Have your say on civic space

- **The work of civil society is vital for human rights, development, and peace and security**
- **Restrictions and attacks against civil society persist at all levels**
- **The UN is committed to protecting civil society and promoting civic space – and we look forward to getting your advice on how best to do that through online consultations in January 2020**

We the Peoples of the United Nations Determined:

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, …

to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small […]

to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom

(*Preamble of the UN Charter*)

What is civic space?

Across the globe, people want something fundamentally human: to **have a say in decisions about their future**. To do so, they need to **speak out, organise, mobilise and take action** off-line and on-line. In order to achieve this, democratic, fundamental freedoms – of expression, association and peaceful assembly – and safe environments are key. Effective participation at all levels ensures that policies address real issues, makes societies more resilient and policy-making more effective and legitimate.

> *Our partners are indispensable and we must all do more to protect and promote the fundamental right to engage with the United Nations.*
>
> Antonio Guterres
> UN Secretary-General

Why does civic space matter?

Safe, open, free and enabling space for all to form and voice opinions, debate, be heard and protest peacefully, is an essential **prerequisite for sustainable development, maintaining peace and security, humanitarian assistance, human rights and rule of law**. Keeping the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's promise to "leave no one behind" means redoubling efforts to ensure that all voices are heard, including those that have traditionally been excluded.

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[1]. Too often, those who kill, attack and harass, whether on behalf of States or other groups, go unpunished.

The UN and civic space

Effective implementation of all of the UN's pillars is **dependent on civil society contributions and feedback**, including critical voices from and engagement by different communities and groups, especially communities affected by our work. Open civic space also provides room for groups that do not share the values of the UN. The best response to such voices is upholding our principles and values enshrined in the UN Charter, and protecting the space while responding to online and offline acts that misuse it and violate rights.

UN entities, at the global, regional and national levels, have long been **working in partnership with civil society** to implement programmes and projects, e.g. to deliver life-saving services, to support mediation and post-conflict activities, to monitor political and social developments. In the humanitarian pillar, civil society is part of the main decision-making humanitarian coordination forum of the UN system, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The UN has also sought to promote and protect civic space in a multitude of ways, e.g. through rule of law programming, capacity development, advocacy in support of open space. UN human rights bodies and mechanisms, based on the obligations of Member States, have been actively engaged in the promotion and protection of civic space.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is the longest-standing and highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the UN system to ensure coherence of efforts, formulate policy, and discuss priorities for strengthened humanitarian action. The IASC brings together 19 Principals of UN and non-UN entities, and ensures that civil society is part and parcel of the entire process from policy inception to its implementation.

Created in 1991 by the UN General Assembly resolution 46/182

Over 7 million people expressed their views in the global "My World" discussions that informed the SDGs. Civil society has also contributed feedback on UN achievements and gaps in the area of civic space in the past 2 years, for example: in the peace-building and women, peace and security contexts; as part of Beijing+25 and implementation, the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development; and to the UN Secretary-General's report on the UN implementation of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders at its 20th anniversary.

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[1] unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/goal-16/

Taking the UN's civic space work to the next level – the 3 Ps:

- ✓ **Promote civic space:** advise on, and proactively advocate for, safe participation of diverse civil society groups in national decision-making processes, including through peaceful protests; seize opportunities to expand the space for civil societies and systematically highlight the positive contributions of civil society

- ✓ **Partner with civil society:** enhance civil society engagement with the UN and strengthen policies and practices on participation of / partnerships with civil society, drawing on examples of good practice from across the UN system

- ✓ **Protect civil society actors:** coordinate and strengthen UN responses to protect civil society actors effectively, including from reprisals against those who cooperate with the UN and by identifying and disseminating examples of good practice across the UN system

So, how can you contribute?

We invite civil society to share their advice on how best to achieve the "3 Ps". Please be ready to contribute your observations and suggestions to on-line consultations to be held from 13 to 24 January 2020 on the **Global Dev Hub** platform. An invitation, containing a dedicated web link to the discussion room, will be made available soon.

Questions for consultations

Partnership / participation:

- What are <u>entry points</u> for you to engage with the UN organizations and/or processes at international and national levels? What are the challenges you face in engaging with the UN (e.g. unclear about entry points/contacts, opaque and complex procedures, etc.)? Have you ever contested decisions that restricted your participation in the UN?

- How do you receive information about UN 's work and processes? Have you experienced any difficulties in <u>accessing information about the UN's policies and processes</u>? What measures do you suggest to improve access to information and quality of information?

- With a view to "leaving no one behind", what can the UN do to reach out to diverse civil society actors or groups (e.g. women, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous peoples, LGBT individuals) in your country/region/area of work? Can you provide good examples of the UN reaching out to specific groups?

- Do you have any comments about <u>civil society participation in intergovernmental bodies and/or forums</u> (e.g. General Assembly, Security Council, ECOSOC, Human Rights Council, Universal Periodic Review, various commissions etc.)? Do specific groups (e.g. women, youth, migrants, minorities, indigenous peoples, LGBT groups etc.) face greater obstacles than others in accessing UN inter-governmental fora? How could the UN support efforts towards more diversity?

Protection of civil society actors:

- What role do you expect the UN to play in situations when <u>civil society actors are at risk</u> (e.g. of intimidation, threats and attacks off-line and on-line)? Can you provide examples of the UN taking such measures?

- How could the <u>UN strengthen its protection role, including in cases of intimidation and/or reprisals against people who cooperate or seek to cooperate with the UN</u>?

Promotion of and advocacy for civic space:

- What role should the UN and its senior leadership play vis-a-vis State authorities in terms of ensuring safe <u>civil society participation in national policy discussions and decision-making processes</u>? How can the UN support diverse participation in these processes (e.g. of women, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous peoples, LGBT individuals)?

- What role should the UN play to ensure people have a say in their country (e.g. regarding national laws and policies on protests, access to information, freedoms of expression and association)?

- How could the UN strengthen its political support to civil society (e.g. through more positive narratives on civil society, meetings during high-level visits, regular consultations etc.)?