

An Open Call for Strong and Inclusive Civil Society Engagement at UN Virtual Meetings

19 June 2020

The UN has an unprecedented opportunity to ensure continued and improved civil society access and meaningful engagement as meetings and processes are moving online to safeguard public health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If carried out inclusively and securely, **online participation presents an opportunity** to widen the number and diversity of civil society actors engaging with UN agencies, mechanisms, and bodies, including after in-person meetings are resumed, as it will remove the resource constraints linked to travel.

We are convinced that, as the Agenda 2030 states, meaningful, diverse and substantive participation of civil society in UN processes contributes to significantly **strengthen the multilateral system** and **aid the realization of the Agenda 2030** at all levels. It is worrying to see, however, that there are escalating limitations on civil society participation and on freedom of assembly and association, with the pretext of the COVID-19 crisis, at national level and attacks on multilateral cooperation and processes at the global level.

The upcoming High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2020 will be **an important moment** where the opportunity presented by virtual engagement can be utilized fully. Since its inception, civil society has worked hard to contribute to and utilize all participation possibilities at the HLPF. We, as the undersigned major groups and stakeholders, civil society organizations and coalitions (CSOs), ***call on the UN, its agencies and member states to take note of and implement the set of recommendations below to ensure the virtual nature of upcoming meetings do not hinder, but extend the inclusiveness of HLPF for meaningful civil society participation.***

Existing barriers and risks to meaningful engagement by CSOs in UN virtual meetings must be acknowledged by the UN, and a plan to address them must be developed and implemented; this plan should be guided by principles of accountability, transparency, equity, and take a rights-based approach. While we understand the technical limitations and logistical challenges that arise, **existing barriers and risks** to address include:

- Digital divide, including the digital gender divide and rural access to digital platforms

- Timings that favor the Global North, due to time zones
- Language and accessibility
- Lack of digital security, threats to human rights defenders, marginalized groups and people in vulnerable situations
- Inequality in access to information (due to language barriers, technical shortages, public availability of the information, etc.) and spread of misinformation
- Restrictions to civil society access
- Lack of information about changing modalities, timetables and opportunities
- The short turn-around times imposed on civil society for participation

Before finalizing CSO engagement procedures for UN virtual meetings, the UN, its agencies and member states should:

- Actively seek feedback from civil society actors, in all their diversity, when selecting secure and accessible means of communication to engage with them online or by phone
- Engage with and reach out to civil society actors in all of their diversity and scope (e.g., global to grassroots); relying on large international organizations is not sufficient as they can act as gatekeepers (whether intentionally or inadvertently)
- Perform an impact assessment on CSO participation to ensure that civil society space is not limited over time and by any changes in working methods or modalities

To **facilitate CSO engagement at UN virtual meetings**, the UN, its agencies and the member states should:

- Make available, at least two weeks prior to the meeting, comprehensive and readily understandable information in a variety of languages, at a minimum in all six UN languages, on how to engage with the UN virtually, and test the methodologies used prior to the official sessions (for example, through call testing by UNDESA with participants prior to the calls, preparatory calls for answering technical questions, etc.)
- Take measures to mitigate and respond to the possibility of new and increased risks of intimidation and reprisals targeting human rights defenders, as well as marginalized groups and groups in vulnerable situations, when operating online, and when submitting information to the related mechanisms. Engage the relevant UN human rights mechanisms in these measures as they are implemented at the HLPF and across all sustainable development processes.

- Connect with civil society actors who are less able to acquire the necessary technology and connectivity on their own to provide them with financial and technological assistance, reaching first to the groups left most behind.
- Adopt secure, open, inclusive and accessible communication platforms to protect civil society and ensure participation regardless of technological resources or accessibility needs.
- Clearly indicate how data will be stored and only share participation lists externally if participants have consented to it being shared.
- Ensure that opportunities for participation, real interaction and engagement for both ECOSOC-accredited and non-accredited NGOs should be, at a minimum, as significant and as meaningful as they were in person, with a goal to increase opportunities

In addition, the UN and its agencies, offices, and other constituent bodies should:

- Develop indicators to understand the impact of virtual meeting participation on the meaningful and effective participation of major groups and other stakeholders, and civil society organizations and coalitions, in consultation with those groups.
- Collect, analyze and use diverse data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts to understand participation and broader trends
- Adapt processes based on the data analysis, including towards narrowing and eliminating the digital divide
- Ensure data security and privacy
- Utilize the lessons learned from this virtual HLPF 2020 to establish best practices of sustained and inclusive virtual civil society engagement processes, throughout the year for all sustainable development processes.

