

Webcasting the NGO Committee will increase accessibility to the UN

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Webcasting sessions of the NGO Committee is an important exercise in transparency, accountability and accessibility at the UN, write the Permanent Representatives of Chile, Mexico and Uruguay to the UN in New York.



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Earlier this month, Chile, Mexico and Uruguay were pleased to introduce a resolution at the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on improving the working methods of the NGO Committee by instituting webcasting of open sessions. The resolution passed with no opposition, in an important expression of support for making the United Nations more accessible and encouraging civil society participation.

Chile, Mexico and Uruguay have long supported reforms in the working methods of the NGO Committee, with webcasting the sessions as an important first step. The ECOSOC NGO Committee operates as a door to NGOs accessing and participating in the UN. It makes recommendations on granting NGOs with consultative status and such accreditation provides NGOs with means to access and participate in human rights discussions at the UN.

NGOs' participation in United Nations processes is essential. At a time when the world faces such challenges, civil society plays a vital role complementing and reinforcing the efforts made by States. Agenda 2030 – the UN's flagship global policy – will rely heavily on NGOs for its effective implementation. They will play a key role in carrying out activities on the ground, as well as monitoring and reporting on implementation of the Agenda. More broadly, through their engagement with the UN, NGOs play a key role in drawing attention and demanding responses to situations that States would rather look away from. In many cases NGOs criticize State policy and practice in an important exercise in dialogue and accountability.

The NGO Committee is in a privileged position to encourage participation of NGOs. However, the Committee practice has been much criticized. For several years, Chile, Mexico and Uruguay have expressed concern about politically-motivated questioning of some NGO applicants and the multiple deferrals of applications.

Webcasting will make sessions accessible to all NGO applicants for accreditation – not only those with resources to travel to New York for open sessions of the Committee. Ensuring that public UN processes are accessible to as many people as possible is an important principle that should inform UN working methods. Whilst the Committee will make the decisions as to recommending accreditation, civil society has the right to know how the process operates. Webcasting open sessions of the NGO Committee is key to enabling NGOs themselves to follow the process by which their access to the UN is decided. NGOs should be able to see that decisions are being made in good faith.

We hope this will encourage the participation of the most diverse group of NGOs possible. Ensuring a diversity of voices at the United Nations is part of what the participation of civil society is all about. In line with the ECOSOC resolution 1996/31 that provides its mandate, the NGO Committee is required to ensure 'participation of non-governmental organisations from all regions, particularly from developing countries'.

Over time, there were attempts made to discuss webcasting within the NGO committee itself, but unfortunately those talks did not prosper. In introducing the webcasting resolution we were acknowledging that it was time that ECOSOC took action. In practical terms, webcasting the Committee open sessions will simply bring its practice into line with other subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC.

We will continue to call on the NGO Committee to operate in a way that ensures the applications of NGOs are dealt with in a transparent, fair and apolitical fashion. The NGO Committee should encourage not hinder the participation of NGOs in UN processes. Civil society has a right to expect the NGO committee to work properly.

Membership of the NGO Committee will always be important. We would like to see more States that are committed to promoting civil society participation at the UN and safeguarding civil society space more broadly, to stand as candidates for the NGO Committee.

The United Nations benefits from participation of organisations from all regions, working across the full spectrum of relevant concerns. We believe that States must ensure that the UN NGO Committee enables this participation and we are confident that webcasting sessions is an important step in the right direction.

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