogue with local municipalities and other relevant public sector bodies.

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EQUATORIAL GUINEA – MONITORING RETURNS FROM THE U.S.

Civil society in Equatorial Guinea has recently engaged with a case involving assets confiscated in the U.S. from the country's current vice president. This involved the return of approximately USD 20 million following money-laundering and corruption investigations. The assets were returned under a settlement between the U.S. Department of Justice and the Government of Equatorial Guinea, which stipulated that the recovered funds would not be directly managed by government officials but implemented by UN agencies—primarily UNDP—to finance COVID-19 vaccine programs.

Civil society, particularly EG Justice, monitored this process externally, as in-country monitoring was not possible due to restrictions on civic space. Supported by international partners, the organization combined formal information requests, policy engagement, and document review to ensure transparency and accountability. Requests for information were submitted to the U.S. Embassy in Malabo and to the UN via official channels, while publicly available UN and Multi-Partner Trust Fund reports were analyzed to track fund disbursement. EG Justice also conducted remote field verification, comparing official data with local implementation outcomes to assess whether promised projects had been delivered.^[87]

Monitoring faced major transparency barriers. Neither the UN nor the Equatorial Guinean government released detailed information on expenditures or project outcomes, and official reports failed to acknowledge that the funds originated from a corruption case. As a result, citizens perceived the initiative as ordinary UN assistance rather than restitution for corruption-related losses. Implementation of the project also stalled when the government suspended cooperation for political reasons, leaving roughly USD 10 million unspent and held by UNDP. Limited responsiveness from international institutions, weak public disclosure mechanisms, and the inability of local organizations to operate safely further hindered oversight.^[88]

Despite these obstacles, EG Justice's monitoring demonstrated the importance of maintaining independent scrutiny over transnational restitution processes, particularly in restrictive political environments. In a context where domestic accountability is absent and civic freedoms are severely restricted, the engagement of external civil society actors was vital to ensure that asset recovery serves its intended purpose—returning stolen wealth to citizens, reinforcing public integrity, and transforming a legal settlement into a genuine act of justice.^[89]

ITALY - MONITORING ASSETS CONFISCATED FROM ORGANISED CRIME

The experience of Italian civil society is rooted in the structures Italy has established for monitoring the confiscated proceeds of organised crime. Italy's law on the reuse of confiscated assets enshrines the principle that confiscated assets are a public good and must be managed transparently.^[90] This obligation has opened the door for civil society, journalists, and citizens to access information and track how assets are allocated and used. Moreover, the National Agency for the Administration and Destination of Seized and Confiscated Assets maintains a public database of confiscated properties and enterprises, enabling independent verification of data and facilitating monitoring by civil society. Furthermore, local authorities managing confiscated assets are required to report on the use of assets assigned to them, creating a legal and institutional ecosystem where monitoring by civil society and citizens is both possible and encouraged by law.^[91]

Using this framework, civil society in Italy plays a central role in monitoring the management and reuse of domestically recovered assets. Primarily the anti-mafia organisation Libera and other networks have developed nation-wide participatory monitoring mechanisms to track how assets are used, who benefits, and whether they serve their intended social purposes. Libera employs two complementary monitoring systems. The first assesses municipal transparency in publishing data on confiscated properties as required by law. Dozens of trained volunteers across the country - organized into "monitoring communities" - use an online platform to verify whether municipalities disclose details such as property addresses, size, and purpose of reuse. Results identify compliance levels and support civic actions like information requests and local advocacy.^[92] The second form of non-institutional monitoring, focuses on associations and cooperatives that have been assigned the use of confiscated assets. For this, Libera has built its own national map from media, local reports, and partner inputs to assess the social impact and transparency of asset reuse.^[93]

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Civil society organisations in Italy in recent years have also started contributing to similar initiatives abroad. Italian CSOs, particularly Libera, have supported partner organizations and governments in Europe, Latin America, and Africa to design legal frameworks for monitoring and reusing confiscated assets, promoting knowledge exchange and supporting campaigns to strengthen civil society participation in asset recovery processes.^[94] Italy's approach offers valuable insights for other countries seeking to develop CSO-led asset recovery monitoring. While the uniqueness of the Italian context - its history of combating organised crime, the physical nature of the confiscated assets, and a strong civil society - raises questions on its replicability in other national contexts, it shows that the success of CSO monitoring ultimately depends on a combination of legal guarantees of openness, access to data, strong CSOs and recognition of civil society's role as a legitimate oversight actor.

MOZAMBIQUE – COLLABORATIVE MONITORING

Alongside advocacy efforts to strengthen the transparency and accountability of asset recovery, both through the promotion of legal reform and collaboration with relevant institutions, the civil society organisation Centro de Integridade Publica (CIP), carried out monitoring of the repatriation and management of the return from Jersey of GBP 829,500 (approx. USD 1.1 million), announced in 2023. This case remains the only publicly confirmed instance in which funds recovered from abroad were acknowledged and transferred back to Mozambique. Following a formal information request, CIP verified with the Attorney General's Office (PGR) that funds recovered from Jersey had been repatriated and allocated to justice sector institutions under a memorandum of understanding between the two countries. The civil society organisation then formally requested disclosure of the MoU, promoted its online publication, and continues to seek documentation on fund allocation and use, since no public audit reports are yet available as of 2025.^[95]

CIP has also conducted over the past years monitoring of domestically recovered assets. The approach combines informal contacts with relevant bodies with written requests to the PGR and other relevant bodies to obtain data, complemented by collaborative field visits with government institutions.

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These joint inspections—conducted by the Asset Management Office (Gabinete de Gestão de Ativos) and the Asset Recovery Office (Gabinete de Recuperação de Ativos)—allow participants to assess the condition and management of seized assets such as vehicles, land, and buildings. After each visit, the findings are compiled in joint internal reports submitted to the PGR. Since 2022, CIP has participated in several such missions, both in Maputo and provincial areas.^[96]

As in other countries, CIP's main challenge is a persistent lack of transparency and public information on asset recovery and reuse. Authorities often cite judicial secrecy to withhold data, even in cases where confidentiality may not be justified. While cooperation with the PGR has improved, civil society remains excluded from formal frameworks such as being explicitly included in memoranda of understanding governing recovered funds. Moreover, the legal framework in Mozambique does not require public disclosure of how recovered assets are managed or reused.^[97]

NIGERIA – ADVOCATING FOR THE TRANSPARENT AND ACCOUNTABLE REUSE OF ASSETS

In addition to the international cases described above, in which Nigerian civil society was formally involved in monitoring the reuse of returned assets, CSOs in Nigeria have long been strong advocates for the transparent and accountable use of stolen assets and conducted informal monitoring of both international and domestic recoveries.

Unlike international returns, which have often included agreed transparency provisions, domestic recoveries have traditionally been less transparent in Nigeria and elsewhere. In this context, organizations such as CISLAC have focused on advocacy for transparency prior to recovery and on oversight afterward. They have done this through collaboration with key institutions, including the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). For example, CISLAC has monitored EFCC asset auctions to ensure compliance with the Nigerian Proceeds of Crime Act and has consequentially highlighted opacity within these processes and the limited opportunities for civil society oversight.

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Beyond institutional engagement, CISLAC has also promoted public accountability through media campaigns, community outreach, and international partnerships, advocating for recovered assets to be invested in sustainable public projects.^[98]

Regarding international cases, two case studies are interesting to observe as are also notable for experience of “informal” civil society engagement, particularly in advocating for more transparency and accountability on the use of returned asset monitoring.

- The **James Ibori loot** case involved the repatriation of approx. GBP 4.2 million (approx. USD 3.1 million) from the UK, confiscated from former Delta State governor James Ibori, who was convicted in the UK for corruption and money laundering. While the money was originally stolen from Delta State, the Nigerian Federal Government decided to allocate the returned funds to national infrastructure projects rather than transferring them directly to the state.^[99] This decision prompted a vocal reaction from citizens and civil society about the appropriate use and destination of recovered assets. Civil society organisations in Nigeria, with international partners, conducted a widespread public campaign while monitoring the process through media reports and contact with the Government, calling for transparency, accountability, and public disclosure on how the funds are managed.^[100]
- In the so-called **Galactica Asset Return** Agreement, announced in early 2025, Nigerian civil society organisations campaigned for greater transparency and oversight in managing the USD 52.88 million returned from assets linked to Diezani Alison-Madueke. CSOs generally welcomed the recovery but urged public disclosure of spending plans^[3] or criticised the absence of a third-party monitoring mechanism, calling for adherence to international asset-recovery principles and inclusion of non-state actors. Through statements, reports, and media engagement, CSOs pushed to ensure accountability and citizen participation in the use of the recovered funds.^[101]

PART 2: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY-LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING

2.3. LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY'S EXPERIENCE

Although the experience of CSOs in monitoring recovered assets is not yet extensive, the examples above demonstrate that there is an evidence base that can be drawn upon and which covers different forms of monitoring across several different types of cases and contexts. From this, several reflections on the challenges encountered, lessons learned, and best practice in civil society monitoring can be identified.