In order to ensure that **HLPF 2020** can be **as participatory and as inclusive** as possible, UN, its agencies and members states should:

- Ensure that as many representatives of Major Groups and other Stakeholders as possible are given the opportunity to participate and speak at all official sessions and activities of HLPF, including the thematic sessions and the voluntary national reviews (VNRs). We recommend a minimum of five civil society speakers per session, self-selected by the MGoS mechanism, with an aim for diversity in all its forms.

- During VNR sessions, and throughout the whole HLPF 2020, inclusion of national and local civil society groups, especially from the VNR countries, should be prioritized.
- All civil society speakers should have time to read their questions during the VNR sessions. In the event the Member State presenting a VNR does not have sufficient time to answer, they will provide a written response within a month, to be posted on the HLPF website.
- Because interaction with member states will be limited, and because many of the national VNR processes were gravely affected by COVID-19 crisis, the engagement of civil society organizations at the national level were limited. Taking this into consideration, the alternative reports prepared by CSOs should be made available on the UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform.
- Virtual engagement opportunities should be utilized for a better connection between the sustainable development processes and the human rights mechanisms of the UN. These should be guided by meaningful interactions, such as discussion rooms, and should not be broadcasts or webinars where interaction is limited to chat conversations.
- Information regarding the civil society led events should be made as accessible as the member state led events (e.g. side events, trainings, information sessions)
- Member states should be encouraged to establish follow up mechanisms, even if virtually, including a follow up meeting with civil society, after their VNR at HLPF 2020, to engage them in national implementation and monitoring efforts.
- All meetings shall be inclusive by providing for accessibility needs, such as international sign language translations and closed captioning.

We voice our concern over escalating limitations on civil society participation, freedom of assembly and expression in certain national contexts, and the attacks on the multilateral institutions and processes, under the pretext of the COVID-19 crisis. In the wake of such a time, and taking into consideration the impact of the pandemic on national VNR consultation processes, and regional sustainable development fora, the UN and member states must provide a **platform for strong civil society engagement during the HLPF2020**.

We, as the undersigned civil society organizations, coalitions and major groups and other stakeholders are ready to collaborate and cooperate for increased inclusivity and meaningful participation, and in the implementation of SDGs, especially at this challenging time for all. We call on the UN, its agencies and the member states to take these relevant measures to ensure this participation. We must not miss this opportunity to meet the call to leave no one behind!

Organization, Country/Region

28 Too Many, United Kingdom

ABAAD-Resource Center for Gender Equality, Lebanon

Action for Sustainable Development, United Kingdom

ActionAid International, South Africa

African Youth Commission, The Gambia

Afrihealth Optonet Association [CSOs Network], Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya

American Pakistan Foundation, United States of America

ARC International, Global

Asia Pacific Alliance for SRHR, Thailand (Regional)

Asia Pacific Women's Watch (APWW), Asia Pacific Regional

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Malaysia

Asociación Ciudadana ACCEDER, Costa Rica

Asociación Ciudadana por los Derechos Humanos, Argentina

Asociación Red de Jóvenes para la Incidencia Política (INCIDEJOVEN), Guatemala

Association des Femmes de l'Europe Méridionale (AFEM), France

Association for Progressive Communications, South Africa

Association For Promotion Sustainable Development, India

Association for Single Mothers (ASMOK), Kenya

Association Montessori Internationale, France

Association Nationale des Partenaires Migrants, Sénégal

ASTRA Network, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Aube Nouvelle pour la Femme et le Développement (ANFD), Democratic Republic of Congo

Autistic Minority International, Switzerland

Bangladesh Indigenous Women's Network, Bangladesh

BirdLife International, UK

BPW BRASIL, Brasil

Bright Women, Portugal

Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, USA

Cameroon Education For All Network, Cameroon

Caribbean Male Action Network (CariMAN), Caribbean Region

Centre for Democracy and Democracy, Nigeria

Centro de Derechos de Mujeres, Honduras

Centro de Estudios e Investigación sobre Mujeres, Spain

CERPAC, Republic of Congo

CHIRAPAQ, Center of Inndigenous Cultures of Perú, Peru

CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, Netherlands

Christian Aid, United Kingdom

Christian Aid, Ireland

Civil Society Advance Forum on Sustainable Development (CAS2030), Nigeria

Civil Society Financing for Development (FfD) Group, Global

Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS), The Netherlands

COC Nederland, The Netherlands

Colectivo "Genero y Teologia para el Desarrollo", Bolivia

Combined Social Network, Bangladesh

Comité de América Latina y el Caribe para la Defensa de los Derechos de las Mujeres, (CLADEM), Latin America and Caribbean Region

