



Global Online Civil Society Consultation

UN's Approach to Protecting and Promoting Civic Space

13 – 24 January 2020

<https://www.globaldevhub.org/civicspace>

Across the globe, people need to speak out, organise, mobilise and take action off-line and on-line, in order to have a say in decisions about their future. Safe, open, free and enabling space for all to form and voice opinions, debate, be heard and peacefully protest, is an essential prerequisite for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, maintaining peace and security, humanitarian assistance, human rights and rule of law. Democratic, fundamental freedoms – of expression, association and peaceful assembly – and effective participation and safe environments are therefore key.

The tide against civil society is strong: hostile discourse and online and offline abuse and harassment, disinformation and smear campaigns are on the rise. Civil society organisations in different domains, including health, education, housing and humanitarian assistance can face curbs on funding and complex registration rules, often under the pretext of security. Independent journalists, peacebuilders, humanitarian workers, youth activists, land activists, minorities and indigenous groups, environmental defenders, activists for women's equality and LGBTI rights, activists working on migration and forced displacement are frequently subjected to attacks, criminalization or killings.

Effective implementation of the United Nations (UN) purposes, policies and programmes on development, peace and security, humanitarian action, and human rights, under its Charter, is dependent on effective civil society partnerships, engagements, contributions, feedbacks and critical voices at all levels. The UN has also sought to promote and protect civic space in a variety of ways, but the UN could do better and is therefore resolved to take its civic space work to the next level by developing a UN system-wide strategy on protecting and promoting civic space, including through consultations with civil society.

For this purpose, OHCHR and UN Women, with support from other UN and civil society partners, hosted a global, online consultation with civil society actors on the role of the UN in protecting and promoting civic space, especially in the context of shrinking or closing civic space and increased attacks and threats against civil society actors.

Consultations Summary

The consultation took place from 13 to 24 January 2020 and attracted over 260 civil society participants from over 80 countries across all regions of the world. Most participants were from national and local civil society organizations, individuals and civil society activists, as well as international NGOs. The discussions were moderated by CIVICUS, Amnesty International, Innovation for Change, UN Women, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Development Programme, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The consultation provided an opportunity for a diversity of civil society actors to express their views and opinions, as well as share experiences and suggestions on how the UN can improve its work to protect and promote civic space. In the moderators' views, the discussions were rich and constructive, and offered a number of concrete ideas and recommendations that will be taken into account during the development of the UN's system-wide strategy on promoting and protecting civic space.

The discussions focused on a number of key questions formulated around three main roles of the UN in relation to civic space that should be further prioritized and improved upon: partnership and participation, protection of civil society actors, and promotion of civic space. These three areas were identified following a UN system-wide survey carried out in 2019, and can be summarized as:

- *How can the UN effectively partner and engage with diverse civil society actors, and improve the channels of participation and access to information?*
- *What role should the UN play to better protect civil society actors under threat, including from reprisals for cooperating with the UN and from offline and online attacks?*
- *What role should the UN play to better promote civic space and support civil society, including effective civil society participation in national decision-making processes?*

Many participants emphasized the essential role of the UN in strengthening partnerships with and protection of civil society actors, and in actively engaging a diversity of actors in promoting civic space at international and national levels. The majority of participants stressed the need to reach out to the most excluded, marginalized and discriminated population groups, including but not restricted to women and girls, youth, children, indigenous peoples, minorities, refugees, migrants, persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, as well as civil society actors at grass-roots, local and community levels.

Participants also expressed shared concerns relating to the shrinking and closing of civic space as well as the challenges relating to their engagements with the UN at all levels. These common concerns and trends will help to frame and inform the UN's approach and strategy on promoting and protecting civic space. Throughout the discussion, participants raised concerns relating to general human rights situations in various countries and severe rights violations that target specific population groups. Many of these human rights situations are documented in UN reports and are being monitored by UN special procedures.

This closing summary will focus primarily on the specific concerns and suggestions raised in relation to the overall promotion and protection of civic space. Therefore, the summary provides [key recommendations](#) or "[key asks](#)" on what the UN should do to improve partnership, participation, access to information, protection of civil society actors from threats and reprisals, and to proactively promote civic space and civil society participation in national decision-making processes.

All contributions and comments by participants, as well as this summary, will still be accessible on the [Global Dev Hub](#) platform, until further notice.