Potential challenges

Based on the discussion above, several challenges are likely to be faced by civil society engaged in monitoring asset recovery. These are likely to be more pronounced when a CSO is carrying out monitoring independently but can also be the case even when monitoring is formalised. While this will depend on the context, these challenges are nevertheless important to keep these in mind when designing a monitoring strategy.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

For non-governmental organizations newly engaging in the monitoring of recovered assets, the first obstacle is likely to structural access to reliable and timely information. Most governments treat asset recovery and management as confidential or security-sensitive, limiting public disclosure and constraining civil society oversight. Even when Freedom of Information laws exist, responses can be incomplete or delayed, forcing organizations to rely on fragmented data, leaks, or indirect indicators.

PART 2: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY-LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

The institutional capacity of the civil society organisation and of relevant state agencies is another potential barrier. Asset recovery involves complex legal, financial, and diplomatic processes, with engagement channels differing from court proceedings to repatriation agreements. Although a growing number of CSOs possess the technical knowledge to interpret these processes or trace assets through multiple jurisdictions, skills and processes may need supplementing to effectively monitor assets. This can range from building internal expertise, developing specialized monitoring tools, and building networks able to monitor returns, including across borders.

State agencies may also lack the tools to make this process efficient. There can be an absence of coordination mechanisms—both between state agencies and between the state and civil society—which can create duplication and confusion. Different government bodies may manage separate recovery processes without a unified reporting system or not have the mechanisms to be able to publish data in a timely and accessible manner.

CIVIC SPACE

Monitoring practices will likely also vary dramatically depending on the political environment. Where civic space is open, CSOs may be more able to access official information, participate in consultations, and publish findings without fear of retaliation. In restrictive settings, by contrast, organizations may face intimidation, legal harassment, or reputational attacks that discourage scrutiny and make monitoring from within the country extremely challenging. In general, monitoring recovery processes can trigger safety risks for those who look into cases and assets linked with powerful people.

PART 2: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY-LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING

Lessons and recommendations

Following from this, several lessons and recommendations can be drawn from the interviews with key civil society organizations, which can help guide CSOs seeking to strengthen or initiate their engagement in the monitoring of recovered assets.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE FIELD AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Across the returns discussed, the importance of developing a clear understanding of the numerous complexities of the international or domestic asset recovery framework, as well as experiences from previous cases and tools and opportunities for monitoring recovered assets has been highlighted as a vital first step. This requires dedication, training and investing in NGO staff. Across regions, many organisations are increasingly equipping their staff with a stronger understanding of national and international asset recovery frameworks, with entities such as the Basel Institute for Governance, StAR, and CiFAR providing technical support in this area.

2. STARTING SMALL

It's important to keep objectives realistic when planning and conducting monitoring. It may be effective for CSOs new to the field to start with small, manageable tasks—such as tracking budget allocations or verifying specific public statements—before scaling up to broader field monitoring over time, which requires more resources.

3. INTEGRATING MONITORING INTO EXISTING PROGRAMMES

Integrating asset recovery into broader anti-corruption and governance programs rather than isolating it as a niche activity may help using existing resources and allowing sustainability even with limited funding. Most organizations involved in asset monitoring do not have dedicated programs or staff for this work. Instead, they pursue asset recovery opportunistically, focusing on cases that align with their broader activities—such as monitoring a return case, advocating for transparency, or engaging citizens. For example, one organization in Equatorial Guinea leveraged an international return case to push for greater transparency, while continuing its broader anti-corruption and human rights initiatives.

PART 2: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY-LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING

4. SUSTAINABLE FUNDING STRATEGIES

To the extent possible, CSOs engaged in asset monitoring should develop sustainable funding strategies to ensure continuity, independence, and long-term oversight capacity. To increase financial sustainability, such strategies could include seeking multi-year grant agreements with international donors, creating public-private partnerships for technical and financial support or developing membership or subscription-based funding models.

5. BUILDING CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH OVERSIGHT INSTITUTIONS

Cooperation—formal or informal—with key agencies such as anti-corruption and asset recovery commissions, prosecutors, or justice ministries can enhance credibility and access to information. Demonstrating professionalism and respect for legal boundaries can also help secure trust. In Kenya and Nigeria, for example, leading anti-corruption CSOs have extensive experience engaging with relevant authorities—such as Kenya's Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission and Nigeria's Independent Corrupt Practices Commission—carefully balancing the demand for transparency and accountability with the need to maintain their independence and pursue constructive collaboration. Many CSOs have established formal Memorandums of Understanding with these bodies, which can facilitate structured engagement and exchange of information.

6. INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Collaboration with CSOs in jurisdictions returning assets, or within regional coalitions, has proven to be important, both for gaining from the experiences of others and to build joint pressure on governments during monitoring activities. At the African Union level, for example, the CAPAR Civil Society Network has partnered with the African Union Anti-Corruption Board (AUABC) to jointly promote key messages on transparency in asset returns. At the global level, organizations such as CiFAR and the UNCAC Coalition facilitate cross-border collaboration among CSOs, enabling coordinated action on return cases and participation in international forums, including the UNCAC Conference of State Parties.

PART 2: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY-LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING

7. ADAPTING BEST PRACTICES TO LOCAL REALITIES

Asset recovery systems are deeply shaped by institutional complexity. “One-size-fits-all” models—such as centralizing all recovery under a single agency—can create delays or institutional resistance. It is important to reflect on what would work best in your context to monitor the return.

8. CENTERING VICTIMS AND COMMUNITIES IN MONITORING

Particularly when monitoring is assessing whether returned funds improve the lives of those harmed by corruption—through schools, health services, or social programs - community-based verification and validation can help to verify not only that funds were spent but that they were used effectively. Successful examples of this can be seen in Nigeria, as discussed in the previous section, where CSOs involved in the Abacha II and III returns engaged local communities in direct field monitoring, including verifying cash disbursements to beneficiaries and conducting on-site inspections of infrastructure projects funded through the returned assets.

9. PRIORITIZE PROFESSIONALISM AND CREDIBILITY

CSOs should operate transparently and prioritise professionalism while avoiding manipulation or co-optation.

10. COALITION-BUILDING

Coalition-building may be helpful in different ways: working in networks can distribute risk, enhance visibility, and prevent authorities from isolating or targeting individual actors. Partnering with academics, journalists, or professional associations can expand access to data and strengthen advocacy messages.

11. DIGITAL TOOLS

Where official transparency is weak, NGOs may use digital tools and social media to keep the issue visible, promote dialogue, and mobilize citizen interest. Persistent, lawful use of information requests—even when initially ignored—creates a formal record that can be cited in advocacy or litigation.

12. MAINTAIN INDEPENDENCE

Finally, civil society actors should maintain independence from government negotiation tables. While engagement is necessary, excessive proximity risks compromising neutrality or being blamed for policy failures.

PART 2: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY-LED ASSET RETURN MONITORING

On practical methods of monitoring

- 1. Start by mapping available data**—public budgets, parliamentary reports, court decisions—and using them to track asset flows indirectly. Community-level verification (for example, checking whether projects funded by returned assets are implemented) provides credible evidence without direct confrontation.
- 2. Developing structured monitoring frameworks** to engage with authorities
Establishing clear monitoring plans and communication channels with relevant government agencies to help track recovered funds systematically and support mutual accountability.
- 3. Combining data review with local verification**
Cross-check official information on recovered assets with field observations and community feedback to confirm whether promised projects or allocations have been delivered.
- 4. Using access to information tools and media strategically**
When available, persistent use of access to information mechanisms, even when responses are partial, can build an evidence base. Collaboration with investigative journalists can also amplify visibility and encourage accountability while managing reputational risks.