Community Action on Sustainable Development Initiative, Nigeria

Community Initiatives for Development in Pakistan, Pakistan

Community Science Centre - Vadodara, India

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, México

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, United States of America
Consortium Humanitarian Agency , Sri Lanka
Consultancy on Human Rights & Gender Issues, Germany
Consultora e Investigadora Independiente, Colombia
CoopeSoliDar R.L, Costa Rica
Coordinadora 28 de Mayo, Guatemala
Coordinadora de la Mujer, Bolivia
Counselling Line for Women and Girls, Albania
Creación Positiva, Spain
D.C. Unit Church Women United, United States of America
DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project), Uganda
DoNation, India
Dr Uzo Adirieje Foundation (DUZAFFOUND), Nigeria
DUKINGIRE ISI YACU, Burundi
Eidos Global, Uruguay
Elimu Kwanza Initiative, Kenya
EMPOWER INDIA, India
Environmental Protection Promoters Initiative (EPPI), Nigeria
Equal Asia Foundation, Thailand
Equality Bahamas, The Bahamas
Equidad de Género: Ciudadanía, Trabajo y Familia, Mexico
European Network of People of African Descent (ENPAD) , Sweden
Faith to Action Network, Kenya
Family Education Services Foundation, United States of America
Family Organization for Empowerment (FOREM), Kenya
Family Planning NSW, Australia

FAWCO, Austria

Federation of Environmental and Ecological Diversity for Agricultural Revampment and Human Rights (FEEDAR & HR), Cameroon

FEEdar & HR MCUCOOP with BOD, Cameroon

Fiji Women's Rights Movement, Fiji

FOKUS - Forum for Women and Development, Norway

Fondation EBOKO, France / Congo

Fondo Semillas, Mexico

Foundation for Building Sustainable Communities, Canada

Fund of Women Entrepreneurs, Georgia

Fundació Aroa (Aroa Foundation), Spain

Fundación Arcoiris por el Respeto a la Diversidad Sexual, Mexico

Fundación Colectivo Hombres XX, A. C., México

Fundación para Estudio e Investigación de la Mujer (FEIM), Argentina

Fundación PLURALES, Argentina

Fundación Unidas: Mujeres Construyendo Tejido Social, Colombia

FUSA AC, Argentina

G.R.A.C.E Foundation, Zimbabwe

Gabidezin House Of Fashion-Boadi, Ghana

Gatef organization, Egypt

Gemstone Tech Tutors, Nigeria

Gestos– HIV, Communication and Gender, Brazil

Global Ecovillage Network, United States of America

Global Network of CSOs for Disaster Reduction, United Kingdom / Global

Global Youth Organisation, India

Greenation for Environmental Development, Egypt

Greenspring Development Initiative, Nigeria

Grob, United States of America

GROOTS T&T, Trinidad & Tobago

Hawaii Institute for Human Rights, United States of America

Herstoire Collective, Saint Lucia

Indigenous Information Network, Kenya

Institute of Gender, Law and Development (INSGENAR), Argentina

International communication Center, Nigeria

International Council of Women, Switzerland

International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), France

International Movement ATD Fourth World, United States of America

International Organization of Women, Switzerland

International Partnership and Development Organization, Russia

International Planned Parenthood Federation, United Kingdom

International Women's Health Coalition, United States of America

International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP Asia Pacific), Malaysia

International Youth Alliance, Bulgaria

Ipas Centroamérica y México (Ipas CAM), México, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panamá

ISHR, United States of America

Itaka Initiative, Nigeria

Jan Reynders, Gender Justice Consultancy, The Netherlands

Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning (JOICFP), Japan

Jolen Press, United States of America

Journalists for Human Rights, North Macedonia

Just Associates, South Africa
Just Associates (JASS), Global
Justice Call Foundation, Egypt
Kevoy Community Development Institute (KCDI), Jamaica
KINDERENERGY, United States of America
Korean Disability Forum, Republic of Korea
Kulmiye Aid Foundation, Somalia
L'Associacio de Drets Sexuals i Reprductius, Spain
LandSea Maldives, Maldives
Lanka Fundamental Rights Organization, Sri Lanka
Latin America and Caribbean Women's Health Network (LACWHN), Latin America and Caribbean Region
Let There Be Light International, United States of America
LGBT Centre, Mongolia
Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights, Egypt
Make Mothers Matter, International
Mama Cash, The Netherlands
Marie Stopes International, United Kingdom
Medical IMPACT, Mexico
Medical Students Association of India, India
MENA Rights Group, Switzerland
MenEngage Alliance, United States of America
Mind Reformers Network, Nigeria
Mitini Nepal, Nepal
Moravian College, United States of America
Morya Samajik Pratishthan, India