Key recommendations or “Key Asks”

1. *How can the UN effectively partner and engage with diverse civil society actors, and improve the channels of participation and access to information?*

- Streamline the UN’s understanding of what civil society is; avoid tokenistic engagement without proper and effective processes and frameworks to follow; and reverse the perception among local actors and small civil society organizations that the UN is unapproachable, elitist or selective in its engagement, with a particular focus on the most marginalized, excluded and discriminated groups, including women, youth, children, persons with disabilities, minorities, indigenous peoples, refugees, internally displaced persons, faith-based groups, sex workers, among others
- UN decision-making and consultation structures need to better account for domestic political realities and be grounded on the views of citizens and people.
- Lend better political, technical, logistical and financial support to civil society actors, especially at local and community levels that target excluded population groups mentioned above, including by establishing dedicated civil society focal points and/or desk officers in the country and local offices
- Establish direct channels with civil society by creating region/country-specific physical hubs, using online interactive forums and venues (in addition to physical meetings and consultations), digital technologies and social media platforms, for improved outreach to, inclusive participation of, communications with, and sharing information with civil society actors, especially at the grass-roots and community levels in an engaging manner
- Simplify bureaucratic processes; ensure consultation channels are open and inclusive to enable meaningful engagement with civil society actors; arrange consultations with sufficient notice and use easily accessible platforms (easy to understand, practical and in multiple/local languages); make online portals and online contents friendly to persons with disabilities, engaging for youth, reflective of the concerns of various sectors/groups, and conducive to direct engagement by children
- Adapt the UN’s operational practices and arrangements to allow, strengthen and expand opportunities for partnerships, including the possibility of developing joint strategic plans for cooperation between civil society and the UN; and build capacities of civil society in relation to UN processes and modalities for participation
- Support the "institutionalization" of transparent, open and inclusive civil society engagement with all intergovernmental processes, and urge Member States, putting themselves forward for membership of the ECOSOC NGO Committee, to fulfil their responsibilities in accordance with international human rights standards
- Adopt a broad understanding of accessibility within the UN system to improve civil society engagement in UN inter-governmental processes and the UN’s responsiveness to civil society concerns in relation to these processes; address challenges and barriers related to civil society engagement (e.g. unclear or cumbersome accreditation and registration processes, physical and procedural inaccessibility, lack of separate civil society lines at security checkpoints, pre-screening of civil society materials for dissemination and exhibits, fees for conference rooms for civil society

events, short speaking times and unacceptable speaking slots during the sessions, non-admittance of NGOs to sessions of intergovernmental discussions, travel requirements and costs, visas and other issues), including the engagement with the UN High Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

- In particular, explore options for increased engagement by civil society organizations that are not in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) that are often small and local civil society actors and organizations, including by specifically inviting and providing logistical support to such civil society actors; and/or learning from practices of regional commissions, adopt regional forums “approach” in organizing the UN inter-governmental and other meetings in easily accessible venues away from New York and Geneva
- Put in place “information feedback loops” between the UN and civil society, that enable civil society to provide relevant feedback to the UN; establish complaints and accountability mechanisms across the UN; and put in place measures to assess the effectiveness civil society partnerships in the implementation and evaluation of the UN’s activities and projects
- Improve communication and sharing of information regarding the work of the UN human rights mechanisms; standardize certain processes pertaining to the functioning of the UN human rights mechanisms; and ensure inclusive civil society participation in all sessions, panels or events organized by the UN human rights mechanisms
- Put in place a system for a better timing and format for NGO engagement with treaty bodies; greatly improve safe and private spaces, transparency, access to treaty bodies by indigenous peoples and minorities; and establish a common practice of webcasting for all treaty body sessions
- Improve accessibility of information regarding actions taken by the UN special procedures in response to submissions of information and complaints (e.g. communications sent by the Special Procedures to States and other actors)
- Actively engage with civil society actors, particularly religious and traditional actors, and those working on refugees, migrants, forced displacement, peacekeeping and peacebuilding issues, humanitarian assistance, anti-corruption, anti-terrorism, among others
- Create a separate complaint system through dedicated focal points in Geneva and New York, to ensure that human rights defenders have referral channels to address and follow up on civil society requests and complaints
- Expand the UN’s field presences for improved human rights monitoring, which will help to overcome the remoteness of the UN’s human rights system; and strengthen the implementation of the UN’s Human Rights Up Front initiative, especially in countries with no UN human rights presence

2. *What role should the UN play to better protect civil society actors under threat, including from reprisals for cooperating with the UN and from off-line and on-line attacks?*