3

A TOOLKIT FOR CSO ASSET MONITORING

PART 3: A TOOLKIT FOR CSOS ASSET MONITORING



After exploring the experiences, approaches, and lessons learned from civil society organizations in various countries on monitoring recovered assets, this part aims to equip CSOs—whether new to this work or seeking to strengthen their existing efforts—with practical tools and resources.

Part 3 is structured into three main sections.

1. The **first section** offers reflections and practical guidance on **how to initiate and plan a monitoring activity**, primarily targeting CSOs new to this field.
2. The **second section** examines **key steps, resources and methods** during the monitoring process, divided by type of monitoring activities, and provides other considerations critical to effective asset return monitoring.
3. Finally, the **third section** provides a compilation of **useful resources** for further learning and reference.

The tools and recommendations presented are drawn from interviews with leading CSOs active in asset monitoring, a review of relevant literature, and nearly a decade of CiFAR's experience supporting civil society organizations worldwide in advancing asset recovery and return efforts.

PART 3: A TOOLKIT FOR CSOS ASSET MONITORING

3.1. Laying the Groundwork for CSO Monitoring



This section guides CSOs new to monitoring recovered assets, helping them plan and reflect on the initial steps for engaging in this field of work. It may not be the case that every step will be needed—or possible—in every situation. Time, context, and capacity will shape what can or should be done.

The when, what and why of monitoring

WHEN SHOULD A MONITORING EXERCISE TAKE PLACE?

Asset recovery is often a long and complex process, stemming from court cases to the actual return itself and the ultimate disbursement of confiscated funds or reuse of physical assets. CSOs may choose to begin work following public announcements on asset recovery. For instance, they may start monitoring a return case that becomes public through media coverage or government statements—whether domestic or international. These cases often attract public attention and media scrutiny, providing civil society organizations with an opportunity to verify information and strengthen accountability throughout the asset recovery process.

Monitoring may also begin when an asset recovery agency reports having recovered a certain amount of assets during the previous year, or when new legislation or policy reforms on asset recovery processes are adopted. These moments create opportunities for civil society to verify official information, hold decision-makers accountable for their statements and commitments and provide it with solid evidence to advocate for transparency in asset recovery processes.

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Monitoring may also take place only after a return has taken place, focussed less on the process and more on adherence to decisions about how returned or recovered assets are spent.

There may also be instances where return agreements or national legislation explicitly formalise a monitoring role for civil society organisations, in which case the timing, purpose and scope of the monitoring process will usually be predetermined or subject to discussion with authorities.

DEFINING THE SCOPE OF THE MONITORING

Alongside thinking around the timing of the monitoring, another important step is to clarify the scope of the monitoring, which then interrelates with the timing. Asset monitoring can take many forms depending on the nature of the assets and the processes involved. Establishing the scope from the outset helps define the appropriate methods, tools, data sources, and stakeholders to engage.

As outlined in Part 1, it is useful to think about monitoring activity being of three types: **1) case-based monitoring** – where you monitor a specific return case, **2) institutional monitoring** – where you monitor the performance of institutions involved in asset return processes, for example asset management agencies, or **3) financial monitoring** – where you focus on tracking the money or property confiscated and disbursed.

These activities may of course overlap: case based monitoring will necessarily involve one or both of institutional or financial monitoring. Similarly, financial or institutional monitoring may also involve deep-dives into specific cases.

DEFINING THE PURPOSE OF THE MONITORING

Purpose is also important to think about here: what are you trying to achieve with the monitoring? If you are focussed on victim compensation and participation, for example, you may want to focus monitoring on assessing whether funds have reached target communities and whether these funds achieved the goals of the return related to victim compensation.

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On the other hand, if our focus is on financial transparency, it may be that effective monitoring for your purposes focusses on reporting that agencies responsible for receiving and disbursing funds put out, or the financial accounts that are presented to parliament.

Alternatively, your purpose may be to understand the decision-making process in the return and therefore you may want to focus efforts on monitoring stakeholder inclusion in decisions relating to what recovered assets are used for.

Together setting out these three elements of purpose, scope and timing of the monitoring at the start of your work is essential for designing an effective monitoring action.

Capacity and context

Once your organisation has clarified its purpose, scope and the timing for monitoring asset returns, a useful next step is assessing your capacity, understanding the broader political, legal and stakeholder environment, and conducting a risk analysis.

ASSESSING YOUR CAPACITY

It is first useful to evaluate whether CSOs have—or can obtain—the resources needed for the chosen monitoring approach.

➡ **Technical capacity** here is critical: depending on the monitoring track, monitoring could require knowledge of the legal and institutional context, of asset recovery and asset management in general, financial auditing expertise, or legal analysis. It may also require trust and constructive relations with relevant asset recovery bodies, knowledge of international legal and policy tools and of other national frameworks. Therefore, understanding your organisations' capacity and addressing gaps in existing skills will help you to carry out effective monitoring.

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Useful learning tools

- International Center for Asset Recovery (ICAR), Basel Institute on Governance LEARN Platform^[103]
- CiFAR: Civil Society Organisations & Asset Recovery - A Manual for Action
- Transparency International France Handbook on Asset Restitution^[104]

- ➔ Assessing **human resources capacity and needs** can also help determine whether the monitoring work is both feasible and sustainable. It is useful to reflect on which team members already have experience in asset recovery, budget monitoring or related anti-corruption and transparency fields and assess their capacity to undertake monitoring activities.
- ➔ Regarding **financial resources** – often referred to as one of the key challenges in conducting CSO asset recovery work - these are usually linked to staff time employed for monitoring. Costs can also occur if field trips or other meetings outside the usual workplace need to take place, for legal expert fees or accessing relevant databases. See the next section for a brief introduction to addressing challenges in financial resources for asset monitoring.
- ➔ A key question when planning a monitoring exercise is whether it should be designed as a **stand-alone project** focused on a major case or integrated as part of the ongoing work of a civil society organization. This choice depends largely on available resources and on the nature and scale of the case being monitored. For example, monitoring a large international asset return—especially one involving the allocation of recovered funds to public projects—could require more structured planning, a dedicated team, and higher human and financial resources over an extended period. By contrast, monitoring the transparency, governance or operational efficiency of an asset-recovery or asset-management agency may be possible as part of other, ongoing activities, embedded in regular CSO operations and generally requiring fewer dedicated resources.

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MAPPING THE LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

An essential step is understanding the legal, and institutional framework within which the return or all returns operate.

For monitoring focussed on domestic recoveries or on institutions and financial transparency at the national level, guiding questions should focus on the relevant laws and policies governing asset returns and asset management.

Typical laws and policies that include regulations for asset management and return are outlined in the previous Part as well as in the next section, divided by the type of monitoring activity. Alongside reviewing those parts, questions here should focus on:

- Are there legal frameworks in place for CSO monitoring?
- Do laws and regulations require disclosure of information about asset returns?
- Do broader financial accountability laws apply to the monitoring objects?
- Do access to information laws exist?

When the return is **international**, bilateral or multilateral agreements, including **memorandums of understanding** or other cooperation instruments between asset source and receiving states provide a key entry-point for CSO involvement in international returns. These documents often define the terms and conditions for return, specify how assets will be managed and provide for transparency and accountability measures.

In some cases, CSOs have been formally incorporated into these arrangements. For example, in Kenya, under the Framework for the Return of Assets from Corruption and Crime in Kenya (FRACCK) provision is made for potential inclusion of civil society on the steering committee.^[105] However, many such agreements still exclude civil society, with the return process remaining a state-to-state negotiation and the decision to involve CSOs wholly at the discretion of the originating and destination country.^[106]

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However, several recent asset-return agreements have included transparency provisions, such as requiring the publishing of the transfer of assets, the appointment of independent auditors, or third-party monitoring of use of funds. These transparency clauses open a space for formalised inclusion of civil society access, periodic reporting obligations and joint monitoring mechanisms in MoUs and other cooperation agreements.^[107]



Useful tools

- StAR Asset Recovery Watch Database^[108]
- UNODC TRACK Legal Library^[109]

STAKEHOLDER MAPPING

Identifying **who has a stake** in asset return and asset management — and how stakeholders relate to each other — is another vital strategic exercise.

The first step is to understand which groups are specifically involved, if a particular case is the subject of the monitoring, and otherwise which groups have stakes in asset recovery more generally. Moreover, often asset return responsibilities are often shared by several authorities, potentially with overlapping mandates, so mapping these different roles is also key.