MPact Global Action for Gay Men's Health & Rights, United States of America
MY World Mexico, Mexico
Nafas LGBT Azerbaijan Alliance, Azerbaijan
National Campaign for Sustainable Development Nepal, Nepal
National Youth Council of The Gambia, The Gambia
Network of Rural Women Producers - Trinidad and Tobago, Trinidad & Tobago
NetWwater, Sri Lanka
NGO Major Group, International
NGO Parastor, Tajikistan
Nigerian Youth Climate Network, Nigeria
Noble Missions for Change Initiative, Nigeria
North Star NGO, Jordan
Observatorio de Género y Equidad, Chile
ONG PADJENA, Benin
Orchid Project, United Kingdom
Organización de Mujeres Tierra Viva, Guatemala
OutRight Action International, United States of America
PA women's organization Alga, Kyrgyzstan
Peace Actor Network, Nigeria
Plan International, Global
Plataforma Derechos Aquí y Ahora Honduras, Honduras
PODER, Mexico
Presentation Sisters Ireland & UK, Ireland
Projonma Academy, Bangladesh
Raks Thai Foundation, Thailand
Red Agenda 2030 MX, México

Red de defensoras del ambiente y el Buen Vivir, Argentina

Red de Educación Popular entre Mujeres (REPEM -LAC), Bolivia

Red Nacional Jóvenes de Ambiente, Colombia

Red por los Derechos Humanos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (REDHNNA), Venezuela

Regional Center for International Development Corporation (RCIDC), Uganda

Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, United States of America / International RESURJ, Brazil

Rural Area Development Programme (RADP), Nepal

Rutgers, The Netherlands

Saathi Sanga Manka Kura, Nepal

Saferworld, United Kingdom

Sahara Welfare Foundation, Pakistan

Sanctus Initiative for Human Development and Values Sustainability (SIHDEVAS), Nigeria

Sangram Sanstha, India

Santé et Action Globale, Togo

Sarthak Educational Trust, India

Save the Children International, United States of America

SDGs National Network Nepal, Nepal

See Other Sides Consulting, United States of America

Sex og Politikk / IPPF Norway, Norway

Shareteah Humanitarian Organization – SHO, Iraq

Shevolution, United Kingdom

Shirley Ann Sullivan Educational Foundation, United States of America

Social Economic and Governance Promotion Centre, Tanzania

Social Watch / Contrôle Citoyen au Bénin, Bénin

Society for Conservation and Sustainability of Energy and Environment in Nigeria (SOCSEEN), Nigeria

Society for the Improvement of Rural People (SIRP), Nigeria

Sombrilla centroamericana, Central America Region

Sonke Gender Justice, South Africa

Soroptimist International, United Kingdom

Soroptimist International, Canada

Soroptimist International, United States of America

Special Talent Exchange Program, Pakistan

SRJC, South Africa

Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities, Global

Student of international relations and conflict resolution, Chad

Sukaar Welfare Organization, Pakistan

Suma Veritas Foundation, Argentina

Support on AIDS & Life Thru Telephone Helpline (SALT), Uganda

Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), Thailand

The Great Green Kouno Dagal Wall (GGKDW), Chad

The Heritage Institute of Policy Studies (HIPS), Somalia

The Regla Project, Philippines

Together 2030, Global

UN Major Group for Children and Youth, Global

Unchained at Last, United States of America

United States Sustainable Development Corp, United States of America

Univers des Jeunes, United States of America

Urgent Action Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin America Region

Vecinas Feministas, Argentina

Voice of The Vulnerables, Nigeria

WACUNA-UK, United Kingdom

Water Justice & Gender, The Netherlands

WiLDAF-AO, Togo

Women against Rape, Antigua & Barbuda

Women and Girls of African Descent Caucus, Americas and the Caribbean, United States of America

Women Educators Association of Nigeria, Nigeria

Women for Peace and Ecology, Germany

Women for Water Partnership (WfWP), The Netherlands

Women for Women's Human Rights - New Ways, Turkey

Women rights and Sustainable Society, Nigeria

Women Solidarity Namibia (WSN), Namibia

Women's Coalition - Turkey, Turkey

Women's Earth and Climate Action Network, United States of America

Women's Environment & Development Organization, United States of America

Women's Human Rights Education Institute, Costa Rica/Canada

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Global

Women's Rehabilitation Center (WOREC), Nepal

Women's Studies Research Centre - The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Women's Support and Information Centre NPO, Estonia

Women's World Summit Foundation, Switzerland

World Animal Net, United States of America

World Benchmarking Alliance, The Netherlands

World Institute on Disability, United States of America

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Global

Young Changemakers Foundation, Nigeria

Young Shapers, Pakistan

Youth Advocacy Network (YAN), Pakistan

Youth Advocates Ghana-YAG, Ghana

Youth Approaches to Health Association(Y-PEER Turkey), Turkey

Youth Christian Lawyers, Pakistan

Youth For Environment Education And Development Foundation (YFEED Foundation),
Nepal

YUWA, Nepal