- Publicly and unequivocally condemn physical and psychological attacks, threats and intimidation against all human rights defenders without discrimination and in a timely manner; refrain from using language that further stigmatizes, abuses, disparages or discriminates against them; and strengthen the UN's support to the UN human rights mechanisms and country-level fact-finding missions
- Increase public awareness of the UN's commitment to its duty of care to those that provide information, including whistleblowers; develop a more robust anti-harassment policy for off-line and on-line spaces; and create a whistleblower-type system for human rights defenders that have been intimidated and/or threatened in UN spaces
- Improve protection efforts for those at risk, including human rights activists and defenders, women human rights defenders, "earth rights defenders", youth, journalists, and vulnerable, marginalized, excluded and discriminated population groups working on human rights issues, in peacekeeping and peacebuilding contexts, delivering humanitarian assistance, in electoral and post-electoral contexts, and in conflict and crisis situations
- Better understand the variety and specific protection needs of youth activists, who encounter unique barriers related to age limitations, denial of visas for travel, lack of adequate frameworks for a meaningful engagement by youth, as well as children
- Strengthen its vital preventive role, and not only curative; carry out systematic risk assessments and identification of root causes of those risks, through adopting risk mitigation plans, engaging on the duty of states to protect, and combatting impunity by demanding effective investigation of human rights abuses against human rights defenders and other civil society actors
- Enable civil society to communicate safely, including by using safe communication tools, in their engagement with the UN; develop and strengthen feedback mechanisms in order to keep people and organizations who cooperate with the UN informed of their complaints, including on reprisals cases
- Empower and strengthen civil society resilience in hostile environments, by supporting civil society capacities to assess risks, including gender specific risks, by designing collective and individual response strategies, and by increasing awareness of rights and making available legal advice
- Explore possibilities for establishing "contracts" and "agreements" between the UN, government authorities and civil society, which seek to ensure safe engagement of civil society and improve protection
- Where necessary, facilitate and provide safe passage and refuge in a safe environment and create an "emergency fund that can be accessed safely by persons-at-risk"
- Partner and develop joint strategies with the Independent Accountability Mechanisms of the multilateral development banks, National Contact Points of the member states of the OECD, to combat reprisals and retaliation against defenders working on harmful impacts of business activity and investment

3. *What role should the UN play to better promote civic space and support civil society, including effective civil society participation in national decision-making processes?*

- UN senior leadership should lead by example on civil society issues in its engagement and advocacy with Member States; move from rhetoric (political declarations) to action; and demonstrate clear commitments on the importance of effective partnerships with civil society and promotion of civic space
- Improve the UN's advocacy at all levels on the States' compliance with and implementation of international legally-binding normative standards, including human rights treaties, and mobilize the international community to exert political pressure on States to protect and open up civic spaces
- Facilitate platforms for national multi stakeholder consultations and dialogues between government authorities and civil society actors by continually reiterating in the UN's advocacy the importance of positive perceptions and narratives in relation to the essential role of diversity of actors and partnerships between civil society and state authorities, and promote increased visibility and recognition of positive contributions by civil society
- Advocate with state institutions and governments to avail funds and resources for civil society, and increase their knowledge and capacity in establishing participatory, transparent and democratic avenues for inclusive consultations with and involvement of a diversity of civil society actors in national decision-making processes, including the capacities of legislative, administrative and judicial bodies on the domestication of international human rights obligations
- Support and build capacities of civil society to improve their representation in political and economic decision-making processes, including through supporting new legal frameworks and user-friendly tools that allow diverse groups to speak out, organise, mobilise and take action off-line and on-line, and to use art and culture as a form of expression
- In particular, promote and advocate for civil society participation in national law-making processes that ensures people can exercise their right to vote for and have a say in drafting, adoption, implementation and monitoring of laws related to peaceful protests, access to information, freedom of expression and association, and participation
- In particular, address impunity and lack of access to justice for women; support women affected by the structural causes of inequalities and violence; ensure that women human rights defenders can work free of discrimination, intimidation and violence; and support locally-led strategies for empowering women and girls
- Strengthen the UN's partnership with other bodies, including parliaments, national human rights institutions, ombudspersons, academia, businesses, entertainment and other sectors, who play an influential role in protecting and promoting civic space, including through finding ways to balance disparities in access to decision-making processes between businesses and civil society actors
- Significantly increase public awareness, basic knowledge and capacities on fundamental human rights and public freedoms, including through the use of digital technologies to facilitate information sharing; advocate for human rights education in schools (e.g. learning from the experience of human rights defenders' schools in Thailand); and develop freely accessible online courses and resources