Government stakeholders

Some key questions addressing the mapping of government actors are:

- Which government agencies are related to asset recovery at the return and management stage?
- If it is different ones, how are their mandates coordinated and what are the gaps and overlaps?
- Is data on recovered assets collected centrally or by each agency? Is it publicly available?
- Is there a publicly available asset return and management law or policy?

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Asset management and **asset recovery agencies** are the key bodies typically tasked with managing the processes to return and manage recovered assets. They often play distinct but complementary roles in the handling of illicit assets.

➔ **Asset recovery agencies** are primarily involved in the investigative and legal processes that lead to the identification, freezing, and confiscation of assets. They are commonly embedded within law enforcement structures, prosecution services, or anti-corruption agencies, though some jurisdictions establish them as autonomous investigative bodies. Their mandate centres on tracing illicit proceeds, conducting financial investigations, preparing or supporting mutual legal assistance requests, and coordinating with domestic and international partners to recover assets located abroad.

➔ **Asset management agencies** are typically responsible for the preservation, administration, and disposal of assets once they have been seized or confiscated. They are most often situated under the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, or the Attorney General's Office, though in some countries they operate as independent statutory bodies. Their work focuses on safeguarding the value of assets during legal proceedings, maintaining inventories, managing bank accounts where returned funds are held, and organising disposal or transfer once decisions are final.

While their functions differ, the two types of agencies rely on close coordination: recovery agencies work to secure assets through investigation and legal action, whereas management agencies take over once assets are seized or returned, ensuring their proper handling and eventual allocation in line with national regulations or return agreements.

The table below provides a brief overview of other public and non-state bodies usually involved in the return stage of the asset recovery process.

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Actor	Role in Returns and Recovered Assets
Prosecution offices	Lead legal proceedings; seek confiscation orders; coordinate Mutual Legal Assistance with foreign jurisdictions
Courts and judicial authorities	Issue freezing, seizure, and confiscation decisions.
Anti-corruption agencies	Support investigations; coordinate recovery efforts; ensure integrity during processes.
Asset management agencies	Manage and dispose of recovered assets; ensure assets retain value.
Ministry of Justice	Coordinate international cooperation and MLA in return processes.
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Facilitate diplomatic engagement and negotiation in returns.
Ministry of Finance / Treasury	Receive returned funds; allocate budgets; manage financial flows.
Central Bank	Hold dedicated accounts; ensure transparent transfers and records.
Sectoral ministries (health, education, etc.)	Implement programmes or projects funded by returned assets.
Local government authorities	Execute community-level activities financed by recovered assets.
Public procurement authorities	Oversee procurement processes for asset-funded projects.
National audit institutions	Audit use of recovered funds; publish findings.
Parliamentary oversight committees	Scrutinise government management of recovered assets.

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Other actors	Role in Returns and Recovered Assets
External auditors / compliance firms	Conduct independent audits when mandated.
International organisations (UN, World Bank)	Provide technical support; administer or supervise return mechanisms.
Civil society organisations	Monitor transparency and use of recovered assets; engage communities.
Media and investigative journalists	Investigate and report on return processes and risks.
Victims and beneficiaries	Suffered from the original corruption or are the target group for returned funds.

Victims, beneficiaries and non-government stakeholders

The final beneficiaries and victims of corruption are vital stakeholders in the process. These may be direct beneficiaries of the recovered assets – for example if they are due to receive funding or infrastructure as a result of the confiscation or could be persons who originally suffered from the corrupt act and may seek to have a voice in how confiscated assets are used.

It is also important to extend the mapping exercise to other non-state actors: Understanding what CSOs or media actors have engaged on the case being assessed could be useful to find additional sources of information and map potential partners. In international cases private auditing companies may also be involved, therefore identifying these and their roles may be another important step.

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Once the actors are identified, a typical useful tool to map all actors relevant to asset monitoring is a stakeholder analysis. This helps map power dynamics (who can block or push the process forward) and stakeholder interests across these actors.

Important questions in this regard are:^[110]

- What **experiences** have you had with public actors in other areas of anti-corruption work—for example, with Public Prosecutor Offices or Anti-Corruption Agencies—and what **lessons** were learned from those experiences?
- Which asset-recovery agencies—and which officials within them—are likely to **engage in dialogue** with civil society? Which have demonstrated a commitment to transparency and accountability in the return and management of recovered assets?
- Which **other actors** or influencers could persuade key agencies to support your objectives?
- Which public actors are likely to **oppose your efforts** or priorities?
- What are the **needs of the beneficiaries** and how is their relationship to key governmental institutions involved in the return.



Useful tools

- IFES, “Enhancing Anti-Corruption Advocacy Through Evidence-Based Map”^[111]

RISK ANALYSIS

As in any area of CSO anti-corruption work, it is important to consider potential security risks from the outset.

A first step is to evaluate the broader civic-space context: in restrictive environments in particular, engagement with authorities may be difficult, and CSOs may face political pushback, reputational harm, or even personal security threats.

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The asset return and asset management phase often involves complex negotiations and legal instruments. If CSOs are not fully aware of their legal standing, they may be challenged or excluded, leaving them vulnerable. In especially hostile contexts, staff or partners could be personally targeted—either physically or legally—for their involvement in monitoring or advocacy during the asset return phase.

Reputational risks are also critical. By publicly documenting irregularities or criticizing how returned assets are managed, CSOs risk damaging their reputation, especially if accusations are misunderstood, misrepresented, or used against them politically.

A particularly sensitive situation arises—although it has occurred rarely so far—when it is agreed that a portion of returned assets may be used by the CSO conducting the monitoring to cover the costs of the monitoring activity. This scenario requires careful consideration due to the potential for both real and perceived conflicts of interest.

To mitigate risks, some useful steps include to build coalitions with other CSOs, avoid ad-hoc engagement in favour of a clear strategy, and establish transparent procedures and partnerships.

CSOs should also develop appropriate approaches to handling sensitive or confidential information and anticipate resistance from actors who may feel threatened by scrutiny. Digital and physical security measures—such as secure document storage, encrypted communications, and careful control over access to sensitive material—should also be ensured whenever possible.

To this end, a concise risk assessment at the start of the monitoring process can help ensure that monitoring efforts are both feasible and safe, while strengthening the long-term effectiveness and legitimacy of CSO engagement.



Useful tools

- CIFAR's CSO Manual for Action offers a reflection and practical recommendations on risks specific to asset recovery (pages 11-14).

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LEARNING AND EXCHANGING WITH OTHER CSOS

Given that the area of CSO-led monitoring of returned assets is new in most frameworks, understanding previous experiences from other civil society organizations that have already conducted monitoring exercises is critical. These experiences can provide valuable insights into effective and creative methodologies, common challenges, and strategies for engaging with public agencies, ensuring transparency, and managing risks.

Engaging with these CSOs beforehand to exchange ideas can offer valuable guidance when designing your own monitoring efforts. It may also be helpful to join existing cross-border CSO networks focused on asset recovery, to connect with these groups and identify potential partners for your initiative.

3.2. RESOURCES AND METHODS FOR ASSET MONITORING



This section aims to provide CSOs with practical tools for the implementation phase of monitoring process. The first section provides a list of useful tools and approaches, based on the specific monitoring activity – case-based, institutional and financial monitoring. The toolkit then gives some reflections on other aspects relevant for monitoring – addressing the challenges of lack of information and financial resources, building and working with coalitions, and approaches to engagement with authorities.

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3.1. Monitoring tools and approaches



This sub-section guides CSOs through useful tools and methods to track recovered assets, based on the three identified types of asset monitoring: case-based, institutional and financial monitoring. Given the scope and objective of this toolkit, a stronger focus will be placed on the first area of monitoring.

3.1.1. Case-based monitoring

A) PRE-DISBURSEMENT MONITORING: MONITORING THE RECOVERY/RETURN PROCESS

Negotiations in international cases

Once a bilateral or multilateral recovery case reaches the return negotiation phase, CSOs have a crucial role in monitoring developments and advocating for transparency, accountability, and meaningful provisions for civil society and citizen participation within the resulting agreements or MoUs.

The first objective – and challenge – in this process is obtaining copies of draft MoUs or details about their content. Engagement with governments is key here and proactive discussions with governments before any MoUs are important. It may also be beneficial to prepare a CSO position on the MoU before its drafted, to input into government discussions.

