



Recommendations to ensure meaningful civil society participation at the United Nations: From ambition to action.

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1. Introduction

The opening words of the UN Charter clearly states that the United Nations is not the preserve of states and governments alone, but of *"We the peoples"*. Justice to that promise implies broad stakeholder participation to ensure that the voice of everyone is heard – including the most vulnerable and marginalised. Civil society organisations represent a diverse range of expertise, perspectives and lived experiences, and play a valuable role in bringing insights to strengthen the basis of policymaking.

Over the past 75 years, the United Nations has benefited from and relied on cooperation with Member States and civil society to design better multilateral treaties, frameworks, and mechanisms for democratic governance. Individuals and groups engaging with the UN provide valuable on-the-ground insights and information, alert the UN system of evolving situations, and push for relevant action to be taken.

The UN as a whole has a collective responsibility to respect, protect and promote the freedom to engage with the UN as an exercise of fundamental freedoms and human rights for all.

With the [Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights](#), public participation and civic space is identified as one of seven key areas in a blueprint for positive change that reaffirms the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, establishing that the pursuit of fundamental rights and freedoms is at the core of the United Nations' work.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made the need to deliver on that promise more acute. At the same time, the UN working modalities during and beyond the pandemic should endeavour to create an opportunity for building back better and to embed into our new working methods improved participation of all stakeholders, not least civil society.

2. Recommendations

Based on extensive action-oriented discussions between Member States and civil society on lessons learned and opportunities for strengthening meaningful participation, we wish to provide the following recommendations as a non-exhaustive, but committed, exercise to support and build on UN efforts:

1) *Maximise the opportunities and advantages of ICT's and digitalisation in UN meetings and processes*

Information and communication technologies (ICT's) have shown their value in broadening participation and engagement for different stakeholders, and the use of digital technologies and virtual meetings at the UN over the past year present opportunities and challenges, which the UN, Member States and civil society should seize and harness.

An evaluation survey¹ of participation in the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) by Major Groups and other Stakeholders showed that almost 50 percent of participants surveyed joined the HLPF for the first time in 2020. Most of these new participants represented civil society from developing countries.

While the evidence shows the opportunities that virtual formats offer for broader participation in UN meetings and processes, particularly from developing countries, ensuring *inclusive* virtual meetings implies taking into consideration issues such as access to internet, language barriers, time zones and safety, which should be assessed in a more integrated manner.

Building on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, the UN should consider how to best combine inclusive virtual and physical formats in meetings and processes, inter alia UNGA High Level Week and meetings, High-Level Political Forum, Human Rights Council processes, ECOSOC and its functional commissions and COP-meetings.

Efforts to maximise the advantages of ICT's should build upon and complement the ongoing work to strengthen modalities for civil society inclusion and participation at the UN, such as the SG's Call to Action for Human Rights or the UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space.

2) *Bridge the digital divide*

To harness the potentials of digital inclusion, we must bridge the digital divide to promote a more open and inclusive civic space by addressing the disparities in usage and access to digital tools. This is critical to ensure stable and reliable access and possibilities of engagement for everyone, including those living in rural areas, women, young people, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples etc.

The UN can lead by example, in adopting an integrated and system-wide approach in the facilitation of internet access and connectivity for civil society to engage virtually in UN meetings and sessions. One option could be to utilise a connection at UN country-based offices.

¹ 'Inclusion of civil society in the virtual HLPF 2020' survey prepared by Action for Sustainable Development in August 2020, including 130 responses from 48 countries; with responses from all recognised stakeholder groups.

Bridging the digital divide, including the gender digital divide, is a challenging task that requires the contribution of all stakeholders, as different factors must be considered to ensure accessibility, such as diverse language interpretation, attention to time zones, closed captioning and sign language options - not accounting for other barriers (social, political or economic) that need to be tackled in parallel. Until these gaps are fully overcome, the UN should seek to expand the participation of civil society, creatively, by all available means and in close consultation with civil society to identify and overcome the barriers to their full and effective participation.

3) Ensure meaningful participation at all stages of UN meetings and processes

The dialogue and discussions between Member States and civil society have shown that beyond the need to review civil society participation in formal modalities of the UN's work, there are concrete opportunities to integrate the voices of civil society better to the benefit of UN processes, namely:

a. Ensure real interactive dialogue during, as well as in the preparation of and follow-up to, official sessions

The UN should revise the modalities for a meaningful civil society participation and engagement across the spectrum of official meetings and sessions through a UN system-wide and integrated approach, including in the preparation of and follow-up to these. Moreover, the official sessions could seek more creative ways of engaging with and across participants, including civil society, to ensure a meaningful dialogue and inputs from all relevant stakeholders. For instance, by harnessing the potential of digital technologies in the crowdsourcing of ideas to capture broader views.

b. Facilitate procedural conditions for effective engagement

The UN should facilitate appropriate conditions to allow effective civil society participation in official meetings and sessions. This can be accomplished, inter alia, through: Improved access to information, in which digital technologies can play a significant role; ensuring proper notice and information of UN meetings, as well as timely civil society registration; allowing civil society, especially from developing countries, to have adequate time to obtain travel documents and make travel arrangements.

The UN and its Member States can also seek opportunities to allow substantive civil society engagement, also in the preparation phases; for instance by formally recognizing independent civil society reports in intergovernmental processes including the High-level Political Forum and Voluntary National Review processes, following the example of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in the Human Rights Council.

4) Create an annual Civil Society Action Day, i.e. in the margin of HLPF or UNGA

An annual 'Civil Society Action Day', i.e. in the margin of HLPF or UNGA, could serve as a space for accountability, review and stocktaking of ongoing efforts to strengthen the role of civil society at the UN. This could be a forum co-created by the UN, Member States and civil society, taking place virtually or combining virtual and physical elements, for broad and in-depth dialogue on progress, opportunities and barriers to strengthening the role of civil society within all three pillars of the UN's work, including ensuring a human rights-based approach to sustainable development.

5) Appoint a Special Envoy for Civil Society to work for civic space at the UN

Inspired by the impressive work done by the Special Envoy for Youth, it is the recommendation of Member States and civil society that the Secretary-General looks into the possibility of appointing a Special Envoy for Civil Society, specifically tasked to support an inclusive, meaningful and consistent civil society participation across the UN, including in UN processes and meetings through integrated and comprehensive approaches. This would require the appointed Special Envoy to collaborate closely with civil society, including international, and regional networks, as well as other civil society coordinating mechanisms; engaging in conversations with Member States; as well as support the UN's efforts to further advance the conditions that allow civil society to meaningfully participate, while ensuring that a civil society perspective is secured in contexts and intergovernmental forums with restricted access for civil society, by collaborating closely with relevant partners in the UN Secretariat and UN mechanisms, departments and agencies.