- Promote the creation of safe spaces to listen to and foster dialogue with civil society in the decision-making processes at all levels, particularly with those who are disproportionately affected by decisions, including youth activists, indigenous groups, LGBTI individuals and women's rights defenders
- Encourage and support collective and joint initiatives among civil society organizations, regional civil society networks and platforms, recognizing the inter-linked and integral roles that civil society organizations play in development, peacebuilding, statebuilding, conflict prevention, humanitarian assistance and human rights, through their advocacy, service provision, social engagement, expertise, innovation, problem solving, and inclusive representation
- Put in place UN civil society funds to support civic activity at country and regional levels, if such funds are not available to civil society actors from other sources, with a particular focus on civil society actors and organizations working with refugees, migrants, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, youth, children, women and girls, minorities, indigenous peoples, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, LGBTI persons, sex workers, and other marginalized, excluded and discriminated groups, especially in emergency, conflict and humanitarian situations
- Enhance civil society capacities on evidence-based advocacy; support the empowerment and advocacy work of local civil society initiatives; and build civil society capacity on early warning, safe communication, opportunities of participation and data collection
- Improve the UN's capacity to monitor and report on civic space trends, attacks against and violations of human rights of civil society activists and human rights defenders, on situations/cases of intimidation and reprisals, including the monitoring of human rights situations in remote areas; and actively involve, support, and build capacities of civil society to monitor, collect and report data
- Advocate and show that an open society and inclusion are necessary for sustainable growth as a counter-narrative to the visions of economic growth in closed societies, including by examining the relationship between economic growth and inequality to understand how inclusive growth must be compatible with the "leaving no one behind" principle
- Strengthen cooperation with regional inter-governmental organizations and regional expert mechanisms (e.g. African Commission on Human Rights and Peoples' Rights, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, among others) on the protection and promotion of civic space, including in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- Support the establishment of inclusive, transparent and accountable processes to ensure that national SDGs and development plans reach all excluded groups, and in a manner that meets the aspirations and specific needs of vulnerable people, views civil society actors and groups as equal and essential partners, and adopts a "whole of society approach" that gives voice to those who are often left behind (children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees, and internally displaced persons and migrants etc.)
- In relation to SDG 16, strongly advocate with States that the implementation of this Goal with active engagement from civil society has a multiplier effect on the implementation of other SDGs, and progress on the access to information target 16.10 exhibits positive "network effects" on other SDG targets (e.g. fighting corruption (Target 16.5), illicit financial flows (Target 16.4), promoting transparency and accountability (Target 16.6), and in supporting participatory

decision-making processes (Target 16.7), and which also enables positive narratives about civil society and encourages “open door” policies by State institutions

- In the context of SDG-17 for global partnerships, promote civic space as a pre-condition for achieving all other SDGs; support CSO-led initiatives and actions in keeping with the Busan Development Effectiveness Principles and other development frameworks; and advocate for the inclusion of indicators in the national SDGs monitoring frameworks to assess the degree of inclusion and participation of civil society actors in sustainable development
- Support the regulation of sale, supply and export of dual-use items such as surveillance and cyber-surveillance technology and software, including by imposing trade restrictions in circumstances where their use may lead to human rights violations
- Provide guidance to States, and other organisations, to review and update their national frameworks for engagement with civil society that ensure full and effective participation and access to information and resources; create opportunities and incentives for States to voluntarily share and develop their good practices on guaranteeing a safe and enabling environment for civil society; and advocate for the inclusion of civil society representatives in State delegations to the UN inter-governmental events and meetings
- Hold Member States to account; support their efforts to implement recommendations made by the UN human rights mechanisms including the UN Human Rights Committee’s Draft General Comment on the right of peaceful assembly and its implementation when adopted; and widely disseminate and make understandable and accessible other related jurisprudence of treaty monitoring bodies.



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274

Registrants

445

Comments

5,399

Visitors

12

Days

7

Moderators

From UN Women, OHCHR, UNHCR UNDP, CIVICUS, I4C and Amnesty International

3

Topics

- Partnerships/Participation
- Protection
- Promotion

9

Questions

In one discussion room

LANGUAGE OF REGISTRANTS

English = 54%

French = 13%

Spanish = 9%

Arabic = 3%

Russian = 2%

30 others < 2% each

AGE OF REGISTRANTS

15-30 = 3%

30-45 = 23%

45-60 = 45%

60-75 = 20%

75-90 = 8%

90-105 = 1%

COMMON WORDS IN COMMENTS

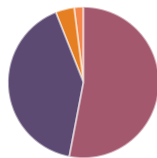
Civil Society, Human Rights, Actors, Participation, Support, Organisations, Groups, People, Work, Civic Space, National processes, Information access, Women, Funding...

GENDER OF REGISTRANTS

Other 2%

Unknown 4%

Male 41%



Female 53%

COUNTRY OF REGISTRANTS

United States, Switzerland, Nigeria, United Kingdom, India, Netherlands, Thailand, Mexico, Kenya, Ghana, Cameroon, Lebanon, Canada, Tanzania, Pakistan, Argentina, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Germany, Costa Rica, Bangladesh, Albania, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Togo, Venezuela, Sweden, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Panama, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Hungary, Guyana, France, Spain, Egypt, Colombia, Chile, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Australia, Zambia, Yemen, Vietnam, Trinidad and Tobago, Tonga, Tunisia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Russia, Peru, Oman, New Zealand, Norway, Nicaragua, Niger, Malaysia, Malawi, Mongolia, Luxembourg, Liberia, Iran, Indonesia, Guatemala, Guinea, Georgia, Gabon, Fiji, Finland, Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Dominican Republic, Denmark, Cyprus, Belarus, Botswana, Brazil, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Belgium, Austria, Armenia...