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Key questions to look at with respect to an MoU include:

- What are the **conditions** attached to the return of assets? Would they be earmarked for specific projects or sectors?
- Which **agencies** are or would be responsible for oversight and implementation?
- What is the planned **process for transferring the funds**—for example, will or would the transfer occur in instalments—and are or would the assets be designated for a specific account or fund in the receiving country?
- Are or would there be **reporting, monitoring, or audit mechanisms** specified in the MoU? Is a role for non-state actors, including civil society or private companies foreseen and what does that look like?
- What are or would be the mechanisms for **tackling corruption risks** and integrity in the return process? How likely are they to succeed in preventing risks?
- If **consultation with civil society** would be included or foreseen, are the mechanisms for this transparent and structured?
- Have any **precedents** or international best practices been referenced in the agreement?

OUTPUTS OF CSO MONITORING

> **Regardless of the monitoring approach used, CSOs can translate the findings of their asset monitoring into a variety of outputs that help promote transparency, accountability, and civic oversight of recovered assets:**

- **Shadow reports** that document on the ground outcomes of projects funded by returned assets, highlighting discrepancies with government claims. This is in some way similar to UNCAC parallel country reviews, where CSOs compile their own assessment of UNCAC implementation.
- **Public (online) databases**, detailing recovered assets, cases and their status
- **Advocacy** on shortcomings and reform around transparency, accountability, and efficiency of recovered assets: meetings with officials, public events
- **Citizen and media engagement** and awareness-raising regarding returned assets, their use and challenges in transparency, accountability and integrity: community events, social media campaigns, press releases and engagement with the press.

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Additionally, monitoring can also take place around the process itself: How transparent is the negotiation process, and is any public consultation or stakeholder input foreseen?

- In this phase, available resources for CSO monitoring include:
- Press releases by governments, ministries of finance, or anti-corruption agencies (publicly released drafts, press statements, or government briefings)
- International organization portals, including the World Bank/UNODC StAR Asset Recovery Watch Database
- Media reporting and investigative journalism on the return
- Official websites of foreign governments or foreign anti-corruption bodies involved
- Informal channels of communication with governments on both the country sending the assets and the one receiving the return.

Processes in domestic recoveries

Domestic recoveries have often been marked by weaker transparency compared to international ones, with limited access to information, information often not collected in a centralised and accessible way and limited capacity of relevant agencies to manage and report on assets.

Unlike the focused oversight required in a single high-profile international return, domestic monitoring typically involves continuous scrutiny of judicial processes, understanding actors involved and plans in the reuse of the recovered assets.

Key questions to look at during the process leading to domestic asset recovery are therefore:

- What is the status of the judicial process, and which steps have been completed?
- Are the assets correctly identified and quantified in court rulings?

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- Are there mechanisms to track the transfer of assets from court orders to government accounts or asset management agencies?
- Who are the responsible authorities for implementing asset transfers?
- Have any conditions or restrictions been imposed on the future use of the recovered assets?
- Which agencies are involved in each of these stages and are they required to report publicly or to parliament?

Available resources include:

- **Court records** and judgments, including indictments, rulings, and asset forfeiture orders
- Official government **statements** on asset recovery
- **Reports** published by asset recovery or asset management agencies
- **Auditor reports** or parliamentary oversight documentation
- Public **legal databases** or gazettes
- **Media** reports and investigative journalism covering high-profile cases.

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B) ASSESSING THE INTEGRITY FRAMEWORKS AND “RE-LOOTING” RISKS IN THE RE-USE OF THE FUNDS

An important task for CSOs in monitoring recovered assets is not only to assess how funds or assets are managed and used, but also to evaluate the integrity safeguards that determine whether those assets remain protected once recovered and disbursed. This requires examining the systems, controls, and practices that prevent the “re-looting” of recovered funds—meaning their diversion, misappropriation, misuse, or capture by political or private actors. In international recoveries such provisions are very often included in MoUs, while at the national level, they are sometimes included in dedicated asset recovery legislation or asset management regulations.

Some of the key questions for assessing integrity frameworks include:

- What are the general **anti-corruption safeguards** in the legal and institutional frameworks about public procurement and budgets? What are the overall corruption risks in the public sector, particularly with respect to political corruption and misappropriation of funds?
- Are there clear and enforceable **rules** governing how the recovered assets can be used, including eligible activities, procurement standards, and reporting obligations?
- Do institutions responsible for managing and overseeing the assets have strong **internal controls**, audit systems, and conflict-of-interest rules?
- What early warning **signs of misuse** can be detected—delays, unexplained changes in project scope, lack of information, inconsistent public statements, or irregular financial flows?
- Is there **independent oversight**, such as parliamentary committees, supreme audit institutions, or third-party monitors, reviewing the use of recovered assets?
- Are **procurement procedures** robust, competitive, and insulated from political interference?
- Is there a track **record of mismanagement** or corruption in the institutions handling the funds?
- Is law enforcement empowered to **investigate** potential diversion of recovered assets and are the courts able to take action if crimes are believed to have occurred?

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Available resources to look at include:

- National **supreme audit institution reports**: Performance and financial audits related to asset reuse or related public spending cycles.
- **Internal audit reports** of implementing ministries or agencies: Often overlooked but useful for identifying control weaknesses and procurement vulnerabilities.
- **Public procurement databases** and e-procurement portals: Tender notices, bid evaluations, awarded contracts, contract amendments, beneficial ownership disclosures.
- Anti-corruption, asset management or asset recovery agency public **reports**.
- **Whistleblower** protection bodies or hotlines, if available
- Reports from **Parliamentary oversight committees**, financial intelligence units (FIU) and investigative journalists
- **Legislation** and asset return agreements

C) DISBURSEMENT AND POST-DISBURSEMENT MONITORING: AUDITING, MONITORING AND EVALUATING THE USE OF RECOVERED ASSETS

CSOs can also monitor how recovered assets have been used – whether from domestic or international recoveries. To do so they can use a range of practical tools to track asset use. This section describes key monitoring methods for four important elements of asset monitoring:

1. **Procurement oversight**
2. **Field verification**
3. **Budget tracking**
4. **Community engagement**

This can be coupled with contextualised checklists and sample templates^[112] to help CSOs systematically gather evidence at every stage of projects funded by repatriated assets. If these approaches are adopted and linked to the push for relevant provisions such as access to information, CSOs can ensure that commitments made under return agreements are achieved and there is public accountability in the projects funded by the returned assets.

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1. Procurement Oversight

To ensure contracts funded by returned assets are awarded and executed fairly, CSOs can monitor each procurement phase. A dedicated team or individual can scan official sources, government procurement portals, gazettes, and tender notices for relevant projects. When a relevant tender or contract is announced, CSOs can evaluate it step by step, including:

- **Advertisement** (Call for Bids): Was the tender publicly advertised in good time?
- **Bid Submission**: Did multiple qualified firms submit compliant bids?
- **Evaluation**: Were the scoring criteria transparent and applied fairly?
- **Contract Award**: Is the winning contractor reputable and rule-compliant?
- **Contract Implementation**: Are deliverables on schedule and within budget?

After each stage, it is useful for CSOs to compile evidence, pictures of tender announcements, bid documents, contracts, photos from sites, and note any irregularities. If red flags appear, CSOs can file complaints with oversight bodies, publish reports, or seek judicial review. For example, Transparency International's procurement toolkit shows how to apply forensic red-flag indicators throughout procurement.^[113]

➔ In its monitoring of the **"Abacha III" return**, CLEEN Foundation used a Project Procurement Data Collection Form to record each tender and check compliance. By adapting such checklists, CSOs can make a basic spreadsheet or form for every project.^[114]

2. Field Verification

CSOs can verify on-the-ground implementation of projects funded by returned assets and gather community feedback. To do this, CSOs can – based on capacity and resources – recruit and train field monitors, volunteer or paid for this. They can also partner with other CSOs and community groups operating in regions where projects are being implemented and who may be able to conduct monitoring visits.

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For field verification, it is useful to develop a standardised Field Visit Report form or mobile application, if available, to standardise information that is collected on project implementation. Key data to collect at each site visit includes:

1. **Project Status:** Is the project physically present and active? Are workers or equipment on site? Are trainings taking place?
2. **Community Involvement:** Were local beneficiaries consulted or informed? Do residents know the project is funded by asset recovery?
3. **Contractor Presence:** Is the contractor or local official available to explain progress?
4. **Schedule:** Are key milestones being met, or has work fallen behind?
5. **Observations:** Any deviations from plans or unauthorised changes?
6. **Community Feedback** or Grievances: What do locals report?

