

Dear all, below are Finnish Development NGOs - Fingo's contribution to the discussion

Q1. Partnership/participation:

1. What are entry points for you to engage with the UN? 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?

As an organisation Fingo as good entry points and access to engaging with the UN bodies. This is mainly due to the fact that in addition to having access as an NGO with the ECOSOC consultative status, we also have working relationships and access via the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs as well as the Finnish UN Association which is one of our approximately 300 member organisations. At times it may take some time to find out the right person or institution to contact but Finnish MFA and the Finnish UN Association are also of help in this regard. Having the consultative status at the UN is a significant added value as it reduces the physical access, bureaucracy etc that the organisation must endure to a great extent.

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, 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?

This depends largely on the state actors as well. Finland has taken a commendable approach into including many minority representatives into the official delegations (youth, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, women). It should be noted though that there are blind spots in this as well, for instance when it comes to migrants and to some extent the Roma (in the UN context). But this is not the case in all member states. That is why it is important that the UN actively communicates and strongly encourages via e.g. recommendations and/or guidelines for member states on including different civil society actors and stakeholder groups and giving them a voice on the UN platforms.

The UN should also put effort into visibility of its work and of the UN as an actor outside of the headquarters and field offices. National UN associations could play an important role in this, but they are often weak and underfunded for the type of work that they could undertake on increasing the visibility of the UN in especially the so-called developed/rich countries. If national funding is not a possibility, the UN itself should look into funding these actors as the visibility and understanding of the work of the UN also strengthens its legitimacy – something that is not as strong as it has been over the past few decades.

2. Do you have any comments about civil society participation in intergovernmental forums (e.g. 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?

There is a culture of participation through e.g. different delegates (Youth, Climate etc.) and civil society has access to most meetings. There has been positive development in this regard within the UN system and many meetings have opened access to civil society representatives. But it should be

noted that there is an advantage to those organisations that are well-funded and professional and come from countries that have an operating culture inclusive of civil society. More attention should be paid to peer learning and exchange within civil society organisations as well as making the UN more accessible to different kinds of organisations – stronger and weaker, bigger and smaller, more organised and more organic. This has been one of the priorities of SG Guterres. More thought needs to be put into how the UN makes itself more accessible as the functions and structure are so complicated that it can take up to a year to just gain an understanding of the system. A good approach would be to offer more opportunities for dialogue and exchange of ideas and well as strengthening the understanding on civil society among UN staff, also of those not in senior leadership positions.

In terms of inclusion of stakeholders included in the process: this could be done in a more systematic way and on a wider scope. Are all the relevant stakeholders heard in the relevant processes? For instance, there has been space created for migrant/refugee voices in conjunction to crisis situations but is there enough space offered on other issues if we look at global migration patterns and the changes that brings (e.g. migrant workers). There are also some questions on how all the relevant stakeholder groups been identified and to what extent the existing stakeholder groups are in touch with the grassroots level actors. This is why it would also be important for the UN to actively try to reach grassroots level actors to enable all voices to be heard.

The HLPF has been a good example of a meeting that has been able to provide a platform for more open discussion and exchange of ideas. It could serve as a model to look up to in within the UN system.

There is a disparity and obstacles to access that depend on the finances of an organisation with NGOs from wealthier countries having less issues with finding the financial means to physically take part in different activities than their counterparts in the global south. This needs to be addressed and financial tools to increase participation implemented.

Q2. Protection of civil society actors:

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

The UN should take an active stance in these situations. For instance, the UN special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful Assembly and of association has been a good example of how much variation there is from year to year. A very vocal Envoy was replaced by a more subdued one, which tells its own story about how sensitive an issue civil society space can be. This should not be a matter swaying political tendencies. The UN and Special Envoys should be politically more vocal and have a bigger mandate to take a firm stance on situations where civil society actors are at risk. There are some mechanisms for drawing attention to certain situations (e.g. UPR) but the follow-up and sanctions are not very effective. There needs to be a push to give a platform and voice to civil society actors in different UN bodies. A good example was for instance during the Swedish SC term when there were instances of hearing voices from grassroots level in conflict situations. These kinds of hearings should be used more frequently and systematically.

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

This question is a difficult one to solve as at the moment there is an increasing tendency for even the UN staff, including UN Peacekeepers to be targets to hostile action. This is a course that needs to change. The best way in the long terms to protect individuals that cooperate or want to cooperate with the UN is to pay increasing attention to reinforcing the status and legitimacy of the United Nations as an international, impartial institution. Naturally the host countries must bear part of the responsibility.

This needs a wider scope of inspection. For instance, media reports about misconduct of UN staff and peacekeepers obviously has an impact on how the UN is perceived. There need to be very visible message on zero tolerance any possible issues that take place.

Another common complaint is the use of international experts in field offices and the apparent big pay gaps between UN staff and locally hired (although often as well qualified) staff as well as use of unpaid interns. These kinds of examples are not beneficial to the work of the UN and will in time erode its legitimacy even further.

In general the UN needs to speak up on any cases of intimidation and reprisals publicly but how this message it delivered and heard has a lot to do with the perceived legitimacy of the UN as an actor.

Q3. Promotion of and advocacy for civic space:

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

The UN and its senior leadership should all have a strong and unified message on inclusion and access of civil society in the national policy discussions and decision-making processes. The UN as a global actor could also champion cases where civil society involvement has been beneficial for the outcome of the processed. This should be spelled out in a manner that speaks not only to the political decision makers (for diplomatic language is often obscure) but also the civil society and wider public as a whole. – This is the moral responsibility of the UN. The use and creation of recommendations, guidelines and best practices should be utilized. There should be clear instructions on how interested parties, e.g. civil society and different stakeholder groups can take part in the processes.

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)?

This is naturally very context/country specific and there needs to be a certain sensitivity when it comes to taking a stance in internal matters. But one way would be to promote the role and benefits of including upholding a positive narrative on the role of the civil society. Naturally with any projects related to good governance that the UN takes part in (or leads) offers a good way of walking the talk.

2. 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.)?

All the above mentioned are commendable courses of action. It is very important that the senior leadership of the UN spells out the benefits and opens spaces for civil society representatives. This is especially the case in authoritarian states. But it is also important that creating a space is not just a token but actually leads to a perceivable change in the matter. There is also a big need not for only the senior leadership to gain an understanding on how civil society works (the internal logic) of ALL UN staff, not just senior management. This could be done by for instance in-house trainings.

UN's Approach to Protecting and Promoting Civic Space