Among possible tools and activities to assess this are:

- **Photographing** the site (this may require agreement of local entities managing the project depending on local laws) using GPS tagging - recording the geographic coordinates of recovered assets or asset-funded project. Mobile data tools can streamline this, capturing photos and coordinates directly into a database.^[115]
- Planning **regular visits** either monthly or quarterly and occasional unannounced checks. For instance, Nigeria's MANTRA program trained 1,459 local monitors nationwide to verify cash transfers by conducting spot checks and interviewing beneficiaries.^[116]
- In infrastructure projects, CSOs can similarly train **community volunteers** to make site visits. In Nigeria, CLEEN's monitoring team trained nearby community members to carry out unscheduled field checks of the recovered-asset projects. These monitors used checklists and site reports to ensure that reported progress matched reality.^[117]

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3. Monitoring Tools for Budget Tracking

To identify possible misallocations or delays, CSOs may want to monitor returned assets through budgets and records of actual spending. This may entail:

1. Identifying **where the funds appear** in official budgets such as line items, special funds, appropriation bills.
 2. Obtaining **budget execution reports**, spending ledgers, and reconciliation statements for those line items through FOI requests if necessary.
 3. Using **Budget Tracking Spreadsheets** to list each project and/or program, the amount allocated, disbursed released, and actually spent.
 4. **Updating** it periodically as new financial reports arrive. Large variances should stand out.
 5. Using charts or **infographics** to visualise gaps and trends.
 6. **Comparing of budget allocations** to end projects: in particular using field verification reports to identify if the budget allocated to the project seems to have been appropriately spent.
- ➔ For example, civil society portals in **Ukraine** consolidate reconstruction budgets and expenditures online. The Big Recovery Portal synthesizes budget data, procurement records and project details into one dashboard.^[118] Key here is publishing a clear account of where repatriated funds were supposed to go versus what was actually used. Inconsistent entries or unspent balances can then be flagged publicly and ask government to give an explanation or corrective action.

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MONITORING AUCTIONS OF RECOVERED ASSETS

Government agencies often revert to auctions to sell physical assets, as this overcomes the challenges and costs of managing and maintaining value over time. Monitoring domestic auctions of recovered assets can be important to ensure that the disposal process is fair, transparent, and free from manipulation. This may require an assessment of processes and documents specific to auction procedures, including:

- Obtaining **auction notices** and schedules from official gazettes, enforcement agencies, or asset management authorities to verify timing, location, and procedures.
- Reviewing **legal and procedural frameworks** governing public auctions, including requirements for valuation, public notice, and competitive bidding.
- Tracking **asset valuation reports** to assess whether items were independently assessed, when valuations occurred, and whether reserve prices were set appropriately.
- Monitoring publication of **asset descriptions** to ensure accuracy, completeness, and consistency with court orders or forfeiture documents.
- Observing **auction events** in person (when public access is permitted) to verify compliance with rules, participant transparency, and fairness of bidding processes.
- Checking **bidder registration procedures**, including documentation requirements and screening for conflicts of interest or prohibited participants.
- Reviewing **winning bids** and sale results, comparing sale prices to valuations and identifying irregularities, unusually low prices, or repeated winners.

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4. Community Engagement Mechanisms

In facilitating engagements with citizens and intended beneficiaries to ensure direct oversight, CSOs can organize public events, such as town halls or community scorecard workshops around major projects. In these meetings, stakeholders such as local leaders, women's and youth groups can jointly discuss and review project transparency and performance. This can include using simple scoring forms on visibility, quality, participation and the responses to voiced questions or grievances. Further, community engagement mechanisms can be set up as permanent feedback channels in accessible languages, so citizens can report issues in real time. As part of the engagement, platforms, such as citizen monitoring committees of beneficiaries who meet regularly to oversee projects can also be useful.

➔ An example of this kind of engagement is **Kazakhstan's BOTA Foundation**, which required every grant under its Social Service Program to involve community stakeholders in project design and execution. BOTA financed 121 local initiatives specifically for needs assessments and action plan development jointly with community members, aiming for projects to reflect local priorities.^[119] Another example was CLEEN's Nigerian monitoring, which used local-language radio jingles and trained hundreds of community monitors who report infrastructure progress via mobile apps.^[120]

3.1.2. Institutional monitoring

When it comes to monitoring asset returns, the most important institution to look at is often the asset management agency, or similar agencies that have responsibility to receiving, management and disposing of recovered assets. This could include dedicated funds, responsible for receiving recovered assets after conversion to financial value.

Institutional monitoring focuses on assessing how effectively an asset management agency fulfils its mandate, meets its legal obligations, and delivers on the public commitments it has made. This type of monitoring goes beyond tracking individual cases and looks instead at the overall performance, capacity, systems, and culture of the involved institutions.

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A key issue is assessing the degree of autonomy that asset management agencies have from political interference. This autonomy depends on the existence of several factors, including: rules around the independence of agencies, clear and functioning regulations governing asset management and allocation, transparent appointment procedures for agency leadership, and the adequacy of resources provided to ensure effective operations.

The monitoring exercise can therefore be structured as follows:

- Start with examining whether the agency has **clear strategies** for tracing, seizing, managing, and disposing of assets.
- Assess whether it adheres to **timelines and procedural standards**; and whether it maintains transparent reporting practices.
- Observe whether the agency responds to **public concerns**, cooperates with oversight bodies.
- Evaluate **staffing levels**, staff selection or appointment procedures, technical capacity and financial resources.
- Evaluate **coordination with other bodies** such as other agencies that share mandates on asset recovery, as well as with prosecutors, courts, or financial intelligence units.

Monitoring may involve reviewing **annual reports, legislative audits, procurement records, or budget allocations**, as well as observing patterns across multiple cases to identify systemic bottlenecks or risks. Reviewing annual reports, performance audits, guidelines and operating procedures, public statements or external evaluation reports are other resources useful to conduct the assessment.

Aside from monitoring the asset management institution, institutional monitoring can also cover key legislation governing the agency and the use of recovered funds. Techniques to conduct institutional monitoring include:

- Development of an **evaluation report**, comparing the work of the agency and the laws governing it against the key criteria discussed above
- Conducting **interviews** with staff involved in the agency and bodies responsible for the oversight of the agency, including parliamentary committees

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- Conducting of **comparisons** of the resources, powers and constraints of the agency with other agencies regionally and worldwide
- Holding **feedback discussions** with key government officials, including from the agency, and civil society to discuss challenges
- Legislative **evaluation reports**.

3.1.3. Financial monitoring

Financial monitoring by CSOs plays an important role in ensuring that recovered assets are transferred, received, and managed with full financial integrity. It involves examining whether funds flow through the channels required by law or by negotiated agreements—for example, whether they are deposited into a dedicated account or special fund rather than being absorbed into general revenues.

CSOs can track the timing and sequence of transfers, verify that financial movements align with court orders, legislative provisions or the details of international agreements, and assess whether the funds remain traceable at every stage of the process. This also includes reviewing whether any interest or financial gains generated during the return process—whether in escrow, holding accounts, or government deposits—are properly identified, recorded, and made available for public scrutiny.

Resources for financial monitoring include:

- **Treasury statements** and central bank reports;
- Public financial management systems or **online budget portals**;
- **Auditor-General reports** and audit statements;
- **Parliamentary** budget oversight reports;
- Official **agreements** or legal provisions specifying dedicated accounts for recovered assets;
- **Banking records** where accessible through FOI requests or official disclosures

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Techniques to monitor the finances of returns include:

- **Financial reports** identifying whether funds are traceable
- **Meetings** with parliamentarians and government officials to gain access to more detailed financial accounting documents
- **Freedom of information requests**

3.2. Addressing challenges in access to information

Access to information around recovered assets and the asset return process may be a significant challenge for CSOs, no matter the type of monitoring conducted. Consequently, where it is likely to be a challenge to access information, it is important to identify strategies for overcoming this obstacle.

Many countries still have outdated secrecy rules or poorly enforced access to information or freedom of information (FOI) laws. Only a handful of countries regularly publish data on recovered assets and key agreements governing returns. Officials often classify asset recovery information as secret and deny FOI requests.^[121] The restricted access to information is compounded by the existence of multiple agencies, such as finance ministries, asset recovery agencies and units, courts, asset management agencies and anti-corruption commissions that may handle different parts of the recovery process. Often, no single office publishes consolidated schedules, budgets or outcomes. Requests can move between bodies with a lack of clarity on responsibility, making it hard for CSOs to know who bears full responsibility on the process and utilisation of returned assets. Moreover, confidentiality clauses are often cited to deny the provision of the requested information on recovered assets.

In international returns, bilateral or multilateral agreements are not always easily accessible and can also be a barrier to access to information when no specific clauses on CSO engagement in the process of return is spelt out in the conditions. Even when national access to information laws exist, return agreements may only provide for minimal roles for CSOs, making information accessibility difficult.

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To address these challenges, CSOs involved in monitoring recovered assets will likely need to adopt flexible and creative strategies that combine both formal and informal information-gathering methods.

The following section provides an overview of practical tools and approaches that can help map existing tools and overcome challenges:

1. IDENTIFY WHAT INFORMATION IS ALREADY AVAILABLE

A useful first step is to map the information that is already available, along with the tools and sources that can be used to obtain it. Often it can be tempting to jump straight into complex procedures for collecting information that can take up time and resources. Making a list of what is available or what could be available in certain situations can help save this time.

1. Start by identifying **what information you need** to effectively monitor the case, the institution or the finances.
2. Then determine **what information exists** from that list of necessary information. Remember this information may be available also on the websites of foreign governments in international cases. It also may be scattered across several government websites. A useful tool here can also be the StAR Asset Recovery Watch database.
3. Then identify **what information is missing** and where this information may be found. Think about whether informal channels exist to obtain this information, or whether institutions can be motivated to release the information.

Tools and techniques for this missing information are described below.

2. GATHER INFORMATION ON RECOVERED ASSETS THROUGH INFORMAL REQUESTS

A first and simpler step should be to approach authorities who may hold the information, or parliament if they can obtain it, and put in a simple request for the information. As part of this, CSOs often rely on informal channels to obtain information on recovered assets, both domestically and abroad. Below is an overview of such approaches.

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Collaboration with local authorities

Building constructive relationships with relevant authorities is essential to obtain information. In fact, CSOs often obtain access to key documents such as agreements or draft bills that are not otherwise published by public authorities or are difficult to access. Information can be obtained formally through a simple request or informally, which may include verbal briefings from officials, background updates shared during meetings, (drafts of) asset return agreements, informal explanations of timelines or procedural steps, clarifications on the amounts recovered, details on intended budget allocations, and insights into which agencies are responsible for specific stages of the process. Informal exchanges can also reveal upcoming decisions, delays, risks, or changes in how the assets are expected to be managed or used — information that may not yet be reflected in official documents.

Collaboration with international CSOs and partners

International partners can be very valuable for obtaining information on recovered assets, especially in cross-border cases. They often have access to documents and data that are difficult to obtain locally, such as copies of memoranda of understanding or procedural updates on asset repatriation. Collaborating with multilateral organizations, foreign anti-corruption agencies or CSO-friendly governments can help CSOs track the status of recovered assets, understand the conditions attached to their use, and monitor compliance with international agreements. Likewise, working with foreign and internationally active CSOs can be very useful to obtain background information on cases, obtain documents through their help or to file relevant freedom of information requests abroad on cases pertaining their countries.

3. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION LAWS

Where this fails and where freedom of information laws exist and function, CSOs can use Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to obtain relevant documents, such as cooperation agreements, asset registers, budgets, audit reports, and disbursement plans. CSOs can push officials to treat asset return data as part of standard disclosures or to respond to FOI requests for these records.

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Targeted or templatised FOI requests for asset recovery data that include:

- **Lists of recovered and confiscated assets** with estimated values and seizure dates
- Copies of any **MoU** or court order governing the return
- Schedules of pending **asset disposals** or auctions
- Detailed **budgets of recovered-funds allocations**
- Monitoring and evaluation **reports** on funded projects
- **Audit statements** of those projects

Maintaining a **tracker of requests and disclosures**, listing all relevant agencies such as the asset-recovery unit, finance ministry, central bank, judiciary and whether they publish any recovered-asset data. For each FOI request, recording the date filed, date and content of response, or any refusal grounds. Systematically logging this information makes it easier to identify barriers and unresolved questions. It also prevents different organizations from unknowingly duplicating requests and helps target follow-up.



Useful tools

A sample of a FOI request relevant for asset monitoring to be adapted to local laws and contexts, see section - "Additional

- Resources and Templates"
- The NGO Access Info Europe provides tools and support to CSOs, activists and journalists in effective use of Freedom of Information.^[122]

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4. OTHER TOOLS

Government reports and public platforms

CSOs can advocate for governments to regularly publish official reports on asset recovery. This could take the form of an annual asset return report detailing any new recoveries and a transparent budget report on how recovered funds are being allocated. In budget documents, any line items or extra budget funds originating from recovered assets should be clearly labelled.

This could also be supplemented by a single public portal or dashboard where all recovered asset information is posted. Such a portal could list all assets by type, value, recovery date, current custodian, and status. A centralised registry would reduce ad-hoc FOI requests and allow tracking of recoveries over time.^[123]

Strategic litigation on FOI

When authorities refuse FOI requests or ignore transparency obligations, CSOs can pursue legal remedies, petitions and litigation. Most FOI laws allow appeals to an Information Commissioner or the courts if a request is denied or unanswered. Civil society can petition courts or use administrative appeals to compel agencies to release information on recovered assets. Similarly, CSOs can sue for access or file constitutional petitions arguing that hiding information on stolen assets violates principles of public accountability.

Collaboration with investigative journalists and other CSOs

Working with investigative journalists is another useful tool for CSOs seeking information on recovered assets outside official channels. Journalists often have access to data sources, leaks, and cross-border networks that are not available through formal channels. The tools and methods they use may help reveal details about asset recovery cases or on the use of returned funds that may otherwise remain opaque. Collaboration can also help verify information, fill gaps in public records, and bring public attention to misuse or delays in asset recovery processes..

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- **Field visits, audits, and stakeholder consultations** already conducted for other anti-corruption projects can be adapted to include asset-specific checks, such as verifying the presence and condition of asset-funded infrastructure or confirming financial flows.
- Similarly, **partnerships** with journalists, local community groups, or other CSOs working on related governance issues can provide additional information without requiring significant new resources.

Ultimately, there are also several degrees of monitoring, from labour and cost intensive to more light touch. CSOs should assess the resources they have available and conduct monitoring that best fits their resources.

3.3. Working with partners and coalitions

Working collaboratively with other civil society organizations is a key strategy for effective asset monitoring. Building CSO networks allows organizations to speak with a stronger, more credible voice, pool expertise, share resources, and increase leverage when engaging authorities or advocating for transparency.

To do this in the most efficient way, CSOs should focus on existing partnerships and networks and carefully assess the capacity, expertise, and reliability of potential partners. Ensuring the credibility and independence of coalition members is also important, as engagement with state-influenced groups could undermine legitimacy and public trust.

International networks can also play a valuable role, providing access to comparative experiences, technical guidance, and additional channels for information on cross-border asset recovery.

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Useful tools

- The UNCAC Coalition's Asset Recovery Working Group seeks to facilitate discussions, exchange information and joint advocacy among civil society experts around asset recovery globally^[124]
- The CAPAR CSO Network, composed of civil society groups from across the African continent, aims to promote peer learning and joint advocacy on asset recovery and CAPAR – the Common African Position on Asset Recovery in Africa.^[125]

3.4. Engagement approaches with public authorities

Building and strengthening relationships with authorities is another critical component of effective asset monitoring. Success however depends heavily on the broader civic space, the openness of public institutions to engage with civil society, and the credibility and reputation of the CSOs themselves.

In more restrictive environments, such engagement can be extremely challenging, carrying risks of co-optation or even personal security threats. In such contexts, the functionality of anti-corruption and asset recovery institutions is often undermined by limited independence, low capacity, and political interference, making formal collaboration difficult. Under these conditions, CSOs frequently rely on individual connections with officials from these agencies and international partnerships both to access information and to monitor the use of recovered assets, particularly in cross-border cases.

Generally, and traditionally to CSO policy work, it is important to balance independence and constructive criticism, ensuring CSOs provide credible, evidence-based assessments while maintaining professional relationships that allow for dialogue, collaboration, and continued access to information. Other tactics that may prove useful and that are often used when engaging with public authorities on monitoring are:

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- Demonstrating **public-interest motivation**: Clearly explain that monitoring benefits transparency and accountability, not personal or political agendas.
- Offering **value in exchange**, such as technical input, capacity-building, or analyses to encourage sharing of information on returns and recovered assets.
- **Respecting institutional constraints**: Acknowledge limits on time, resources, or legal restrictions when requesting information or asking for policy improvements.
- Messages that **emphasize mutual goals**, transparency, and accountability can help convince officials to become allies or to share otherwise inaccessible information.
- Formal **collaboration agreements**, such as MoUs with agencies, can institutionalize these relationships, clarify roles, and outline channels for information sharing. Their implementation however is largely dependent on the actual quality of the relationship and on the capacity of the agency.
- Participation in **multi-stakeholder forums**, technical meetings, and public consultations provides additional opportunities for dialogue and trust-building.

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3.5. Additional Resources and Templates



The following section provides some additional tools that CSOs can use as part of their monitoring work.

DATABASES

The **Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (StAR) Asset Recovery Watch** database tracks over 1,600 cases involving more than 140 jurisdictions worldwide, providing publicly accessible information on international efforts to freeze, confiscate, and return assets linked to corruption. Although the list of cases in the database is not comprehensive, and some relevant cases may not be captured, it includes a lot of case-level data such as jurisdictions involved, amounts recovered, legal basis, and the status of each recovery. For CSOs, the database can serve as a reference tool to track and analyze recovered assets, compare processes across countries, and support research or monitoring activities related to asset recovery and transparency. Available at: <https://star.worldbank.org/asset-recovery-watch-database>

ASSESSMENT TOOLS, TOOLKITS AND PRINCIPLES

Transparency International France's Handbook for Asset Restitution

This handbook by Transparency International France provides a practical roadmap for civil society to assess and ensure that stolen assets are returned to origin countries in a way that is transparent, accountable, and inclusive. It outlines the key stages of restitution—from negotiations to project selection, fund allocation, and monitoring—and pairs them with a detailed indicator framework designed to measure how well each stage upholds these principles. This indicator framework is especially useful because it gives civil society concrete tools to assess the integrity of asset returns, compare different restitution processes, and identify gaps that could lead to misuse or opacity. The indicator framework allows CSOs to assess, based on several benchmarks and three different levels of compliance, the transparency, accountability and inclusiveness of asset returns. Available at: https://transparency-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Handbook-for-asset-restitution_Transparency-France_230622.pdf

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CiFAR's CAPAR Monitoring tool: assessing effectiveness of return frameworks

The Common African Position on Asset Recovery (CAPAR) is a political commitment by African governments adopted in 2020 in the framework of the African Union to promote effective and efficient asset recovery. The CAPAR sets out recommended measures and actions required to effectively address asset recovery, including the management of recovered assets in its Pillar 3. The CAPAR assessment tool, developed by CiFAR, aims to guide civil society organizations in monitoring and reporting on the progress of the implementation of the recommendations set out in the CAPAR at the national level. The tool provides indicators around the main CAPAR recommendations – including on Pillar 3 – and a “traffic light” rating system, which can be used to assess progress in each of the four CAPAR pillars for commitments for reform to be taken place nationally.

- Information on the CAPAR assessments already conducted with the methodology is available at: <https://cifareu.eu/implementing-the-common-african-position-launch-of-six-national-assessments-of-capar-implementation>
- The assessment tool methodology is available upon request contacting CiFAR at info@cifareu.eu.

Civil Society Principles on Asset Return and Asset Management

The Civil Society Principles for Accountable Asset Return and the Civil Society Principles for the Transparent, Accountable, and Participatory Management of Frozen and Recovered Assets are another useful tool for CSOs engaging in asset monitoring. The first set establishes minimum standards for how recovered assets should be returned—focusing on transparency, integrity, and civil society and citizen participation throughout the process. The second set complements this by defining how those assets should be managed once frozen or confiscated: creating or designating an institutional mechanism with strong oversight, properly resourcing it, disclosing information publicly, and involving stakeholders—including victims—in decision-making. They are available at:

- Principles on asset return: <https://cifareu.eu/what-is-asset-recovery/civil-society-principles-for-accountable-asset-return/>
- Principles on asset management: <https://cifareu.eu/what-is-asset-recovery/asset-management-principles/>

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CiFAR “Civil Society Organisations & Asset Recovery: A Manual for Action”

With this manual, civil society organisations interested in starting work in the asset recovery field or strengthening current work will find concrete tips and ideas identified from interviews with CSO representatives and other experts familiar with asset recovery and from previous reference publications.

Available at: <https://cifareu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CSOs-and-asset-recovery-a-manual-for-action.pdf>

CiFAR “Citizen Guide to Asset Recovery in Kenya”

This tool is designed to demystify how asset recovery works, why it matters, and how ordinary citizens and civil society organisations can actively take part in asset recovery and monitoring recovered assets. While tailored to Kenya, the guide can also be useful for CSOs in other countries, as it offers a concrete example of how to build citizen engagement tools, monitor legal and institutional processes, and design advocacy strategies.

Available at: <https://cifareu/empowering-citizens-to-combat-corruption-cifar-launches-the-citizen-guide-to-asset-recovery-in-kenya/>

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Templates

1. FOR MONITORING PROJECTS FUNDED WITH RECOVERED ASSETS

Template 1 - Procurement Monitoring Red Flag Checklist

Procurement Stage	Monitoring Question	Red Flag Indicators	Evidence/Notes
Bid Announcement	Was the bid widely and openly advertised?	Hidden or secret tenders; very short notice periods.	
Bid Submission	Did multiple qualified bidders apply properly?	Only one bidder; missing bid documents; very high/low bids.	
Evaluation	Were scoring criteria clear and fairly applied?	Disqualifying lowest compliant bid without reason; opaque	
Contract Award	Does the contractor meet eligibility rules?	Award to politically connected person; shell company; non-	
Contract Performance	Are project outputs meeting standards and timeline?	Repeated delays; budget overspend; visible poor-quality	

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Template 2 – Field Visit Report

Project Name: _____

Location: _____

Date of Visit: _____

Name of Person Monitoring: _____

Aspect of the project	Response
Is the project visible and active?	Yes / No
Has implementation begun?	Yes / No
Is there evidence of community involvement?	Yes / No
Was the contractor present and engaging?	Yes / No
Are project deadlines being met?	Yes / No
Describe any inconsistencies observed:	description
Photos/Geotagged evidence:	attach or list file names
Community grievances/feedback:	description

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Template 3 – Budget Tracking Sheet

Budget Line (Project)	Allocated Amount	Disbursed	Spent	Remarks
e.g Rural Infrastructure Project				
Social Welfare Project				

Template 4 – Community Scorecard

Project Indicator	Community Rating (1–5)	Comments
Project visibility		
Contractor transparency		
Quality of work		
Community involvement		

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2. SAMPLE OF FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST ON RECOVERED ASSETS

Dear [Name/Title of FOI Officer or Institution],

I am writing to request access to information under [insert relevant FOI law/regulation in your country]. This request concerns the recovered asset case involving [briefly identify the case—e.g., individual involved, year of recovery, amount, or reference number].

Specifically, I request the following information:

1. Details of the recovered assets, including the total amount recovered, dates of recovery, and any associated court or confiscation orders.
2. Documentation on the terms of return or restitution, such as Memoranda of Understanding, agreements between states, or conditions attached to the use of the funds.
3. Information on allocation and use of the returned assets, including selected projects/programmes, budgets, implementing agencies, and disbursement schedules.
4. Monitoring and evaluation reports, audits, or internal assessments related to the management or impact of the recovered assets.
5. official communication between relevant government bodies regarding the planning, allocation, or oversight of the recovered funds.

If any part of this request cannot be granted, please provide the specific legal grounds for refusal and release all segregable portions of documents that can be disclosed.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Your Organisation]

ANNEX I

ANNEX I – LIST OF INTERVIEWS

- Africa Network for Environment and Economic Justice (ANEEJ), Nigeria
- Centro de Integridade Pública (CIP), Mozambique
- Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), Nigeria
- EG Justice, Equatorial Guinea
- Grupo de Trabalho Para a Transparência e Verdade na Recuperação e Reutilização de Activos Recuperados (Associação Uyele), Angola
- Juliet Ibekaku-Nwagwu, Nigeria
- Karina Carvalho, Portugal
- Libera. Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, Italy
- Transparency International France
- Transparency International Kenya

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